

WE TRIED



SS-CLASS HUNTER WHO DIES TO LIVE

FANTASY NOVEL BY SINNOA

SSS-Class Hunter who Dies to Live

SSS-Class Suicide Hunter

(SSS급 자살헌터)

by

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(신노아)

Synopsis

SSS-Class Suicide Hunter (SSS급 자살헌터) is a novel written by Shin Noah (신노아), it covers action, adventure, and comedy genres. It was first published in Munpia on November 20, 2018 and was also serviced on Naver Series, Kakao Page, and RidiBooks. It was completed with a total of 400 chapters on May 7, 2020.

On April 27, 2021, J Plus Media had announced that **SSS-Class Suicide Hunter** will change to **SSS-Class Hunter Who Lives To Die** starting from that day on.

I want an S-Rank skill too! I want it so badly, I could die for it!

[You have awakened an S-Rank skill.]

[But it only works when you die.]

Eh !? What is the point of getting one if I Die !?

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Volume 1 – Chapters 1-24

Chapter 1:

Unprecedented Envy

-Breaking news!

-The Black Dragon Guild has once again returned empty-handed, despite their confidence in conquering the 40th floor of the Tower.

-Number one in the Hunter rankings!

-Flame Emperor has once again soloed the boss!

I'm envious.

I thought blankly as I watched the TV.

So envious. Insanely envious.

-Good day to you, Flame Emperor!

-Ah. Yes. Good day...

On the screen, the man frowned.

Somehow, even his frowning eyebrows looked good.

-Today you've set another record by soloing a boss monster. You're the only one to have done so, Flame Emperor. Could we hear your thoughts on this?

-I'd prefer it if you stopped using that damn nickname.

-Excuse me?

-Flame Emperor. Why use such a shitty nickname when I have a perfectly good name? It's embarrassing. Why not just call me Flame Retard while you're at it? I'm going to find and beat up the motherfucker that came up with this nickname.

-Uh, uh...

The reporter stammered, overwhelmed. But that was it. He couldn't actually respond to the man.

That's because the man was a legendary hero of this era.

And I was nothing more than an extra, not even worthy of a supporting role.

“Ah...”

I muttered.

“I'm so envious.”

How great must it feel?

To live a life where you can say whatever you want on TV.

I fiddled with my smartphone and entered an online Hunter community forum. I was curious about people's reactions to the interview.

-Yeah, the Flame Emperor is being a Flame Retard again!

2 minutes ago | Report

Reply ▼

-That guy's always on TV complaining.

2 minutes ago | Report

Reply ▼

As expected, the forum was ablaze.

People were fuming after watching the interview.

-Can't he watch his words in front of a global audience?

1 minute ago | Report

Replies 5 ▲

It's not his first or second time, you know.

1 minute ago | Report

It's the broadcaster's fault, really. They know what he's like.

56 seconds ago | Report

Seriously... They're just trying to stir up controversy for ratings...

44 seconds ago | Report

This place is overrun by Flame Emperor fanatics.

Disgusting.

37 seconds ago | Report

I wish I could be like the Flame Emperor.

1 second ago | Edit

Supporters and critics of the Flame Emperor.

The internet was divided like the Red Sea.

-I wish the Flame Emperor, with all his skills, would also become a national representative with a good character. It's embarrassing as a citizen when his interviews get translated and spreads abroad...

1 minute ago | Report

Replies 5 ▲

It's 'translated and spread,' not 'translated and spreads.' Love your own language before worrying about foreign languages. And in the Tower, nationality doesn't matter.

1 minute ago | Report

So it's okay for your idol to curse in Korean? Shameful.

50 seconds ago | Report

They just corrected a typo; why the insult? Twisted personality.

38 seconds ago | Report

What's twisted is not my character, but your life lololol

23 seconds ago | Report

I wish I could be like the Flame Emperor.

1 second ago | Edit

The community was in an uproar.

Not just here, but everywhere that discussed Hunters.

-Flame Emperor's got a girlfriend! He's dating the Saintess!

1 minute ago | Report

Replies 4 ▲

The Saintess? Really?

48 seconds ago | Report

My friend, who's a Hunter, said they saw Flame Emperor and the Saintess together.

39 seconds ago | Report

My friend is the Saintess, and she says it's not true.

27 seconds ago | Report

I wish I could be like the Flame Emperor.

1 second ago | Edit

Some places were even buzzing about who the man was dating.

The Saintess was one of the most popular Hunters, along with the Flame Emperor. The post was accompanied by a photo, called the 'life shot' of the Saintess, famous for her beauty and good nature.

So, he's dating this Saintess.

“Ugh.”

Finally, I put down my phone and grabbed my head in frustration.

By the way,

-I wish I could be like the Flame Emperor.

All those comments were written by me.

I had just browsed through the posts and written the comments. I always leave such comments on any post I see.

Why the same comment over and over?

"Envious! So envious! I want to be successful too!"

Because I'm envious.

That's truly how I feel.

I can say this honestly because I'm alone in my single-room apartment.

Anyone who saw my room would be shocked. It's covered in magazines and newspaper clippings. All about the world's number one, the Flame Emperor.

"Flame Emperor solos floor 39!"

"Solo play conquers floor 38! Another legend of the Flame Emperor!"

"Hunter Yoo Soo-Ha. First Korean to reach world rank 1."

...

...

...

"Who will claim the throne of Rank 1 with Sword Saint gone? Foreign experts say 'Korean Yoo Soo-Ha is the most likely.'"

"The enigmatic hero breaks through floor 10. Who is this hero?"

"Sword Saint missing for 22 days. Is this the worst turmoil for the Hunter industry?"

From the most recent newspaper articles to those over ten years old.

The walls were filled with clippings. Some papers were fresh, others yellowed with age. A history. The history of the Flame Emperor. No, it's a history that dates back even before Hunter Yoo Soo-Ha became known as the Flame Emperor.

Ah.

"I wish I could be successful like the Flame Emperor..."

To be so successful that others envy me. To succeed and show those who looked down on me or didn't respect me. And after showing them, to forgive them generously and be praised as a broad-minded man...

Yes, I was envious of the hero on TV.

-Flame Emperor.

-Wow. Can't you just call me by my name instead of that nickname? Do you lose your hearing along with your brains when you do journalism?

-I'm s-sorry. Could you please say a few words to our viewers?

-Sigh. What should I say?

-Many aspiring Hunters look up to you, Flame Emperor Yoo Soo-Ha. You entered the Tower in your early twenties and awakened instantly! You defeated a boss monster within a month! Please, give them a piece of advice for success!

The Flame Emperor let out a hollow laugh.

-If someone's going to succeed, they'll succeed no matter what I say. What difference does it make whether I give advice or not?

-But please, just a few words!

-Ah, these damn broadcasters... Fine, just a few words then.

The Flame Emperor scratched his head. His hairstyle, with the front hair pulled back and tied with a rubber band, was called a ponytail, right? His long black hair, like a horse's tail, swayed slightly.

-If you're destined to succeed, you'll succeed.

The Flame Emperor glared directly at the camera.

-But even if you succeed, don't get cocky with me. You'll die.

-Excuse me?

-That's it. I have nothing more to say, so don't follow me.

That was the end. The Flame Emperor left the camera behind and walked away alone. The reporter, in a panic, shouted, "Flame Emperor! Flame Emperor! What did you mean by what you just said?" but was completely ignored.

I silently watched the Flame Emperor's receding figure.

“Sigh...”

I was furious.

It should be the reporter who felt ignored. Yet, for some reason, I felt like I was the one being snubbed.

I was truly angry.

"If only I had one good skill..."

In reality, I was an F-class, low-tier Hunter.

To have interviews that heat up the internet in real-time.

To have people interested even in the minor details of your private life.

Above all, to succeed on your own merits... and become wealthy.

That kind of successful life was far from mine.

"I want to succeed... I wish I had an S-class skill... Ugh. Not just for the money, but just so I can succeed. How great would it be if I had the Flame Emperor's skill?"

If anyone saw me now, they'd think I was crazy.

Muttering to myself, shamelessly exposing my desires.

But again, I'm alone in my single-room apartment. Muttering to myself in a place where no one can hear is my way of relieving stress.

It might look pathetic, but what does it matter?

Better than causing a scene outside and being a nuisance.

After all, no one's listening.

“...Huh?”

But it seems I was wrong.

As if someone heard me, a golden light flashed before my eyes.

“No, could it be?”

A scene I had only seen in videos. I clicked the replay button hundreds, thousands of times. I watched it every morning to fuel my envy.

The light that appears when a Hunter awakens a skill.

“Golden color!?”

And it was the golden light that only appears for S-class skills or higher!

My heart pounded wildly.

Soon, the golden light gathered into the shape of a card.

[An unprecedentedly ugly envy!]

[The Tower is appalled by your vile envy and throws a skill at you.]

Huh?

This doesn't sound like the skill awakenings I've heard about.

Usually, when awakening a skill, you hear things like, 'The Tower is moved by your will', 'The Tower rewards your earnest training', 'The Tower sends its accolades for your achievements'.

But appalled by ugly envy and throwing a skill?

It's as if they're giving me alms or something.

'No, no. It's an S-class skill. What does the tone matter?'

I ignored the unsettling feeling.

I'd been waiting for this moment. No need for ominous thoughts.

[Creating skill card.]

Whoosh!

Finally, with another burst of light, a golden card was created.

I grabbed the card with trembling hands.

I WANT TO BECOME JUST LIKE YOU

*Activates automatically upon death.
After dying to the enemy, you can copy
one of their skills and make it yours.*

*You cannot copy a skill from targets that
have already killed you previously.*

Skills are randomly copied.

However, you die!

(SKILL GRANTED BY THE TOWER)

+

[I Want to Become Just Like You]

Rank: S+

Effect: Automatically activated when killed by an enemy. You copy one of the skills of the enemy that killed you and make it yours. You may not copy from an opponent you've already copied from. The copied skill is selected randomly.

*However, you will die!

+

"Wow! Wow, oh... Oh... Huh?"

As time passed, my voice naturally became puzzled.

I blinked my eyes.

"Huh?"

For a moment, I thought I had read something wrong.

I read the sentence at the bottom of the card again, slowly.

*However, you will die!

It was indeed written like that.

Using this skill meant dying.

"....."

I stared blankly at the card.

Wind blew through the window, rustling the newspaper clippings plastered on the walls. After a while, a scream echoed in my single-room apartment.

"Damn it, what is this? How am I supposed to use this skill!?"

That day, I acquired a legendary skill.

A legendarily crappy skill.

Chapter 2:

However, You will Die! (1)

Skills.

A word that has made countless hunters weep.

The condition for awakening a skill differs for each person.

-I whacked a scarecrow in the training ground 10,000 times.
Then, it just appeared on its own?

-One day, suddenly, I heard the voice of a god!

-Magic? When I entered the tower, it just happened.

There were hunters who had both integrity and perseverance but lacked the talent, struggling at the bottom. On the other hand, there were those with terrible personalities who lived off their natural talent.

A prime example was the Rank 1 Flame Emperor.

If life were compared to a game, the Flame Emperor's life would probably be a godly game of skill, right? Anything desired could be obtained through sheer ability.

My life, on the other hand... was just an ordinary game of lousy luck.

"Uwaaaaack!"

How long had I been wandering aimlessly after leaving the bar?

In a deserted alleyway, I finally threw up everything.

"If you're going to be unlucky, damn it... might as well not have anything at all."

When is the biggest moment of despair in gaming?

Anyone who's played pay-to-win mobile games would know.

It's not when you keep spinning the gacha and don't get a 5-star... It's when you do get a 5-star, but it's the worst one possible. Like a 5-star that's worse than a 3-star.

And my 5-star was even worse than a 1-star.

I WANT TO BECOME JUST LIKE YOU

*Activates automatically upon death.
After dying to the enemy, you can copy
one of their skills and make it yours.*

*You cannot copy a skill from targets that
have already killed you previously.*

Skills are randomly copied.

However, you die!

(SKILL GRANTED BY THE TOWER)

[I Want to Become Just Like You]

Rank: S+

Effect: Automatically activated when killed by an enemy. You copy one of the skills of the enemy that killed you and make it yours. You may not copy from an opponent you've already copied from. The copied skill is selected randomly.

*However, you will die!

+

"Heh. Damn..."

Right. My life was indeed a game of lousy luck.

Normally, upon awakening a skill, one should report to the Hunter Association. But I didn't. It was too unfair. I was too embarrassed to show off this as my skill.

- "Hello, Hunter. How did you awaken your skill?"

- "I was jealous of the Rank 1."

- "Pardon?"

- "I was so jealous and envious that I was going crazy, then this skill appeared, as if to mock me. I'm the most enviously petty human ever. Haha."

How could I say something like that!

In the end, I just got drunk and staggered in a secluded alley.

'...Where is this?'

But even that, I couldn't do well. Before I knew it, I had wandered into a completely unfamiliar alley. I had no recollection of where it was or how I ended up there.

Could I end up sleeping on the alley floor like this?

'Ah. How pitiful.'

Just as I swallowed my tears.

From the other end of the alley, a faint scream reached my ears.

".....Please, no! Why all of a sudden.....!"

The drowsiness instantly vanished. It was too vivid to be a hallucination induced by rice wine. I didn't know who it was, but it was a real scream of someone whose life was in danger.

'What's that?'

I silenced my footsteps. Instinctively, I even held my breath. One step. Another step. I quietly walked towards the alley where the scream came from. The closer I got, the clearer the voice became.

This was...

"Fl-Flame Emperor. Why are you doing this to me all of a sudden..."

"...It's useless. Anyway, no one's around here..."

This was the second stupid thing I did today.

The first mistake was... obviously, drinking enough to break my mental fuse. I had never been blackout drunk in my entire life. But today was an exception. Angered that the only skill I finally awakened was an S-rank trash, I guzzled down rice wine like water.

The second mistake was not running away as soon as I heard the scream.

"I had already poisoned the cup you drank from."

"Poison? What are you talking about, Flame Emperor?"

"Oh, nice acting. If someone saw you, they'd think you really didn't know."

At the dead end of the alley.

In a place so dark that there wasn't even a street lamp, there was a man and a woman. Perhaps it's strange to simply say 'there was'. The man was threatening the woman, and the woman was being threatened by the man.

"Basilisk's gastric juice. Originally, it was the poison you put in my drink. Wow. If it weren't for my skill, I would've been in real trouble. Why that look? Your face's gone pale, Saintess."

"Could it be... Perfect Poison Immunity...? No, it can't be. You don't have such a skill."

"I don't."

The man's laughter echoed softly.

"But I do have a skill a little better than Perfect Poison Immunity."

And then, I recognized the man. No matter how dark the alley was, I couldn't fail to recognize the man's back... the swaying ponytail tied back. I had seen the exact same back on

TV just last night.

'It's really the Flame Emperor!'

The Rank 1 hunter. The hero of this era. An idol revered by all. And thus, the target of envy and jealousy by many... especially mine.

Moreover.

'That woman is the Saintess!'

I covered my mouth to stop my breath. The Saintess. The world Rank 9 hunter selected by the Association, recently embroiled in a scandal with the Flame Emperor for dating rumors. There she was, the unparalleled beauty I had only seen in videos and photos on the internet.

"But the joke's over now. You've crossed me, now you must pay the price."

Not just there, but being threatened.

"Wait, please, Flame Emperor. There's some misunderstanding... I only wanted to team up with you to conquer the tower!"

"I thought so too, but no, it wasn't like that."

I was shocked.

'Those two. They're not... dating?'

The internet was abuzz with their relationship. TV shows covered the romance of the two heroes. Yet, the scene unfolding before my eyes lacked any trace of romance. It was hard to call it a lovers' quarrel, even as a joke.

Killing intent.

I only saw someone trying to kill and someone trying not to be killed.

"Let's talk, please! We can clear up the misunderstanding through conversation."

"Talk? Ah, talk. Sure. Let's be gentlemanly."

Flame Emperor - Yoo Soo-Ha - grabbed Saintess - Isabelle's - throat.

"Kuk...!?"

"But I set the rules for the conversation."

The Saintess struggled, gasping for breath. Was she suffocating? The more she struggled, the more my hidden breath also choked. My God. An unthinkable event was unfolding right before my eyes.

"I'll ask the questions. You just answer. Ah, you don't need to speak. If my question is correct, nod your head; if it's wrong, shake it. That's all."

"Hic, Huk...! Cough..."

"If you sincerely participate in the conversation, I'll spare your life. I'll even give you an antidote. But if you ignore my gentlemanly consideration even once... Well, you know what will happen, right? You're from Oxford, after all. Use that

smart brain."

Saintess, a renowned healer, desperately hit the arm of Flame Emperor holding her throat. Thud! Thud! But nothing changed. It was impossible for her to overpower Flame Emperor with brute force.

"Actually, there's only one thing I'm curious about."

"Uh, Cough. Huhuh..."

"Who ordered to kill me? Just answer that. Is it the Black Dragon Witch's doing?"

The Saintess stopped struggling.

"Think carefully before answering. I may not have Perfect Poison Immunity, but I do have a skill for detecting lies. If I catch you lying, I'll burn you to the bone."

"....."

The Saintess seemed to hesitate for a moment. In the pitch-dark alley, her face wasn't visible, but her silence was palpable. Under the Flame Emperor's watch, she slowly nodded.

"I knew it."

A faint laugh echoed.

"Farewell, Saintess Isabelle."

Flames erupted.

The fire engulfed the dead-end alley. From Flame Emperor's grasp to Saintess's neck, then her entire body. Engulfed in flames, Saintess began to thrash. A desperate struggle for life. But no matter how much she writhed, Flame Emperor remained unmoved.

He just watched the burning Saintess expressionlessly.

"Hmm."

Even amidst the blazing flames, Flame Emperor was calm, never letting go of Saintess's neck until the end. Saintess flailed her arms, scratched and clawed at Flame Emperor's wrist, and finally reached towards the night sky... but soon, she stopped.

She went limp.

She moved no more.

'Insane...!'

She died right before my eyes. A hero of humanity.

Perhaps it's odd to simply say 'died'. No, Saintess didn't just die. She was murdered. By Flame Emperor, who was equally revered as a hero of humanity.

'A madman.'

Saintess was already reduced to a charred corpse. Yet, the flames didn't stop. Flame Emperor himself, didn't stop. Until Saintess's flesh and bones melted into ash and soot, he burned her with an expressionless face.

'He's out of his mind.'

I stepped back.

'I need to run away.'

And then, I committed my third and last mistake of the day.

Crack-.

It was a small sound. Not a can, but the noise of glass being stepped on. Maybe it was a glass shard from a broken soju bottle. Or perhaps a glass carried by the wind... I didn't know. Nor did I need to know.

What I really needed to understand was something else.

I had just made a foolish mistake.

"...Hoo."

And the Flame Emperor was not the kind of hunter who would miss another person's mistake.

"I thought I got rid of all the rats nearby, but there was one left over?"

"Ugh!"

As soon as our eyes met, I ran.

I ran without looking back. Those eyes were the eyes of a murderer. Not someone who had killed one or two people, but dozens, or perhaps even more. That devil was now trying to kill me.

"Ha, kid. Cute?"

It was the moment the Flame Emperor scoffed. Suddenly, I felt a burning sensation around my ankle, and the next moment, I was rolling on the ground. I couldn't understand why I fell at first.

Not until I saw my feet on the ground.

"Hi, Ik...!?"

My feet were severed. Both my right and left feet, shoes and all.

The logo of a famous brand on the side of my sneakers was particularly white.

"Please, spare me! Please!"

"Why did you run? Scared the shit out of me."

The Flame Emperor bent down. He had picked up my feet. He toyed with them, tossing and catching like a baseball. Thump. Thump.

"Hey. Did you see?"

"I-I didn't see anything!"

The Flame Emperor approached.

"What didn't you see?"

"I don't know anything! Uh, please. I really don't know anything..."

"What don't you know?"

"Please... Flame Emperor, please... spare me. I won't say anything. I won't talk anywhere..."

I felt his presence over my head.

The Flame Emperor was looking down at me, kneeling.

"Wow. So you did see that I'm the Flame Emperor, and you know who I am. That's enough to know everything."

"Please..."

"Hey, are you making me feel slighted? Why play dumb when you know?"

Flame Emperor fiddled with my severed feet.

"Tell me. Who sent you? Black Dragon again?"

"I... really don't know anything..."

"You were watching me and the Saintess from there, quietly like a rat? Oh, you're quite credible. I'd have believed you if I were a little more of a fool."

The Flame Emperor smiled slyly.

"But I'm not a fool, you bastard."

Flames arose before my eyes. Whoosh! The fire from the Flame Emperor's hand burned my feet. Completely gone. The famous brand's logo, the shoes I wore for a long time, and the feet that were part of my body for even longer.

All vanished.

"Next is your head. Answer correctly."

My mind went blank.

This devil... he's insane.

A madman. A psychopath who kills even innocent people. A bastard who thinks he's always right, and only his opinion matters.

How could a person, ranked number 1, do this?

Were people... and I, ever slightly idolizing this person? Praising him for his honesty? For his refreshing personality? This madman?

"Lies..."

"What?"

"Lie Detection Skill... You have the Lie Detection Skill."

I desperately continued.

"You said it to the Saintess. You could tell if she lied. So answer correctly.

"....."

"Test it with that. You'll know my words are true. Flame Emperor. I just... I really just happened to pass by. Please believe me!"

The Flame Emperor's expression became peculiar.

"That's a lie, though?"

Chapter 3:

However, You will Die! (2)

"Excuse me?"

"It was a bluff. Bluffing. Don't you know?"

Flame Emperor - Yoo Soo-Ha - chuckled.

"I don't have a skill to detect lies. It was just a bluff to test the Saintess. Wow, both the Saintess and you. You're really naive. Do you believe everything I say?"

"That... then."

My lips trembled. I was in shock.

"Did you kill the Saintess without any real certainty?"

Rank 9 hero, the Saintess. Unlike the psychopath before me, she was a hunter who donated most of her earnings to orphanages and had her character intact. And she was killed just because she seemed a bit suspicious?

'If that's the case...'

This guy wasn't just a top-ranked hunter; he was a top-ranked psychopath.

"Hey. How can you say such harsh things? Of course, I was certain. The Saintess really tried to kill me. If I didn't kill her first, she would have poisoned me tomorrow."

The Flame Emperor spat on the ground.

"Damn it! Thinking about it now pisses me off."

"How did you know...?"

"I just know."

He replied as if it were obvious.

"I just know. There's a way to know everything."

"....."

I was at a loss for words.

Not just because the Flame Emperor was outrageously confident. There was some kind of certainty in his eyes. A certainty that he had a reason to kill the Saintess. At least, that's how it seemed to me.

"Well, since you mentioned Lie Detection, it seems you're really innocent."

"Ah..."

"But you know I'm the Flame Emperor. And you saw that the Saintess was killed by me."

He patted my head.

"So I need you to die."

His hand slowed as he patted.

"My name is Yoo Soo-Ha. Farewell."

That was the moment. My head felt hot. No, it was my brain that was hot. At first, it felt like my scalp was touching a frying pan. But soon, my brain began to burn intensely. Sizzling.

My skull boiled like an oil drum.

"...Uk,!?"

I couldn't speak. Couldn't even scream. True pain silences human screams.

'To die at the hands of this madman...'

'To die like this. Me.'

Kim Gong-Ja.

The name given by the orphanage director, meaning to be as great as Confucius, led to a life far from Confucian and an equally unremarkable death.

I was sad.

'Ah.'

If life were a game, it was a failed game.

Simply put, it was a failed life.

A life destroyed and lost.

[You have died.]

I hated it.

[The condition for your skill has been fulfilled by your death.]

Why should I die like this?

No, why did I have to live like this?

I felt wronged. Angry. Everything was unjust. I could have lived a little better. I had the right to live better. Just a mistake. Today, I made three mistakes. Died because of a mistake. Lived a life of mistakes. Born a mistake.

Was my very birth a mistake?

[Randomly copying Hunter 'Yoo Soo-Ha's' skills.]

[Creating skill cards.]

I heard nothing. Saw nothing.

But a faint light shimmered. It seemed like fireflies were flickering before my eyes. Some fireflies were bronze-colored. Some were silver. And some... were golden.

It was fast.

The golden firefly fluttered swiftly. Too quick to catch. There were many bronze fireflies. Easy to catch. Silver ones were numerous too. But there was only one firefly flickering in the color of the sun – golden.

[Please select a skill card.]

I reached out for the one and only golden light.

[Selection complete.]

Caught it.

[Copying skill.]

And then I died.

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Activating skill.



I WANT TO BECOME JUST LIKE YOU

*Activates automatically upon death.
After dying to the enemy, you can copy
one of their skills and make it yours.*

*You cannot copy a skill from targets that
have already killed you previously.*

Skills are randomly copied.

However, you die!

(SKILL GRANTED BY THE TOWER)

Name, I Want to Become Just Like You.

Rank, S+.

Rule one.

Automatically activated when killed by an enemy.

Rule two.

Copy one skill from the enemy that killed you, making it yours.

Rule three.

You cannot copy from an opponent you've already copied from.

Rule four.

Which skill to copy is randomly determined.

However, you will die.



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Do you know what hell looks like?

Let me tell you.

Firstly, there was no hellfire. Not even a normal fire. There was a gas range, but it lacked the power to create hellfire. Ah. Surprisingly, there was also a small fridge in hell. A narrow bed... And a second-hand TV.

"Uh."

In other words, it looked exactly like my studio apartment.

No, it was my studio apartment.

No matter how I looked, it wasn't hell. It was my modest 3.5 pyeong (approx. 115 sq ft) studio, attractive for its affordable rent.

"Uh, huh... uh?"

I ran my hand through my hair. It was intact. Just to be sure, I checked my reflection in the smartphone screen. A face like an unfinished sculpture of Apollo. In other words, moderately handsome and moderately unattractive.

There were no burn marks anywhere.

"What's going on? What happened?"

Really, what had happened?

'Did Flame Emperor - Yoo Soo-Ha - heal me and leave me here?'

It was a ridiculous thought.

But... I couldn't think of any other explanation for my current situation. Maybe Flame Emperor was nicer than I thought. Despite being insane, maybe he wasn't a complete psychopath and pretended to kill me but actually spared my life.

- Breaking news.

Did he also leave the TV on?

-The Black Dragon Guild has once again returned empty-handed, despite their confidence in conquering the 40th floor of the Tower.

But no.

Flame Emperor wasn't in my tiny 3.5 pyeong (approx. 115 sq ft) studio. He hadn't just stepped out for a moment.

Instead.

-Number one in the Hunter rankings!

-Flame Emperor has once again soloed the boss!

Instead, Flame Emperor was on the TV screen, frowning.

-Good day to you, Flame Emperor!

-Ah. Yes. Good day...

-Today you've set another record by soloing a boss monster. You're the only one to have done so, Flame Emperor. Could we hear your thoughts on this?

The corner of the broadcast screen read 'LIVE' in big letters.

I blankly stared at the old TV.

-I'd prefer it if you stopped using that damn nickname.

-Excuse me?

-Flame Emperor. Why use such a shitty nickname when I have a perfectly good name? It's embarrassing. Why not just call me Flame Retard while you're at it? I'm going to find and beat up the motherfucker that came up with this nickname.

Yoo Soo-Ha.

The world's Rank 1 hunter. The hero of this era. The hero I had envied was there. Perhaps it's inappropriate to simply say 'he was there.'

He had killed me, and I had died by his hand.

"This makes no sense."

As I said this aloud, my hand was already checking my smartphone. I checked the date. It was yesterday's date.

My hands trembled.

I browsed internet communities.

-Yeah, the Flame Emperor is being a Flame Retard again!

2 minutes ago | Report

Reply ▼

Here too.

-Can't he watch his words in front of a global audience?

1 minute ago | Report

Replies 5 ▲

There too.

-Flame Emperor's got a girlfriend! He's dating the Saintess!

1 minute ago | Report

Replies 4 ▲

This site too. That community too. Social media too.

Everything was the same. The same posts I had read yesterday were being uploaded live. Even though I had seen them yesterday, others were reacting as if they were new.

"Ha..."

Yet, there was one change.

└ I want to become like the Flame Emperor.

1 second ago | Edit

My comment was missing.

Of course. Normally at this time yesterday, I would have been actively commenting, but now I was just staring blankly.

I had really returned to yesterday.

"...Skill card. Open."

Whoosh!

A golden card flared up before my eyes.

[I Want to Become Just Like You (S+)]

The skill I had memorized after checking several times since yesterday. An S-rank skill, but one I could never use. The skill whose use meant my death, the worst skill ever.

But that wasn't all.

"My goodness."

Two.

There were two flames burning before me.

[I Want to Become Just Like You (S+)]

[Returner's Winding Clock (EX)]

Two golden cards floated in front of me.

'How?'

My heart raced.

Returner's Winding Clock. A skill I had never seen before. It wasn't there when I checked yesterday, nor before the Flame Emperor killed me. There was only a useless skill I couldn't use, not a skill with that name... especially not a golden one.

'How did this happen?'

I didn't know.

How this skill became mine, how it came to be. I didn't understand yet.

But...

'It's mine.'

I knew this card was mine.

'Mine.'

And perhaps a card that could change my life.

I reached out and grasped the card.

Flipped it.

+

[Returner's Winding Clock]

Rank: EX

Effect: Activated automatically on death. You will return 24 hours back in time from the moment of your death. Your memories and stats are preserved while returning.

*However, there is a greater penalty the higher your rank.

*Skill copied from Yoo Soo-Ha

+

‘Return’.

If I die, I go back 24 hours.

"Ah..."

My head trembled as if struck by lightning. My heart pounded.

I realized.

"This is, the Flame Emperor's secret..."

How the Flame Emperor became the world's Rank 1.

How he soloed the invincible boss of the 10th floor of the Tower.

And lastly, why he was so sure that 'the Saintess would kill him.'

I finally understood.

- "The Saintess really tried to kill me."

- "If I didn't kill her first, she would have poisoned me tomorrow."

The Flame Emperor had said.

- "I just know."

- "I just know. There's a way to know everything."

- "You don't need to know how."

He had actually died at the hands of the Saintess.

As he said, poisoned and killed. But since he died, he returned 24 hours back. And then, with grinding teeth, he got his revenge on the Saintess.

For revenge.

'And he killed me too.'

I clenched my fist.

'An innocent me! Just because I was an annoyance!'

He cut off my feet. Burned my head. Killed me. Played with me like a bug.

The cheap TV was still broadcasting the interview.

-So, sorry. Could you please say a few words to our viewers?

-Sigh. What should I say?

Flame Emperor scratched the back of his head in response to the journalist's question.

Yesterday, I saw a hero in him. Now, I saw a psychopath. It didn't matter that he was the world's Rank 1. It didn't matter that he was hailed as a hero by many. He was my enemy.

Flame Emperor glared directly into the camera.

-If you're destined to succeed, you'll succeed.

I glared back at him.

-But even if you succeed, don't get cocky with me.

I gripped the golden card tightly. The same card that man had. The skill I had copied from Flame Emperor. He was Rank 1, and I wasn't even ranked, but at this moment, we were on the same starting line.

-You'll die.

Now it was my turn for revenge.

Chapter 4: Hero Hunting (1)

'I can't beat the Flame Emperor - Yoo Soo-Ha - through ordinary means.'

My heart thudded violently. I tried to stay calm, but it wasn't easy. Perhaps it was understandable? Just moments ago, I had died, burned from the head down.

The pain of my bones and flesh burning alive was... truly horrific.

"Damn, that bastard."

I glared at the newspaper scraps stuck to the wall.

The history of the Flame Emperor. From his days as an unknown rookie to reaching the world's Rank 1, numerous interviews and articles were plastered there.

Of course, the Flame Emperor's photos were also there. I wanted to tear them up so badly.

"Tch. But even if he dies, he returns 24 hours back."

Killing him was impossible.

That was the big problem.

'It's like an invincible cheat code, isn't it?'

Even without that, the gap in abilities between Flame Emperor and me was as vast as between the sun and a firefly. He was the world's Rank 1. I was unranked. My jealousy might be top class, even for the Tower, but that doesn't make me more powerful.

Even if miracles upon miracles happened, it would be hard to kill the Flame Emperor.

'But even if I successfully kill him, there's a problem.'

What would happen if I killed the Flame Emperor?

He would just return 24 hours back. And that's it. The Flame Emperor would ruthlessly try to kill me, and the moment he realized he couldn't, he'd probably imprison me forever.

Like building a prison in a basement and throwing me in.

With Flame Emperor's power and capabilities, it would be easy to subdue me. And I would spend my life forever trapped in a prison.

Kim Gong-Ja's life's bad ending number two. A glamorous imprisonment ending.

"Damn it..."

Killing him was a problem. Even if killed, still a problem.

How am I supposed to get revenge on this psychopath?

'What should I do?'

'How can I take down the world's Rank 1?'

One day.

I spent over 24 hours holed up in my room, thinking.

I stared at the newspaper articles on the wall, pondering. All of the Flame Emperor's information was there. Maybe I'd get a hint by looking at them.

"Flame Emperor solos floor 39!"

"Solo play conquers floor 38! Another legend of the Flame Emperor!"

"Hunter Yoo Soo-Ha. First Korean to reach world rank 1."

•

•

•

"Who will claim the throne of rank 1 with Sword Saint gone? Foreign experts say 'Korean Yoo Soo-Ha is the most likely.'"

"The enigmatic hero breaks through floor 10. Who is this hero?"

"Sword Saint missing for 22 days. Is this the worst turmoil for the Hunter industry?"

"....."

That was the moment.

"Huh?"

A shiver ran through my head.

"Wait. Look at this?"

I muttered, touching a newspaper scrap. It was an interview with Flame Emperor from a magazine. Originally an online article, but I had printed it out and stuck it there.

+

Q: How old were you when you first awakened, Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha?

A: It was the summer when I was 21. So, it's been 11 years.

Q: You remember the season so clearly. You must have an excellent memory.

A: I've never thought I had a good memory. It's just that the day I awakened happened to be my birthday. 11 years ago, June 7th. That's why I remember it.

Q: Your awakening happened on your birthday. What happened then?

A: I was on the 1st floor of the Tower. That's all I'll say. It's private.

+

At first glance, a routine interview.

But... to me, it was an invaluable clue.

"Wow, wait. Really? Can this really work?"

There was a way. A way to kill the world's Rank 1 hunter.

Not easy, and others would call me crazy if they heard it. But at the same time, it was the only method I thought of to eliminate the Flame Emperor. Even a lowly F-rank hunter like me could do it.

'I can really get revenge!'

That's when it happened.

"Fire!"

There was commotion outside the window. Curious, I opened the window to look. Thick red smoke was billowing from the other side of the neighborhood. Residents were coming out into the alleys, making a racket.

"Oh my, what do we do, oh my!"

"Stop standing here and put out the fire!"

"Let's do it!"

The residents here were different from the 'outside world.' People who had set foot in the Tower to become hunters. A city formed by such residents, the 1st floor of the Tower.

The city had various names. Some called it Babylon, others called it the Abyss. Some simply called it the 'Floor 1 City', while others more elegantly named it the City of Ascension.

It was because people of various races from all over the world gathered here.

Most residents here were hunters. They had experienced life-threatening crises, willing or not. When a crisis hit, they

moved more quickly than humans in the outside world.

I hurriedly left my studio and joined the residents in the firefighting effort.

'Crazy.'

I checked the time on my smartphone. It was the 24th hour since I returned from being killed by the Flame Emperor. The exact time when the Flame Emperor had murdered the Saintess.

Meaning...

'Damn it! Flame Emperor set the fire! To destroy the evidence!'

Yoo Soo-Ha.

He truly was a devil.

The vigilante corps had already arrived at the scene. Hunters

from major guilds were also arriving. Normally at odds, they united in the face of the fire disaster.

"Water ability users, don't use your skills alone!"

"Right, time it together! Right!"

"The Black Dragon Guild will temporarily take command here! Please follow Black Dragon's orders for a moment, everyone!"

Normally, these hunters were hard to even see outside of newspapers. The top rankers, including a few in the top five, showed their faces. I helped other residents while secretly observing the rankers.

"We've secured the area for now. The problem is whether there are any survivors inside... We need to send a rescue team quickly."

Rank 5. Guild leader of the Healer and Pharmacist Guild, Master Alchemist.

"It's okay. This place used to be a slum. For the past five

years, it's been uninhabited and entry was prohibited. It's a stroke of luck that the fire broke out here."

Rank 10. Leader of the City's Vigilante Corps, Paladin.

Truly hunters renowned for helping others. Even among the top rankers, they weren't loners. They arrived first and were commanding the scene.

'Normally, the Saintess would be among them...'

But the Saintess was nowhere to be seen.

Of course. She had been murdered by the most insolent loner of them all.

Only the Flame Emperor and I knew this fact. A truth that even the top rankers didn't know yet... No, a truth they might never know.

Master Alchemist looked around.

"It's strange. Why hasn't the Saintess arrived yet...?"

"She mentioned she had something tonight. I don't know exactly, but maybe a date."

Rank 10 Hunter, Paladin, chuckled.

"Recently, she's been spending more time with the Flame Emperor."

"...I don't like that Flame Emperor."

Master Alchemist shrugged.

"It might be a bit rude to gossip here... But I think Saintess should meet someone better."

"You're too picky. Who's better than Rank 1? That's why you're still single."

"I-it doesn't matter... I'm still safe in my late thirties..."

Speak of the devil.

"Flame Emperor!"

Those helping with the fire halted momentarily. The top rankers turned their heads. There was Flame Emperor, strolling casually, dressed in a hoodie and sweatpants. He looked extremely bothered.

"Who the hell started playing with fire without my permission?"

That insane psychopath.

"Welcome, Flame Emperor."

"Oh, big bro, welcome."

"Can you help us? As you see, there's an arson in the old slum area. Could you lend a hand?"

Paladin politely asked. However, the Flame Emperor was

indifferent.

"What do I get out of helping?"

"You get the satisfaction of having helped many people for free."

"Ah, cut the crap. Tell me what I get."

"Tomorrow, headlines across the world will read, 'Flame Emperor, the hero who extinguished the fire.' It'll be a fresh shock to the public and improve your image."

"Pfft."

The Flame Emperor stuffed his hands in his pockets and scoffed.

"Have I ever cared about what the media thinks?"

He was truly a lunatic.

Residents were already filming Flame Emperor with their phones. His expression and words were probably being broadcast worldwide. The internet would be heatedly divided between those defending and those cursing Flame Emperor.

What would Flame Emperor's defenders say?

- "Exactly. You have to look out for your own interests."

- "Helping others for free is for fools."

- "I like that he's still honest even after becoming a hero."

My head spun.

'No one knows.'

A chill ran down my spine.

"He's not just being honest. That guy is... he's just crazy. He's not in his right mind."

Despite the nearby flames flickering, my heart felt cold. This fire, this arson, this disaster — it was all caused by the Flame Emperor - Yoo Soo-Ha. Yet, he returned with a nonchalant face, asking "What's in it for me?"

It was then I was certain.

"I need to kill him."

A monster.

Not just for my revenge, but for humanity. For the honor of all hunters, this monster must be obliterated. A monster is a monster. And isn't it our duty as hunters to eliminate monsters?

"I must kill him by any means necessary."

In this tower, there lived a monster who played with fire. Yes, that's true. But simply saying 'he lived' was an understatement. He was grossly inappropriate.

That monster was my prey.

"Even if it costs me my life."

I started walking.

Thud.

Past the heroes pondering post-mortem strategies. Past ordinary people struggling with the fire. Towards the ceaselessly soaring flames, towards the inferno that resembled hell, I walked.

"Wait! Where are you going?"

I kept walking.

"Hey, mister! You shouldn't get too close!"

I continued.

"Oh my! That person must be crazy!"

"Someone stop him!"

"Damn, what a lunatic!"

And then I ran.

People behind me were in a frenzy. Some stamped their feet in panic. Others stopped their firefighting efforts to shout. I ignored them all and kept running.

"It's hot."

It was no different from hell. Flames leapt up everywhere like red tongues of fire.

"It hurts!"

With every step, my flesh seemed to melt. My eyeballs felt as though they were being scorched.

"But it's better than being tormented by the Flame Emperor!"

This was the only way to kill him.

How long did I run? It felt like a while, but perhaps only a minute had passed. My throat choked with smoke, and when I stopped coughing, I heard a voice.

[You have died.]

Yes.

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

It was my second death.

As I plunged into the flames, people thought I had gone mad.

Of course, I hadn't. On the contrary, I was very lucid about the situation.

"...I'm back."

My hell. My tiny 3.5 pyeong studio.

The walls were plastered with interview articles, and the TV was broadcasting a live news report. A broadcast I was listening to for the third time.

- Breaking news. The Black Dragon Guild has once again returned empty-handed...

I had returned to yesterday again.

"Good. The skill works properly."

Unlike before, I didn't pay attention to the TV. It was unnecessary. What mattered was that the skill to return 24 hours back worked correctly.

With this skill, I can kill the Flame Emperor.

[You are currently an F-Rank Hunter.]

[There is no penalty for the skill usage.]

"Just as I thought."

I muttered.

'Returner's Winding Clock. The penalty gets stronger the higher the hunter rank.'

Conversely, if the hunter rank is at the bottom, there's hardly any penalty.

'I have a chance now.'

While I'm still an F-rank.

The only opportunity to hunt the Flame Emperor.

'This is my last chance.'

I took out a knife from my backpack.

An old knife. A dagger I've kept since I started being a hunter. It was no longer suitable for hunting monsters... but sharp enough to kill a person.

'How do I kill the Flame Emperor?'

I pondered continuously.

'Do I cooperate with the Saintess, who hasn't been killed yet? Do I reveal my abilities to Black Dragon Guild and plot to imprison Flame Emperor forever? Or do I secretly film Flame Emperor killing the Saintess and leak it to the media?'

Any method was fine.

But fine was all they were. There was no 100% certainty of sending the Flame Emperor to his doom.

'I lack the track record to convince the Saintess.'

I had no achievements.

'I lack the power to avoid being betrayed by the guild.'

I had no strength.

'I lack the confidence to successfully film Flame Emperor.'

I had no confidence.

'But...'

There was something I had.

'I can return 24 hours back when I die.'

The skill.

Returner's Winding Clock, copied from Flame Emperor.

'Yes. I have a skill.'

'Don't worry, Kim Gong-Ja. You can do this.'

I gulped and looked at the wall one last time. The interview with Flame Emperor - Yoo Soo-Ha - was there in black and white.

+

Q: How old were you when you first awakened, Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha?

A: It was the summer when I was 21. So, it's been 11 years.

Q: You remember the season so clearly. You must have an excellent memory.

A: I've never thought I had a good memory. It's just that the day I awakened happened to be my birthday. 11 years ago, June 7th. That's why I remember it.

+

'11 years.'

11 years ago, June 7th, summer.

Counting backwards from today.

'4050 days.'

Yes.

'I need to die 4050 times.'

That was the only way to kill the Flame Emperor.

'Yoo Soo-Ha.'

'If you are a monster that can't die even if killed.'

I raised the knife high.

'I'll kill you before you become a monster!'

And I stabbed myself in the throat.

To return to the past.

To June 7th, 11 years ago, the summer when Flame Emperor - Yoo Soo-Ha - hadn't yet awakened his skills. Before he had the power to return 24 hours back upon death.

To a past where I could still kill the Flame Emperor!

"Ugh...!"

It was hot. It hurt. My heart throbbed violently. Every nerve in my body screamed in pain. I couldn't see or feel anything.

But I heard a voice.

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

I returned to one day earlier.

There, I was lying on the bed. The TV was off. But the articles plastered on the wall were still there. I couldn't erase Flame Emperor's history, his insane legend, with just one more day of regression.

I glared at Yoo Soo-Ha's picture.

'It doesn't matter.'

If a day is not enough, then a week. If a week is not enough, then a month. If a month is not enough, then a year. If a year is still not enough, then...

"Alright."

I took out the dagger again.

"Just 4049 days left."

And I stabbed myself.

Chapter 5: Hero Hunting (2)

4048 days.

[You have died.]

4047 days.

[You have died.]

4046 days.

[You have died.]

It was a process of erasing one's history, of wiping away a legend that seemed forever etched in the tower's memory. Just as Rome wasn't built in a day, Flame Emperor's legend wasn't created in a few days either. Naturally, it was difficult.

But it wasn't impossible.

"Damn it...!"

I cursed as I killed myself.

When I felt like giving up, I remembered the pain when the Flame Emperor set my body on fire, the sense of injustice, the rage. His face, when he returned nonchalantly after burning down the village and asked, "What's in it for me?"

His expression as he looked down on me like an insect.

'I'll kill you!'

Thump!

I bit down hard and stabbed the knife into my neck.

'I'll kill you, Yoo Soo-Ha!'

It was a task of killing myself.

But more so, it was about killing the Flame Emperor.

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

4040 days.

4039 days.

4038 days.

4037 days...

...

...

...

How many times did I kill myself?

Like an endless hourglass, my task seemed to never end. Flame Emperor's achievements appeared as indestructible as a pyramid.

Then, cracks began to appear in that pyramid.

"Flame Emperor solos floor 39!"

"Solo play conquers floor 38! Another legend of the Flame Emperor!"

"Hunter Yoo Soo-Ha. First Korean to reach world rank 1."

...

"Who will claim the throne of rank 1 with Sword Saint gone? Foreign experts say 'Korean Yoo Soo-Ha is the most likely.'"

"The enigmatic hero breaks through floor 10. Who is this hero?"

"Sword Saint missing for 22 days. Is this the worst turmoil for the Hunter industry?"

...

One by one, the newspaper clippings on my room wall that showcased Flame Emperor's history disappeared.

One by one.

"Unbreakable 10th Floor Conquered. Who is this Mysterious Hero?"

"Sword Saint missing for 22 days. Is this the worst turmoil for the Hunter industry?"

They Disappeared.

'I can see it!'

The end was in sight.

Still a long way to go, but... it's okay. I can endure. The once-seemingly immortal and indestructible Flame Emperor is neither eternal nor invincible. Just being sure of this fact is enough for me.

'I can do the impossible!'

I swung the knife.

Swinging it, I killed the time when the Flame Emperor conquered the 37th floor.

"Hunter Yoo Soo-Ha. First Korean to reach world rank 1."

"Who will claim the throne of rank 1 with Sword Saint gone? Foreign experts say 'Korean Yoo Soo-Ha is the most likely.'"

"The enigmatic hero breaks through floor 10. Who is this hero?"

"Sword Saint missing for 22 days. Is this the worst turmoil for the Hunter industry?"

I swung the knife again.

Swinging it, I killed the time when the Flame Emperor reached the pinnacle of the world.

"Who will claim the throne of rank 1 with Sword Saint gone? Foreign experts say 'Korean Yoo Soo-Ha is the most likely.'"

"The enigmatic hero breaks through floor 10. Who is this hero?"

"Sword Saint missing for 22 days. Is this the worst turmoil for the Hunter industry?"

I killed it.

"The enigmatic hero breaks through floor 10. Who is this hero?"

"Sword Saint missing for 22 days. Is this the worst turmoil for the Hunter industry?"

I killed it.

"Sword Saint missing for 22 days. Is this the worst turmoil for the Hunter industry?"

Finally,

[You have died.]

My old knife now gleamed as if new.

My hands had fewer wrinkles. My room had become smaller due to frequent moves. As I regressed to my younger days, life became poorer. Occasionally, when I went to the bathroom to take a break, I could see my much younger face in the mirror.

And then.

"Ah..."

They were gone.

Nothing was there on my wall.

The numerous newspaper articles and magazine interviews had vanished. There were no scraps of paper on the walls of my room.

A void.

I had erased the history named Flame Emperor.

"I did it."

I murmured unconsciously.

"I'm back..."

May 6th, 11 years ago.

One month before Flame Emperor - Yoo Soo-Ha's awakening.

I had regressed.

'There's no need to hesitate.'

I was dressed in shabby clothes.

'No need to wait.'

In a plain hoodie and sweatpants, everything I owned in my early twenties. I ventured out, armored in my meager belongings.

The thrill of being in the past... was absent.

'Yoo Soo-Ha.'

Until I killed him.

'I won't be complacent.'

4090 times.

That's how many times I died to return to today.

More than the 4050 times I initially calculated. Counting the time spent on thousands of suicides and breaks, it added up to that.

But that wasn't all.

I gathered everything about Yoo Soo-Ha, every bit of information.

I repeated today, May 6th, 10 times.

'11 AM.'

Yoo Soo-Ha almost always wakes up at 11 AM. On May 6th, he awoke at the same time, grimacing, perhaps because of the four beers he downed the night before.

'2 PM.'

Yoo Soo-Ha left the rental studio he lived in for hunting grounds. A place where F-rank Hunters often stayed. Taking advantage of the fact that they often died while hunting, the landlord set low rents but demanded high security deposits. Shrewd business.

'3 PM.'

Yoo Soo-Ha hunted slimes on the 2nd floor of the tower. But slimes alone didn't make for a good day's earnings. At 3:11 PM, Yoo Soo-Ha grumbled to himself,

"Ah, damn. When will I be rolling in dough like the Sword Saint?"

Four minutes later, at 3:15 PM, he muttered,

"Wow, hunting slimes is so boring."

A typical F-rank Hunter.

Living life waiting for a golden ticket.

That was 21-year-old Yoo Soo-Ha, not the 32-year-old Flame Emperor.

"If only I could win the lottery..."

Soon after, 21-year-old Yoo Soo-Ha would realize this wish.

Upon gaining the Returner's skill, Yoo Soo-Ha used it to win the lottery.

The Merchant Union, known as Sang-Ryun, issued lottery tickets weekly, the only guild in the tower to do so. And among the recorded winners was the young man who would later be known as the Flame Emperor.

Twice in a row, he hit the jackpot.

'That's three and four weeks from today.'

But...

The 21-year-old Yoo Soo-Ha I was looking at would not have that future.

'You die here today.'

May 6th, 5:31 PM.

Yoo Soo-Ha left the 2nd-floor hunting grounds, perhaps thinking he couldn't make it in life just hunting slimes. He moved to a more challenging area, less frequented by novice Hunters.

A remote and dangerous place.

'...He's here.'

I was waiting there.

'That's him.'

Yoo Soo-Ha, yawning and sauntering along. I recognized him instantly, even though it had been 11 years. Not because I was

particularly perceptive. Simply because Yoo Soo-Ha looked much the same then as he would 11 years later.

'Probably gorged himself on some Elixir of Fire later.'

Thanks.

For being such a greed-driven pig!

'Come on.'

My heart pounded wildly.

I swallowed my nerves and called out.

"Ex-excuse me, Hunter! Please save me..."

"What?"

Yoo Soo-Ha looked my way.

"I was attacked by wolves... Please, save me. Give me a potion..."

I was covered in blood. Not mine, but from monsters I'd hunted earlier. To anyone else, I looked like a novice Hunter, inches from death.

"Ah, damn. What's this?"

Yoo Soo-Ha probably saw me just like that.

"Did you already mess with the monsters here? Damn it. My hunt's ruined for today."

"Please... a potion..."

"What potion? I'm not gonna give my expensive potion to a stranger for free. That'd be insane."

Yoo Soo-Ha took out a plastic bottle, shaking it in front of me. The liquid inside, as red as blood, sloshed around. It was a recovery potion from Alchemy Castle, costing 20 gold at the store.

"I'll give you... twenty gold... for it..."

"Wow. You're really greedy, aren't you?"

Yoo Soo-Ha crouched down to my eye level.

"Don't you get it? You're about to die. And you want to save your life with just 20 gold? Isn't your life worth more than that?"

"Uh..."

"Think about it. If I leave right now, you're dead. If you don't want to die, you should be willing to pay the right price for your life."

"..."

Alright.

I knew it.

"I'll give you... forty gold..."

"Forget it. Just give me everything you have."

I knew he was this kind of guy.

"Ah, right. You want to give more, but you can't even move your hands, right? Don't worry. I'll collect it for you. I'm that generous."

Yoo Soo-Ha rummaged through my pockets. My shirt, inside my hoodie, and my pants. He finally found my leather wallet and smirked.

"Let's see. 1 gold, 2 gold, 3 gold... Hmm. About 60 gold? Why are you so poor? Carry more money on you."

"Uh, that's... all I have..."

"Don't worry. I'll spend it well."

Yoo Soo-Ha pocketed my wallet and patted my head.

Just like he did 4050 days later, when he burned me alive.

"Life's like that, isn't it?"

He reached into his pocket, not for the promised recovery potion, but something else. Instead, he drew out a knife.

A sword.

Not a lifesaving tool, but a deadly weapon.

'Hah.'

I looked up at Yoo Soo-Ha. It wasn't out of anger, just disbelief. But perhaps interpreting my look differently, Yoo Soo-Ha shrugged.

"Hey, don't look at me like that. I thought about giving you the potion, but what if you seek revenge later? Can't have that. Gotta live without future troubles. Since you've seen my face..."

Yoo Soo-Ha was smiling.

"You've gotta die."

The Hunter I had only seen from behind on TV. The one I admired as a hero for ten years, envying his success.

The true face of the hero was hideous.

Much more than I had imagined.

'Good.'

I quietly watched Yoo Soo-Ha grip the knife.

'I'll live without future troubles.'

He slowly raised the knife.

And then.

I kicked his groin with my right foot.

"Argh!?"

Staggering, Yoo Soo-Ha's posture faltered for a brief moment. But that was all I needed. I narrowly dodged the trajectory of his knife and,

"Huh?"

I stabbed his throat with my sword.

"..., ...!"

I wasn't like Yoo Soo-Ha. Facing my prey, my target for elimination, I didn't waste time with pointless chatter. Immediately after stabbing him in the neck, I twisted the sword, slicing under his jaw.

"Krh, huuh...!"

A fountain of blood erupted. My hands quickly soaked. Yoo

Soo-Ha writhed in pain on the ground, then let out a scream.

"Aaaaaah!"

But it was brief. Soon, his throat was clogged with blood foam.

"Good."

I stepped on Yoo Soo-Ha's throat.

"..."

His eyes widened. Why? How? Such questions and anger were visible in his gaze. A gaze that would soon fade. I had no obligation to answer.

"Think of it as a valuable experience."

I grabbed the dagger.

The dagger that had killed me 4090 times.

And swung it.

To kill the monster.

Chapter 6: Hero Hunting (3)

"Uuuk, Gag...!"

The brink of death can awaken latent powers.

This adage has long circulated in the Hunter community: face death to awaken your skill. Perhaps it wasn't just a saying, but actual truth. At least it seemed more plausible than awakening skills through sheer envy, no matter how extreme.

Thus, I did not let my guard down.

Without complacency, I swung my dagger directly.

"Hah!"

To ensure the psychopath before me wouldn't awaken his

powers by chance.

"Agh....."

Die.

"Groan..."

What enraged me the most wasn't just that this psychopath had burned me alive without a second thought, nor the pain and injustice of it. There was something else that infuriated me more.

'He said his name.'

Before I returned to the past.

Before the Flame Emperor burned my head to a crisp, he smiled and said:

- But you know I'm the Flame Emperor. You saw me kill the Saintess.

- So, you must die.

- My name is Yoo Soo-Ha. Farewell.

It all sounded like the ramblings of a madman. But there was one truly strange part that I couldn't bear.

'The last thing he said.'

Why did he reveal his name while killing me?

Did he think I didn't know who the Flame Emperor was?

No, that wasn't it.

'He was showing off.'

The Flame Emperor.

That murderer... was posturing.

As if it was a sacred duel where warriors reveal their names. In his mind, as he killed me, the Flame Emperor must have thought:

- I, at least, reveal who I am as I kill.

- Thus, I am honorable.

How dare.

"A monster like you..."

How dare a psychopath like you.

"A bastard like you, doing such things...!"

A man who casually murdered a bystander. Who set a locality ablaze and then shamelessly returned as if he did nothing wrong. Such an inhuman creature, worse than a beast, a devil.

Pretending to be noble.

"Don't make me laugh!"

Thrust!

My sword pierced Yoo Soo-Ha's neck.

"..."

Yoo Soo-Ha was already silent. No screams, no groans. In a secluded hunting ground, where no one else passed by, Yoo Soo-Ha lay on the ground, his eyes lifelessly gazing at the sky.

He was dead.

"Haa, huff... Haa..."

Perhaps 'dead' was an understatement. He wasn't just any hunter, and his death was far from ordinary.

A man who would have become the Flame Emperor. A legend who would have reached the world's top rank. The one who would have single-handedly conquered the untamed 10th

floor of the tower.

Was killed by me.

"Sigh."

I exhaled deeply.

"Finally, some sanity returns..."

I was about to remark on my return when I stopped. Were they attracted by the smell of blood? Wolves. Large wolves, their dark fur marked as if tattooed by human hands. Known as prairie wolves, the more complex their patterns, the stronger they were.

These wolves were simple-patterned, but...

"..."

First, I retrieved the wallet Yoo Soo-Ha had stolen from me.

Cautiously, I stepped back.

"You want this corpse, don't you?"

Pointing to the body, I spoke.

"I don't need it. Take it."

I retreated.

-Awoooo.

The wolves approached the corpse. Rip! Their teeth tore through the clothing. As one wolf bit in, others joined. Rip, tearing... Soon, the body was hidden beneath their massive forms.

"Eat well."

I quickly retreated.

'Is it over?'

I buried the bloodied clothes. Deep in a hole I had dug earlier. I washed off the blood with water I brought in plastic bottles. Changing into fresh clothes from my backpack, I still couldn't quite believe it.

'Is it really over?'

If my new clothes looked too clean, it might raise suspicions. I deliberately rolled in the dirt. When they seemed dirty enough, I returned to Babylon, the city on the 1st floor of the tower. A Vigilante Corps member was on guard but merely glanced at me before yawning and looking away.

'Ah.'

No one knew.

'It's over.'

I went to a pub and ordered a beer. Even after finishing one and ordering another, no one paid me any attention. No one knew what I had done.

The pub's TV showed only old news.

-Today, another attempt to conquer the 10th floor was thwarted.

-Despite the participation of rankers from 2nd to 7th...

-There's growing criticism of the Sword Saint, ranked 1st but not participating in the raids...

There was no breaking news about 'Hunter missing on 2nd floor hunting grounds.'

It was expected. The loss of a novice Hunter's life was a daily occurrence. Just as no one paid attention to me, nobody cared about the disappearance of an unknown Hunter.

So.

'It's over!'

Yes.

I had successfully hunted down the monster.

I raised my empty glass high.

"One more beer, please!"

"You're drinking a lot today. Did the hunt go well?"

"Yes, very well. Extremely well!"

I couldn't have felt more relieved.

For a few hours, I filled my heart, now light and breezy, with beer. It wasn't until the sun began to set outside the pub that I slowly started to think about reality.

'What do I do now?'

There was much to do.

'I could win the lottery. I could sell unknown top-floor strategies for money. Wow, my life has opened up. It's wide open!'

I looked up at my ability window.

The ability window, visible only to the Hunter themselves.

+

Name: Kim Gong-Ja

Rank: F-Rank

Skills (2/4)

1. [I Want to Become Just Like You] (S+): Passive

2. [Returner's Winding Clock] (EX): Passive

3. None

4. None

+

"Wow, who needs side dishes?"

My ability window was like the most delicious side dish in the world. An S-Rank skill and an unheard-of EX-Rank skill. It's like adding caviar to a steak dinner.

'Wanting more would be greedy. Yeah.'

But the satisfied smile on my face was short-lived.

"...But I have no combat skills."

Ah.

Is this how human nature is?

I slowly started noticing what I lacked.

"No matter how much money I make, a Hunter needs to be a Hunter... Having money without power, I'll be robbed eventually..."

The society within the tower was even more brutal than the outside world.

Elegantly put, it was a survival of the fittest world. Simply put, the law of the jungle.

If only I could just run away to the outside world...

'Once you enter the tower, you can never leave.'

That was the rule.

Even an S-Rank Hunter with spatial movement abilities couldn't leave the tower. It was simply impossible.

The only person who could interact with the outside world from Babylon was the leader of the Sang-Ryun (Merchants Union), the Hunter known as "Countess."

'She can send and receive items outside, but can't physically leave the tower herself...'

In other words, entry was at one's discretion, but exit was not.

Only those ready to abandon everything in the outside world could become true Hunters.

Wealth, relationships, status, nationality, everything.

Maybe... even their humanity.

"Right."

Of course, I was no different.

"Whether it's death or booze, I have to succeed in the tower."

Buoyed by the alcohol, I murmured. Success. I desperately wanted to succeed.

Why did I idolize the Flame Emperor in the first place? Because of his character? Did he have any character to speak of? The reason was much simpler.

I envied the Flame Emperor's dazzling achievements and success.

"Let's succeed, Kim Gong-Ja. Yeah. After dying 4090 times, what can't I do? I must succeed..."

Then.

-Jingle.

The pub's front door chimed.

At first, I didn't care who entered.

How impressive could a Hunter be who starts drinking in the

early evening?

But soon, other drunkards began to whisper.

"Hey, isn't that person over there...?"

"Huh? Seems like it."

"Why here...?"

The pub quieted oddly. Everyone held their breath. Now curious, I couldn't help but look.

A well-dressed elderly man in a black suit stood there.

"Hmm."

Dressed as if he was about to head to the office, with a plain, bright red tie. He looked like an ordinary businessman, enough to make you wonder, 'Did I accidentally return to the outside world?'

Except, his shoes were red sneakers, not formal shoes.

'Wow. What kind of fashion sense is that?'

It was extremely unbalanced.

But the oddity wasn't just his attire.

"Milk."

"Yes?"

"Warm milk mixed with a bit of vodka and sugar. Honey would be better than sugar."

Faced with the bizarre order, even the pub owner seemed baffled.

"Uh... Sir, I'm not a bartender, so..."

"Don't worry, I'll pay properly."

The pub owner reluctantly nodded. The other patrons continued to sneak glances at the suit-clad elderly man. He seemed quite famous.

'Who is he?'

I frowned slightly.

'It's strange. I know most of the famous Hunters.'

It wasn't bragging, but there was no one who envied top Hunters as much as I did. I knew everyone from the Flame Emperor to the top 100 rankers. They were all objects of my jealousy.

But this strangely dressed elderly man was unfamiliar.

'Where have I seen him? Where?'

It took a while before I remembered.

'Ah!'

Not other than in my own room.

Among the myriad of newspaper clippings stuck on my wall.

「Sword Saint missing for 22 days. Is this the worst turmoil for the Hunter industry?」

'It's the Sword Saint!'

That's right. Before Yoo Soo-Ha rose to fame as the Flame Emperor, this man was the most famous.

I had simply forgotten him, a Hunter who had been active over ten years ago. After all, it's not easy to immediately recognize a Hunter who's been inactive for so long.

Someone who, for some reason, would soon disappear.

'Ah, right... It's 11 years ago.'

I suddenly felt the reality of having returned to the past.

'In this era, it's not the Flame Emperor, but this elderly man who's the strongest in the world...'

It was intriguing.

Despite knowing it was rude, I couldn't help but steal glances at the Sword Saint's side profile. How should I describe it? Like seeing a great figure who had died long ago, right in front of me. It was an odd sensation.

'Wow. That old man probably has an S-Rank skill too, right?'

I smirked, sipping my beer.

'Not a weird skill like mine, but a proper combat skill...'

That's when it happened.

"Huh?"

My hand froze unknowingly.

Suddenly, my S-Rank skill flashed in my mind.

+

[I Want to Become Just Like You]

Rank: S+

Effect: Automatically activated when killed by an enemy. You copy one of the skills of the enemy that killed you and make it yours. You may not copy from an opponent you've already copied from. The copied skill is selected randomly.

*However, you will die!

+

'Wait a minute.'

It was as if lightning struck my brain, illuminating everything.

The same sensation I had when I thought of a way to kill the Flame Emperor engulfed me.

[I Want to Become Just Like You]. It's a great skill. If I wanted, I could die to any Hunter and copy their skill. The downside, of course, is that I have to die.

But.

'I don't die anymore, do I?'

Because I now have another skill.

+

[Returner's Winding Clock]

Rank: EX

Effect: Activated automatically on death. You will return 24 hours back in time from the moment of your death. Your memories and stats are preserved while returning.

*However, there is a greater penalty the higher your rank.

*Skill copied from Yoo Soo-Ha

+

'So.'

A chilling current ran up my spine.

'Can I just copy them all? Just choose any Hunter, die, and that's it?'

The most obvious fact. Yet, due to the tension and pressure of needing to kill the Flame Emperor, I hadn't realized it until now.

'...Even the current world's top-ranked Sword Saint?'

Gulp. I swallowed the remaining beer.

The Flame Emperor, who would become the top ranker in the future, possessed the cheat ability of regression. Then, what about the Sword Saint, who reigned over this era? What kind of ability might he possess?

'If I can copy that...'

I gazed at the elderly man's back.

'This is huge.'

Apparently.

My hunt wasn't over yet.

Chapter 7: The Identity of the Soliloquy (1)

I immediately searched for information about the Sword Saint on my smartphone.

-He was originally from a Nordic conglomerate family.

-Real name: Marcus Callenbury. A big shot who abandoned his family, connections, and wealth to enter the tower alone.

-Exactly what skills he possesses is unknown to everyone.

-It is said that he often mutters to himself.

I clicked my tongue in frustration.

"Not much helpful information."

I searched for interview videos or anything similar, but found nothing. It seemed that this elder, unlike the Flame Emperor, had a completely opposite personality. The Flame Emperor, although rude to journalists, was essentially an attention-seeker and frequently appeared in the media.

In contrast, the Sword Saint was utterly enigmatic.

As a result, the information available on the internet was quite vague. 'It is said' he was from a conglomerate family, 'it is said' he entered the tower alone, 'it is said' he had a habit of muttering to himself. All speculative information.

'Well....'

I turned my head.

In a secluded corner table.

There sat the Sword Saint, drinking his milk-vodka alone.

'At least the information about his frequent muttering seems accurate.'

The elder was unusual from his fashion sense to his choice of drink. He was continuously muttering to himself without any side dishes, just sipping his drink.

"...Shut up. Don't be noisy. You've always been..."

Muttering.

I couldn't make out exactly what he was saying, but every time he tilted his glass, he would definitely mutter something, frowning deeply. Honestly, it was a bit scary.

'Could he have some kind of mental illness?'

A mentally ill Hunter as the top ranker was a terrifying thought, like a ticking time bomb.

'...But then again, the Flame Emperor was a psychopath.'

Maybe being mentally disturbed is a prerequisite for becoming the top ranker.

'Anyway, the top rankers are almost all crazy.'

I shook my head, continuing my search on the smartphone. As expected, it was all speculative information, but one post caught my eye.

-[Caution] Words you should never say in front of the Sword Saint!

"Hmm?"

It was an interesting title. The post was in a Hunter-specific community, a place where you could only join with a Hunter's license issued by the Hunter Association.

An anonymous post was there.

-I witnessed it myself. There are certain taboo words you should never say to the Sword Saint. If you don't want to die, never mention these words to him. Seriously, you'll die.

What are they?

Grandchildren. A few days ago, some high-ranking Hunters provoked the Sword Saint on Floor 9. One of them said,

‘Looking at what you're doing, I can see what kind of people your grandchildren must be.’

‘They must be living arrogantly, just like you.’

‘How embarrassed your grandchildren must be seeing you like this.’

-Then he killed him.

Killed him?

Yeah. Really killed him. In fact, when he said, ‘How embarrassed your grandchildren must be...’ his head flew off. No one could react, you know? The head and body were separated in the blink of an eye.

After that, the post was flooded with comments.

-Don't make stuff up.

-This is just another rumor spread by a major guild.

-As usual, those who are a bit successful step on others.

Most responses were incredulous.

But the anonymous poster stubbornly defended their claim.

-Believe it or not, it's up to you! I just thought you should know.

-I don't think the Sword Saint was wrong. It was the fault of those who brought up his family. But because of this incident, the top rankers are definitely angry. You can tell by how the media criticizes the Sword Saint lately.

-Anyway, be careful around the Sword Saint. Good luck.

That was the end of the poster's comments.

As if there was nothing more to say.

"....."

I looked at my smartphone, pondering.

'A taboo word you should never say.'

I glanced at the pub corner. The elderly man was still sitting there.

"...Too noisy. I'll take care of it, just leave me alone..."

He was still muttering to himself.

Looking at him again, he still seemed mentally disturbed. However, being mentally ill or not, he was still the top ranker. The fact that he might possess unimaginable skills remained unchanged.

'Good.'

And that fact alone was enough for me.

'It's worth a try.'

"Thanks for the drink."

"Ah, goodbye!"

The Sword Saint finished his drink and left. As soon as he was gone, the previously silent drunkards let out a sigh.

"Finally, he's gone."

"He must have dementia, muttering like that."

"You never know. Anyway, he ruined the mood..."

It seemed like everyone in the pub had been waiting for the

Sword Saint to leave. I felt the same way.

But for a slightly different reason.

"Here's the bill."

I quickly got up and paid the owner as planned. There was no time to waste.

"Ah, thank you. Come again!"

"Thanks, keep up the good work."

Ding-.

The bell on the door rang.

Late at night, darkness had fallen on the streets.

'Where?'

I looked around. The street crowded with pubs also gathered a lot of people. Dozens of people laughed and exhaled alcohol-warmed breath into the night sky.

'Where did the top ranker go?'

Fortunately, I soon spotted the back I was looking for.

'Found him!'

His distinctive attire was a big help. In Babylon, he was the only one in a suit on this wide street.

I quickly silenced my steps and followed the elder.

'What kind of skill could he have?'

My heart raced.

'The Flame Emperor had a regression skill, an EX-rank skill. What about the Sword Saint, who succeeded a generation earlier than the Flame Emperor? Wouldn't he have an even

more cheat-like skill?'

That was soon to be mine. If I was lucky.

.

.

.

.

.

.

How long had I followed him?

Leaving the bustling area, we turned into an alley. Walking further, we left even the alley behind. The outskirts of the

outskirts. An empty field with no buildings. The Sword Saint walked steadily into that desolate field.

"Hmm."

He walked, then stopped.

"This should be far enough."

The Sword Saint turned around, the faint starlight illuminating his figure.

"Enough hiding. Come out, young man."

"....."

"There's nobody around here to witness whatever happens."

He was staring right at the tree where I was hiding.

I sighed internally.

'I was caught, after all.'

It was foolish to think I could tail the top ranker without being noticed. Resigned to my own incompetence, I stepped out from behind the tree.

"I apologize for the intrusion. I desperately needed to ask something of you, Sword Saint."

I tried to speak as politely as possible. Yet, for some reason, the Sword Saint scoffed.

"Hmph. Didn't you purposely make noise to get noticed? I don't understand why you're threatening an old man like me."

"....."

Huh?

Somehow, he seemed to misunderstand that I had

intentionally made noise. Moreover, without any aggressive action on my part, he was already gripping the hilt of his sword, ready for battle.

'Wait, why?'

Of course, this was actually good for me. My goal was to get killed by the Sword Saint.

'But I haven't done anything except tail him...?'

Whether he knew my thoughts or not, the Sword Saint's expression turned even more fierce, almost spitting out killing intent.

"...Impressive acting. Fitting for a top assassin."

"Excuse me?"

"Don't play dumb. You can fool other hunters, but not my eyes. Did you think I wouldn't know that you're a top-grade assassin sent by the Black Dragon?"

Uhh...

The old man was making a huge mistake.

'Is this good or bad?'

In any case, this was favorable. Even without mentioning his grandchildren, he seemed ready to kill me.

But how did he mistake me, a mere F-rank Hunter, for a top-grade assassin? I was completely baffled.

"Oh! How despicable to pretend and act all innocent!"

Swoosh.

The Sword Saint drew his sword.

"I possess many skills. Among them is a skill that lets me see how many people you've killed. Thanks to this skill, I've survived many crises."

".....?"

I was utterly confused.

'Ah.'

Then it hit me.

'I killed Yoo Soo-Ha.'

That's right.

Today, I had hunted Yoo Soo-Ha. I knew what kind of monster he would become, but to the people of this era, that was unknown. To them, I was just a murderer.

'But murder is still murder.'

So, to the Sword Saint, there was probably a [1] floating above my head, signifying Yoo Soo-Ha's death.

It made sense why he was so wary of me.

"Yes, I understand, Sword Saint."

"Hmm."

"I have no words to counter your caution. But please, think of this as an excuse. I had a truly significant reason, and though I can't fully explain, I swear to the heavens it was crucial."

I was sincere.

But things turned strange. Hearing my sincerity, the Sword Saint's face contorted even more.

"Disgusting."

"Excuse me?"

"How dare a murderer like you speak such words. I haven't led a perfectly clean life myself, but I never indiscriminately

massacred people like you!"

Things were getting out of hand.

I was genuinely perplexed.

"No, wait a minute, sir. Massacre? I've only killed one person in my entire life."

"Shameless liar!"

Shiiing.

The Sword Saint pointed his sword at me.

And said,

"I can clearly see the number [4091] floating above your head!"

I was dumbfounded.

"What nonsense are you..."

I was about to retort when my mouth clamped shut. I realized where the number 4091 had come from.

'Ah.'

Killing Yoo Soo-Ha, one.

And...

'My suicides.'

4090 times.

The number of times I had killed myself matched exactly.

"Brace yourself, demon!"

So...

"The Black Dragon Witch or whoever hired you, I'll kill you with all my might!"

To the Sword Saint, I must appear as a mass murderer of 4091 people, a heinous killer whose mere existence was abhorrent. A virus that needed to be eradicated from this world as soon as possible.

"Wait!"

I reached out my hand.

"Just give me a moment to explain!"

At that moment.

The Sword Saint's sword lunged towards me.

Chapter 8: The Identity of the Soliloquy (2)

Luck.

It was purely luck that I dodged Sword Saint's strike.

"Uh!?"

Sword Saint's eyes widened in surprise. He must have thought I was an incredibly skilled master. He might have been prepared for a master to counterattack or dodge his strike... but he surely hadn't expected me to awkwardly roll on the ground.

"Sword Saint, please wait a moment. Hear me out!"

Dying was not a concern for me; I had followed him intending to die. However, I wanted to clear up his

misunderstanding before dying, if possible. It would help avoid unnecessary conflicts in the next loop.

"I'm just a worthless F-Rank Hunter..."

"You managed to dodge my sword. You're definitely a top-class assassin!"

"Ah, is this old man deaf!? This is serious trouble."

The misunderstanding was getting deeper instead of being resolved.

Dodging his attack earlier was purely coincidental. I hadn't even seen where or how the blade was coming. The old man's skill was far beyond my cognitive abilities.

'If he attacks again, there's no way I can dodge it!'

Was I left with no choice but to give up on persuading him?

I braced for death and watched Sword Saint slowly

approach.

"....."

Suddenly, Sword Saint hesitated for a moment. His steps halted.

At first, I thought:

'Oh? Is he considering listening to me?'

But that wasn't the case. Sword Saint wasn't looking at me. The white-haired old man was frowning at the empty air. I glanced over, thinking maybe a mosquito was flying around, but of course, there was nothing.

"...I said I would handle it myself. Do I really need to keep such a demon alive for interrogation..."

He was talking to himself again.

'What's going on?'

Sword Saint, who seemed ready to strike me down at any moment, had inexplicably stopped his attack. Instead, he started muttering to himself non-stop. The imminent crisis was momentarily deferred.

I narrowed my eyes in thought.

'Could his soliloquy be a skill?'

That's a possibility.

In the tavern, I had assumed the old man was suffering from a mental illness. But watching him talk to himself up close, it seemed different. It was too sophisticated for a mental illness. The old man looked like he was really having a conversation with someone.

'Telepathy skill?'

A hypothesis suddenly came to mind. Telepathy or transmitted voice – a technique to freely converse with people far away. I knew such skills really existed.

'So, he's relaying information about me to others?'

A chill ran down my spine.

'Like broadcasting that he found someone who massacred 4091 people?'

A bounty order.

The Hunter Association rarely issues a bounty order. It's essentially a death warrant. The person becomes an enemy of the major guilds and is hunted by top-rank hunters.

Until they're publicly executed in Babylon's main square of the first floor of the Tower.

'That cannot happen.'

I clenched my teeth.

'I need to die now!'

To prevent a bounty order from being issued at any cost. To return to 24 hours before and erase everything that happened.

I had to die immediately.

I glared straight ahead.

"...It's decided. Despite being my teacher... I must..."

The old man continued his one-sided conversation. Whether he was merely an old man with a mental illness or actually communicating with someone, I couldn't be 100% sure. But regardless of my certainty, to prevent the worst-case scenario, I opened my mouth.

"How are your grandchildren doing?"

Sword Saint abruptly stopped his soliloquy.

He slowly turned his head towards me.

"I've heard that the outside world is quite dangerous nowadays. As Sword Saint's grandchildren, they must be quite lovely. You must be very worried."

"....."

Deep blue eyes.

His eyes resembled the scales of the deep sea, making it somewhat understandable why the old man was called the Sword Saint.

"I heard that you're originally from North Europe. Criminal organizations there are really rampant, aren't there?. Maybe without your knowledge, your grandchildren have already suffered a lot?."

Slash.

'Huh.'

It was a sound as clear as an apple being sliced.

'Huh...'

Initially, I couldn't tell what had happened. I'd been

watching the gramps this entire time and I hadn't seen him move. Not even his lips.

So where did that sound come from?

The strangeness didn't end there though. Originally, the Sword Saint was standing on the ground right in front of me.

But...

It started feeling as if the ground was slowly turning around.

The horizon started tilting and the moon in the sky flipped over. High up in the sky filled with stars, the first quarter's moon tilted and became the last quarter's moon. The only thing on the horizon was an upside-down gramps.

“ ... ”

The old man's blue eyes just stared at me and I couldn't help but think that they truly resembled the starry sky. I could see why he was called the Sword Saint*.

*The hanja for the Sword Saint's name actually refers to 'Star' instead of 'Saint'. But for the sake of audience familiarity and convenience, I will keep using Sword Saint, even though 'Sword Star' is a more accurate translation.

Then I realized.

'Ah.'

And then I realized.

'Ah.'

It wasn't the ground that had flipped.

My head had been severed and was falling upside down.

A single strike.

'Beautiful.'

I couldn't perceive the strike from Sword Saint. However, I could see the world after the strike had cleaved through. Seeing it, I couldn't help but think it was beautiful.

Shortly after, I felt a collision. My head felt numb. My ears were muffled. I couldn't hear anything. It took me a moment to realize my head had hit the ground.

By the time I realized it... my vision had gone completely dark.

[You have died.]

What kind of skill did he have?

How long must one train to reach such a level?

[The condition for your skill has been fulfilled by your death.]

I was engulfed in an emotion completely opposite to what I felt when Flame Emperor Yoo Soo-Ha had killed me. With him, I felt betrayed. I wanted revenge.

But with Sword Saint, it was different.

'I want to be like him.'

I was simply envious.

'I want that strike.'

Just like the feelings I had before I knew the true nature of Flame Emperor Yoo Soo-Ha.

'I want it too!'

Jealousy. Desire. Admiration.

Once again, a burning desire enveloped my heart.

And there was a response to my burning desire.

[Randomly copying a skill from Hunter Marcus Callenbury.]

In the darkened world, cards appeared.

[Creating skill cards.]

The cards showed only their backs. Perhaps to hide which card contained what skill?

'At least the card colors are more distinct than when I died from Flame Emperor.'

Maybe I had already gotten used to death. 4090 times. Just as Sword Saint's [Kill Count Skill] had proven, I had experienced thousands of deaths.

No hunter was more accustomed to death than me.

'Not something to brag about, though.'

I wanted to smile bitterly at that moment.

[Please select a skill card.]

The cards that were floating in the air started moving rapidly.

'Wow!'

I was startled by the suddenness, but I quickly focused on the cards.

'I don't need anything else. Golden! I must choose a golden card.'

They were fast. It seemed impossible to follow with consciousness.

'Incredible.'

Had I really picked a golden card from the rapidly flying cards when Flame Emperor killed me? How did I manage that? In hindsight, I was incredibly lucky back then.

'There's no rule saying I can't be lucky again! Come on, gold. Where are you, gold?'

But then.

Something was off.

'Huh?'

No matter how carefully I looked, I couldn't see it.

'The golden card... seems to be missing?'

I focused several times, but if it wasn't there, it wasn't there.

There was only one possibility.

'No, can it be?'

I was shocked.

'Is it really... not there?'

From the beginning...

The Sword Saint never had an S-Rank skill.

"It's unbelievable!"

I felt like screaming in disbelief.

"The hunter who reigned as number one in the rankings! The legend who dominated before the appearance of the Flame Emperor, without a single S-Rank skill!?"

It was hard to believe. But it was the truth. My skill clearly proved it. Marcus Callenbury, the Sword Saint, had reached the pinnacle alone, without any S-Rank skills.

It was a shocking and horrifying revelation.

"No, this can't be!"

I was in denial, facing shock and horror.

"There must be some overpowered skill among the silver cards!"

Whether this was a desperate hope or just pathetic, I was desperate. With all my might, I focused on the cards.

"Three brown cards. Four silver cards."

Seven cards in total flew chaotically around.

"I'll completely ignore the brown cards."

It was a logical choice.

Now, the problem was which silver card to choose!

Probably one of them contained the [Kill Count Skill], and another, some mysterious overpowered skill.

Of course, I was aiming for a skill as powerful as the Returner's Winding Clock, not a subtle one like the Kill Count.

"A one in four chance!"

It was a gamble based purely on luck.

"Please, let it be!"

I reached out and grabbed a silver card.

[Selection complete. Copying skill.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

"Ugh!"

I let out a groan and sat up abruptly.

The cramped room.

My tiny studio, filled with the musty smell of unwashed

bedding, welcomed me back. Sadly, I didn't have the luxury to enjoy the familiarity of my room.

"Did it... work!?"

I immediately checked my status window.

To see if I succeeded or failed in the one in four chance gamble!

Name: Kim Gong-Ja

Rank: F

Skills (3/4)

1. I Want to Become Just Like You (S+): Passive

2. Returner's Winding Clock (EX): Passive

3. Sword Constellation (A+): Passive

4. None

"Ah..."

I sighed, a mix of astonishment and disappointment.

"Thankfully, I got an A+ class skill..."

First, the relief.

While not reaching S-Class, I was relieved to have drawn the best option available. It was fortunate not to end up with a subtle skill like the Kill Count.

"...Another passive skill."

Then, the frustration.

My initial goal was a combat skill. Some rare martial art, swordsmanship, or a skill that awakens aura. Such abilities were usually active skills.

Meaning, I failed to obtain a top-notch combat skill.

"Ha."

I sighed again.

"No, when I think about it, this is just being greedy..."

If any of the numerous low-tier hunters heard my complaint, they would go berserk. How dare I grumble after obtaining an A+ rank skill?

Right.

I decided to think positively. I would focus on the skill in front of me.

"Open skill card."

The cards, visible only to the hunter, appeared.

[I want to become just like you (S+)]

[Returner's Winding Clock (EX)]

[Sword Constellation (A+)]

Sword Constellation. Just by the name, I couldn't guess what kind of skill it was.

"Well, 'I Want to Become Just Like You' is also a weird name."

It was hard to judge whether a skill was a hit or a miss just by its name.

Maybe it was an incredible skill.

Comforting myself with that thought, I grabbed the silver card.

- Ah, why is it so noisy?

A voice that shouldn't be heard suddenly spoke.

- Gramps. I've told you this before. Go outside if you want to train in the middle of the night.

"....."

- I automatically float and follow you around. There's no need to wake me up. Let's respect each other, okay?

Slowly.

Very slowly, I looked towards the direction the voice came from.

My bed. In the tiny space barely enough for me, something was there. Faint but unmistakably present. That something was lying down like a bull, with its back towards me.

"Excuse me."

I felt chills.

"Who... are you?"

- Eh?

Then, I found myself face-to-face with the unknown entity.

A ghost. A spirit.

Something an alive human couldn't normally see.

- Eh?

The ghost looked fierce. If it wasn't for the clothes, I might have mistaken it for a gorilla. With a bulky figure and a scowling face, it could star in a horror movie.

- Hey, who are you?

"...I wanted to ask that. Who are you?"

- You can see me?

I nodded hesitantly.

"Yes."

- And hear me too?

"Yes. Considering we are communicating... I suppose so."

What was happening?

Was I actually having a conversation with a ghost?

I expected a ghost to be consumed by grudges from its lifetime, wandering like a monster. But this one was different. Apart from being faint, it spoke just like a human.

- Huh, this is strange. This shouldn't be happening.

The ghost seemed just as puzzled about the situation as I was.

- Where is this? Why is it so cramped like a doghouse? Where did that old man Marcus go, and why are you here instead of him?

Finally, a statement from the ghost I could understand.

"Oh. Marcus? Marcus Callenbury? Are you talking about Sword Saint?"

- Tsk. It's too much for a rookie like him to be called Sword Saint.

The ghost seemed displeased, clicking its tongue.

- Anyway, yes, that old man. Where did he go? He should be around here.

I was dumbfounded.

'Sword Saint, a rookie?'

The current number one hunter. The legend who, until Yoo Soo-Ha's future demise, will likely remain at the top.

Who exactly was this ghost, calling such a figure a mere rookie? And why could I suddenly see and communicate with a ghost?

"....."

To solve these questions, I flipped over the silver card.

And read the skill description.

[Sword Constellation]

Rank: A+

Effect: From another world, he cleared his world's tower up to floor 99 but failed on the 100th. Unsatisfied, he was unable to give up on his earthly desires, and has become a spirit.

He cannot physically affect anything in this world, but is able to communicate with the holder of this skill.

Be awestruck by his skill and experience, and ask him for guidance!

*Only the holder of this skill is able to feel his presence.

*Skill copied from Marcus Calenbury.

I was at a loss for words.

- Hey, where did the old man go? Are you ignoring me? Sigh. Hey. Hey! I used to be quite something back in the day! Warriors would shiver at the blink of an eye, and you dare ignore me?

Incredible.

It seemed I had accidentally copied Sword Saint's Guardian Spirit.

Chapter 9: The Identity of the Soliloquy (3)

"Can't you send me back to the old man right now!?"

The Guardian Spirit was furiously agitated.

In my already cramped studio apartment, barely humane for one person, the presence of a ghost flitting about made it feel like a complete violation of human rights. Imagine a giant 3-meter mosquito buzzing around - could you relate?

"Ah, seriously! Even if I wanted to send you back, I can't!"

-You copied me with your skill, didn't you? Then you should be able to cancel it! What about a refund, huh? Don't you know what era it is? No refunds!?

"There's no way to cancel it!"

I explained how I inadvertently copied the Guardian Spirit, but even after my explanation, the ghost was stubborn. Continuously demanding to be sent back to Sword Saint.

-Wahhh. Old man Marcus! My disciple! Your teacher has been kidnapped! Your only teacher has been kidnapped by some loser!

To make matters worse, the ghost began to wail, turning upside down in mid-air.

-Alas, my incompetent disciple. This is all because Marcus neglected and scorned his teacher! I always told him to revere his teacher like heaven.

"Excuse me..."

I was fed up. The initial fear of encountering a ghost for the first time had evaporated. Fear? What's that? Even the scariest-looking ghost would just give you a headache if it's this noisy.

"Can we please be quiet? Please?"

-I'm dead! How can I be quiet?

"Ah, then please die quietly."

-What? You've seen such a wretched person! To a ghost already suffering from death, you tell him to die again. People, look at this kid! He has no manners, even on the first meeting!

"Wow."

My jaw dropped. A ghost this much of a talker... No, a freaking talker, was something I had never encountered before.

And then it clicked. The reason Sword Saint kept mumbling to himself in the bar. Of course, looking back, his soliloquies were rather monotonous.

"Shut up."

"Don't be noisy."

"Too noisy. Leave me alone to deal with it."

99% of his soliloquies were about something being noisy.

To an outsider, it would seem like he was constantly muttering to himself like someone with a mental illness...

"If a ghost like this was attached to him..."

-What? Did you just talk behind my back? How old are you? Daring to blatantly gossip about an elder!

"Damn it."

I slumped my shoulders in defeat. My future seemed utterly bleak.

"I'll have to avoid Sword Saint for the rest of my life. Why does it always have to be a ghost whenever I get a skill?"

-What? Avoid the old man? What nonsense is that?

The Guardian Spirit tilted its head in confusion.

-Marcus is one of the kindest hunters out there. Although he's my disciple, he's a real stickler. But never, ever bring up his grandchildren, okay? He's usually calm, but he loses it when it comes to the little ones.

"I'm well aware of that."

I sighed.

"About that skill Sword Saint has. What's it called? The one that shows how many people you've killed."

-Ah, Eyes of a Detective? Such a trash skill.

The Guardian Spirit immediately responded. So, the official name of the Kill Count skill was [Eyes of a Detective]. The ghost seemed to know all about Sword Saint's skills.

-So? It's only useful for determining if someone's an assassin or not. And a high kill count doesn't guarantee they are an assassin.

"4091."

-Hm?

"That's the kill count above my head. 4091."

The Guardian Spirit looked incredulous, furrowing its brow. Even in death, it seemed ghosts had more expressive faces than living people.

-What? You're insane?

"If I spend another day with you, I just might become insane. You're so loud."

-No... You're a total rookie.

The ghost's expression turned serious.

-A rookie among rookies. You don't even seem to have awakened your aura. How could someone like you have killed 4091 people? Even in my lifetime, conquering up to the 99th

floor of the tower, I didn't kill that many.

"Because I didn't kill 4091 people."

-Huh?

I shrugged nonchalantly.

And explained everything.

"How it all happened is that I actually only hunted one really bad guy who would later be called the Flame Emperor..."

That I was killed by the Flame Emperor.

That I was fortunate enough to copy the return skill.

That I couldn't get revenge on the Flame Emperor if I just stayed put.

-.....

For more than 4000 days, I decided to return.

And I executed that decision.

-...What?

The Guardian Spirit's mouth dropped open.

-You killed yourself over 4000 times to get revenge on him?

"Yes."

-.....

The Guardian Spirit fell silent. Earlier, it had an expression of disbelief, but now it was different. It stared at me, deep in thought, a stark contrast to its previous loud and boisterous behavior.

-Hey, rookie.

It floated right in front of my nose.

"Yes?"

-What's your name?

"Kim Gong-Ja."

The ghost hummed thoughtfully.

-Gong-Ja. Why did you choose the old man Marcus right after finishing your revenge against the Flame Emperor?

"Excuse me?"

-Why did you decide to copy his skill right after defeating the Flame Emperor?

"That's... obvious, isn't it?"

I was baffled by the question.

"He's currently the top-ranked hunter of this era. You have to start with the strongest person's skill."

-So you can become strong as quickly as possible?

"Yes."

-...The reason you're being honest is probably because you know there's no risk of the information leaking. According to the skill card, no one but you can perceive me. Completely foolproof, right?

"Of course."

Silence settled in the tiny room again.

-Hmm.

Float, float.

The Guardian Spirit circled around me. It glanced at my face from the left, measured my height from the right, all with a very serious expression. I grimaced, wondering what this strange spectacle was all about.

-Let's see. Hm. Your physique isn't bad if you train a bit. You have remarkable tenacity and a fair amount of ambition. You're sane enough to think things through... Huh, indeed. With a body like this...

The Guardian Spirit mumbled to itself.

-What's he saying?

Seems like the ghost, who was apparently Sword Saint's teacher, was also a master of soliloquy.

-Hey, Kim Gong-Ja.

The Guardian Spirit hovered in front of me again.

"Yes?"

-Show me how you hunt monsters.

I hunted a few minor monsters.

"Is that enough?"

Having nothing better to do cooped up in my tiny room, I headed to the hunting grounds as soon as day broke. Since I had returned to one day prior after being killed by Sword Saint, I needed to hunt the Flame Emperor again today. There were several reasons to go out.

-As I thought...

The Guardian Spirit nodded.

-My prediction was correct.

"Prediction?"

-In my lifetime, I was known as the Sword Emperor.

It was early dawn, and the hunting grounds were deserted and quiet, making it the perfect place for the Guardian Spirit's soft voice.

-I'm not from this world. In my world, a tower similar to this one appeared, and I conquered it faster than any other hunter.

"You mean to brag about yourself?"

-Well, yes.

The Guardian Spirit smirked.

-Though I failed to surpass the 100th floor in our world. Isn't that written on your card?

Indeed, it was.

[Sword Constellation]

Rank: A+

Effect: From another world, he cleared his world's tower up to floor 99 but failed on the 100th. Unsatisfied, he was unable to give up on his earthly desires, and has become a spirit.

He cannot physically affect anything in this world, but is able to communicate with the holder of this skill.

Be awestruck by his skill and experience, and ask him for guidance!

*Only the holder of this skill is able to feel his presence.

*Skill copied from Marcus Calenbury.

+

'That's actually quite impressive.'

Before my return, the Flame Emperor, who had conquered up to the 40th floor, was revered as a legend.

But reaching the 99th floor? This ghost had truly achieved a feat no one else had.

-I could tell right away. I know when a hunter has potential, whether they're a jackpot or a dud. That's why I asked you to show me hunting monsters.

"Ah, I see."

I couldn't help but chuckle at the Guardian Spirit's words.

"Were you checking to see if I had any talent in swordsmanship?"

Such stories are not uncommon, where someone suddenly realizes their true power after meeting a master or facing a life-threatening situation.

A fortuitous encounter.

"Too bad for you."

Unfortunately, I had no such luck.

"I have absolutely no talent in combat. A complete dud, really. That's why I'm desperate to copy other hunters' skills. If I had any talent, I wouldn't still be at F-rank. I wouldn't have lived like that."

The Guardian Spirit frowned.

-What nonsense. You have talent.

"Excuse me?"

-And an extraordinary one at that.

That was unexpected.

"Really? You're joking, right? You're just trying to tease me?"

-I don't joke about these things.

The Sword Emperor shook his head quietly.

-Of course, you have no talent in martial arts. Your movements are clumsy, and your physique is mediocre. It will take you a long time to awaken your aura using ordinary methods. But, irrelevant to all that, you have a rare talent.

His gaze was serious.

-You have no fear of death.

"....."

-Completely absent. Shockingly so.

The Guardian Spirit stroked its chin.

-You probably lost the fear of death naturally after dying over 4000 times. This was part of my prediction. You might not realize it, but you're recklessly fearless when attacking

monsters. Normally, people hold back a little for fear of death or injury. But you, you don't have that.

"Is that really a talent?"

-Of course.

The answer was immediate.

-Talent isn't only innate. People can awaken talents as they live. Overcoming the fear of death is one of the hardest to develop, and you've already mastered it.

"....."

-That's remarkable.

I was a bit taken aback.

No one had ever told me anything like that in my entire life, not even myself. I had just been so enraged by the Flame Emperor treating me like an insect... so angry that I leaped

over 4000 deaths without a second thought.

The thought of dying.

That it was my talent.

-Let me ask you one thing.

"...What is it?"

-You said you were killed by the old man Marcus. What did you think at that moment?

I recalled my last death. It wasn't long ago, so the memory and emotions were still vivid.

The night sky and the moon.

The silent, peaceful strike.

"...I thought it was beautiful."

That's when it happened.

-Hahahahaha!

The Sword Emperor threw his head back in laughter. The laughter was so loud and wild, it filled the early dawn plains, echoing in the stillness.

After a while, he stopped laughing.

-Interesting.

His eyes sparkled.

-You copy skills, not steal them. Meaning, there's [another me] attached to the old man Marcus as his Guardian Spirit. Now I'm curious to see who will become a greater hunter between Marcus and you.

"....."

-I'll help you.

Sword Constellation. The ghost, once a Sword Emperor who conquered up to the 99th floor, looked straight at me.

-Make you as strong as, or even stronger than, the old man!

And he extended his hand.

-Let's conquer the tower!

It was the moment I gained a partner.

Chapter 10:

Starting Alone (1)

What's the most annoying thing when you wake up in the morning? The smartphone alarm ringing too loudly from last night's setting? Your hair being sticky with greasy oil from last night? Or just the fact that you have to work another day?

-Wake up! Can't you hear me?

"Oh, please just stop..."

-From now on, I'll sing a song popular in my homeland every morning. You know, back in my days, I was skilled in Sound Martial Arts. A single verse from me, and thirty minions' heads would burst!

None of these compare to the worst situation: having a restless, unascended ghost nagging at you.

-Do you even know what time it is to still be in bed!?

"What time is it anyway?"

I glanced at my smartphone.

The lock screen displayed "AM 4:01" in a stylish font.

"It's only four in the morning, you maniac!"

-Ha! At four in the morning, even the bugs are stirring. You're weaker than bugs, so you need to wake up earlier.

"It's just because you can't sleep and you're bored, right?"

-I don't understand what you're saying.

The Guardian Spirit turned its head slightly, as if caught off guard.

"Wow, so that's why Sword Saint gets up at four every morning for training. Not out of diligence, but because you're too noisy!"

-Yeah, I woke him up because I was bored. Happy now? It's all for the best. Now, bow down and thank me.

"I just want to kill you..."

-Heh, I'm already dead. Too bad for you! Oh, but you're like a zombie, you can't die either. From now on, your name isn't Kim Gong-Ja, it's Kim Zombie.

"Damn it."

I reluctantly got dressed in workout clothes. The 3-pyeong room was unbearable with the ghost incessantly talking.

For my mental health, I stepped outside and jogged under the still dark morning sky.

"Huff, huff..."

-Listen, Kim Zombie. Aside from your stubbornness, you have no talent.

The Guardian Spirit floated beside me.

-I prefer to teach from the ground up. But you, you're beneath the bottom. The very bottom.

Since copying the [Sword Constellation] skill from Sword Saint, it's been three days.

During this time, I hunted the Flame Emperor again and carefully avoided encountering Sword Saint. I've been training according to the schedule set by the Guardian Spirit.

-Talent-wise, you have what's called a 'deep talent.' Impressive! I'm jealous!

"Huff... Please don't bother... me while I'm running...!"

-Well, you need special tutoring. And for that, you need to prepare a hefty tuition fee.

The Guardian Spirit grinned wickedly.

-Time to go win the lottery, Zombie.

There's a guild known as Sang-Ryun, also known as the Merchants Union. The guild leader, ranked 3rd among hunters, is known as the 'Countess'.

As I mentioned before, the Countess is the only one who can send goods out of and bring them into the outside world. Essentially a walking corporation, thanks to her overpowered skill, Sang-Ryun monopolizes the tower's economy.

Which means...

"Excuse me."

"Yes, how can I help you?"

"I'm here to collect my lottery winnings."

In Babylon, the city on the first floor of the tower, Sang-Ryun is the sole issuer of lottery tickets.

"Ah, you've won our Sang-Ryun Happiness Lottery! Congratulations!"

"Yes, well."

"Congratulations!"

The clerk, wearing a cat-ear hat, bowed deeply. His salesperson smile was like a bright sunflower.

-Every time I see that, I wonder why they wear cat-ear hats.

‘The guild leader is a cat lover.’

-No matter how much someone likes cats, making sane people wear cat ears? They’re definitely a pervert. I’m sure of it.

‘Is that really important right now?’

Of course, the clerk probably thought the cat-ear hat was ridiculous too. But as an employee, he had no choice but to

wear whatever the guild leader dictated, be it cat ears or cockroach antennae.

And just to note, the clerk was a man.

A unisex uniform.

"Just to be sure, have you checked the date of your ticket? Tickets over two years old are ineligible for prize collection."

"It's fine. It's from last week."

"Great!"

The ticket was bought immediately after I was possessed by the Guardian Spirit. I needed to win at least once, and the Guardian Spirit kept insisting, "You need moolah!"

"What prize rank did you win?"

"First prize."

"Excuse me?"

"First prize."

"....."

"Here, check the number."

Above the clerk's head hung a display board. Like a slot machine in a casino, the accumulated amount for the [Sang-Ryun Happiness Lottery First Prize] blinked.

53,000 gold.

About 5.5 billion in my homeland's currency.

-Earning money is so easy, right?

The silence around us was filled with the Guardian Spirit's casual remarks.

-Kim Zombie, have you thought this through? You might get stabbed in a dark alley with all this money.

"I have my plans."

I shrugged.

"It's not like hiding it will make it disappear."

Every hunter who wins the lottery gets recorded. The same went for the Flame Emperor. That's how I knew he won the first prize twice in the past.

‘It's safer to be open about it.’

Winning the lottery and getting assassinated right after would be a PR disaster for Sang-Ryun, who needs to sell tickets.

Soon after.

"You've been waiting a long time, Mr. Kim Gong-Ja. My

name is Arthur Taylor, your contact for this matter."

A man, more polished than the clerk, approached and bowed. He was also wearing a cat-ear hat.

"I'm known as 'The Banker'. Feel free to use my alias."

"Kim Gong-Ja. Your alias suits your guild quite well."

"Ha, I often hear that. Shall we go upstairs?"

The Banker smiled amiably.

Despite being just a rank F, he was very courteous to me.

-Of course, he's catering to a customer worth 53,000 gold.

The ghost chimed in again.

-Kim Zombie, I've been thinking. You've never been treated

well in life, so you're easily moved. Remember a few days ago, when I complimented your talent for dying and you looked so touched? It's pitiful, really.

‘Ah. Just shut up, please.’

-Humans shouldn't be so easily manipulated, kiddo. You should think like me. Everyone in this world exists to adore and worship me.

I'm determined never to take after Yoo Soo-Ha or you, no matter how desperate I am.

Coincidentally, Yoo Soo-Ha and this ghost share similar aliases. Flame Emperor and Sword Emperor. Maybe anyone whose title ends in 'Emperor' is a complete lunatic?

"Excuse me, Mr. Kim Gong-Ja. Is there anything wrong...?"

The Banker inquired as he guided me upstairs, his face clouded with concern. Worried I might look like a madman, I quickly responded.

"No, it's nothing. Just lost in thought for a moment."

"Ah, that's a relief."

The Banker sighed, relieved.

"I was worried I might have inadvertently offended you since you looked a bit unwell. Haha. Glad to hear that's not the case..."

What's with this guy? Is he an angel, maybe?

-Tsk tsk. People are so gullible.

I ignored the psychopathic ghost's gibberish.

We entered the VIP meeting room. The table was already laden with a pile of gold coins, apparently prepared in advance by another clerk.

The Banker smiled broadly.

"This is the total amount for Mr. Kim Gong-Ja."

"...Impressive."

There were over 50,000 gold coins!

Bathed in the spotlight, the room shone brilliantly. The sight alone made my heart race. Whether it was a show or not, the effect was certainly overwhelming.

"You may take all this gold with you, or you can open an account with us at Sang-Ryun and deposit it there. How would you like to proceed?"

"Um."

I tried to regain my composure.

'The allure of money truly is powerful.'

I was honestly tempted.

But my goal is to reach the top, to become an envied and accomplished Hunter. Money is merely a means to that end.

'I should be a man who wields money, not one controlled by it.'

Regaining my composure, I slowly nodded.

"I'll deposit it in the Sang-Ryun vault."

"Ah, such a wise choice, Mr. Customer!"

The Banker was visibly pleased.

"I always advise our winners that while I fully understand their desire to take the money with them, it's generally safer to store it with us. You know, there are always those with ill intentions..."

"And also."

I continued.

"I would like to purchase a position as an honorary guild member of Sang-Ryun."

"Pardon?"

"The cost for a second-class honorary membership is 10,000 gold, right?"

I approached the table and placed my hand on the pile of gold. The golden glow was enchanting. Yet, I was already familiar with a much more captivating flame.

My future.

For the sake of my future, I was willing to invest any amount of this gold.

"I'll pay in full."

"....."

The Banker paused, looking at me intently.

"Mr. Kim Gong-Ja, you don't belong to any guild yet, do you?"

"No."

A guild.

Joining a guild for a Hunter isn't just about socializing. The most significant aspect is the protection it offers.

Even though there's the Hunter Association and Vigilante Corps...

'You never know when you might be attacked.'

Both Yoo Soo-Ha and the Sword Saint had managed to kill me, as I learned firsthand.

A lawless land. Compared to the developed world outside, this place is brutally savage.

'I must not foolishly follow in the Flame Emperor's footsteps.'

Yoo Soo-Ha lived for himself, arrogantly.

Even after winning the lottery twice, he never paid any 'protection fees'. He must've lived carelessly, thinking all the money was his to enjoy.

'And that's why he was later assassinated and poisoned.'

How pitiful.

Why would I need to antagonize the major guilds unnecessarily?

"...Understood."

The Banker jotted something down in his notebook.

"Anyone who pays the set price can become an honorary member of our guild. I'll have a staff member issue your second-class honorary member card right away."

"Ah, and one more thing."

I added a few more requests.

"I'm currently living in a cheap studio. I'd be grateful if Sang-Ryun could recommend a place for me to stay for the time being. Of course, I'll pay properly."

"....."

"And, the press will probably try to find out who the lottery winner is. When that happens, it's okay if you don't reveal my real name, but please let the journalist know that I'm an honorary member of Sang-Ryun."

The Banker paused briefly, pen in hand, momentarily lost in thought.

"Very thorough, Mr. Customer."

"Ah, well. You have to be prepared in today's world, right?"

"...You're absolutely right."

The Banker agreed as the Sword Emperor laughed uproariously behind him.

-Hey. He thought you were an easy target, but you caught him off guard. This is priceless. That's why I love teasing these elites.

'Oh, come on. You were the one calling people gullible. What a hypocrite.'

-Did I say that? I don't remember. If I don't recall, it probably wasn't me.

Unbelievable. Even if your personality is filthy, this is just too much.

I must never become like him.

-Well, anyway, you're managing quite well on your own.

The Sword Emperor smirked.

-I was worried I'd have to babysit you, changing your diapers and everything. But looking at you now, I think you'll be fine.

'If only you were mute, you wouldn't be so detestable...'

-Ah, kiddo. You seem to be in a good mood, too.

Indeed.

Despite my inner grumbling, a smile crept onto my face.

'Of course. It's just the beginning.'

4000 deaths and 4000 days of regression.

The privilege of regression I couldn't properly use while seeking revenge on the Flame Emperor.

Now, it's time to fully enjoy that privilege.

Chapter 11: Starting Alone (2)

-Zombie, do you know what's the most important thing for taking private lessons?

"I wish you would stop calling me a zombie."

-It's the tuition fee.

Having completed our business at the Sang-Ryun headquarters, we left the building.

The streets were bustling as lunchtime approached. Retired hunters operated restaurants and general stores, energetically attracting customers.

Of course, many shops were less successful, with owners sitting idly by the door. It was a brutal but unchanged truth, both in the outside world and in Babylon: some succeed, some don't.

-And you've just secured your tuition fee. So, what's next?

"Maybe a skilled private tutor?"

-Ah, but you've already got one right in front of you.

The Sword Emperor said this shamelessly, without a change in expression.

-What you need now is a good reference book! A textbook to accelerate your growth.

"A textbook..."

-Yes. Scrolls or elixirs. But reading a scroll at your current level wouldn't be much use. The only option left is to collect some damn expensive elixirs.

He always manages to say even the right things in the most annoying way.

-By the way, I don't deal with cheap elixirs. What's it called,

the Alchemy Castle? That guild of doctors and pharmacists? Just get the highest quality elixirs made by the best artisans there.

"Yikes."

-I know where the store is, don't worry. Marcus usually visits a place there. If you go and sweep up their elixirs...

"Wait, just hold on a second."

-Hmm? Why?

I lowered my voice as passersby walked nearby.

"...Aren't those elixirs insanely expensive?"

-Of course, they're ridiculously expensive. They're worth their weight in gold. You'll probably gasp at the price.

The Sword Emperor chuckled slyly.

-Want me to give you a ballpark figure?

"...Let's hear it."

He whispered the price in my ear, and I opened my eyes wide in shock. The amount was beyond imagination.

"I can only afford about four with all my remaining money!?"

-Hehe. If you buy them in bulk, you might get a discount and manage about five. Those doctors know how to do business. That's why you should never mess with money-minded doctors.

"Too expensive..."

It seemed like I was going to be broke again. I thought I'd be living comfortably after winning the lottery.

-Well, it might seem painful to spend all that hard-earned money, but what can you do? This tragedy arises from your lack of talent. Just think of it as your fate... Hmm!

The Sword Emperor suddenly tensed up.

-Gong-Ja, hide.

"What?"

-Quickly.

His tone was serious. Reflexively, I hid behind a nearby metal trash can. It stank of rotten and sour garbage, probably from a restaurant's food waste. I cringed.

"What's going on? Why are we hiding?"

-Be careful. It's Marcus.

"....."

I held my breath and cautiously peeped over the trash can. An old man with white hair tied back was walking in the distance. It was the Sword Saint, the current top-ranked hunter with [Eyes of a Detective].

'I'm in trouble if he spots me.'

My heart pounded. Did he sense my tension? The Sword Emperor, usually a loudmouth, stayed silent for a change. We both hid behind the trash can, tracking Marcus.

"...It's noisy again."

Thankfully, Marcus didn't seem to notice us. As usual, he mumbled to himself and walked away.

-Damn it.

After Marcus entered a building, the Sword Emperor grimaced.

-Shoot! That's the best shop.

"The best shop?"

-For elixirs. The best alchemist around has their shop there. Ah, really! Everyone else is just a quack. We should've bought

from there...

The Sword Emperor stomped his feet in frustration. It was the first time I'd seen him genuinely upset. I contemplated deeply beside him.

'It's too risky to use the same shop as Marcus. But, a highly skilled alchemist...'

I searched my smartphone for top-ranked hunters.

The list started from the first rank and scrolled down.

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1st Rank: Sword Saint / No affiliation.

2nd Rank: Black Witch / Affiliation: Black Dragon (Guild Leader).

3rd Rank: Countess / Affiliation: Merchants Union (Guild Leader).

4th Rank: Heretic Inquisitor / Affiliation: Temple of the Omnipotent God (Guild Leader).

5th Rank: Viper - Celestial Clan Master / Affiliation: Chun-Moon Guild (Guild Leader).

6th Rank: Babel's Linguist / Affiliation: Manhak (Deputy Guild Leader).

7th Rank: Wide-Area Communicator / Affiliation: Summons Times (Deputy Guild Leader).

8th Rank: Paladin / Affiliation: Vigilante Corps (Deputy Guild Leader).

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"It's missing."

I muttered.

The Sword Emperor, who had been fidgeting, responded to my murmur.

-Huh? What's missing? Your luck?

"No, the opposite."

Far from lacking luck, I had more than enough.

"I might not have to spend much after all."

-What?

"I know an incredibly talented alchemist."

I grinned.

"One with extraordinary talent, not just ordinary skill."

We left the bustling area and entered a shady alley.

A poor neighborhood, where people struggling for money had no choice but to live in deteriorated conditions. It was akin to the slums. Hunters with ominous gazes stared at us from the dark alleys.

-Really? A top-notch alchemist lives here?

The Sword Emperor was clearly skeptical.

"Just any good alchemist won't do. We're talking about one with an extraordinary level of talent."

-Stop lying. Why would someone with such talent live in a place like this?

"Ah, if you don't want to believe it, that's up to you."

From down the alley, I could hear tsking sounds. The

hunters who had been watching us turned away, probably thinking I was a lunatic. In such a lawless area, people usually didn't mess with those who seemed mentally unstable.

I smirked to myself.

'Wonder what they would do if they knew my wallet was filled with gold coins?'

The answer was obvious. They would pounce like beasts.

Of course, I had no obligation to kindly inform them about my financial situation. Moving deeper into the alley, where the stench of rotting corpses hung in the air, a strangled voice caught my attention.

"Please, just don't touch my research tools!"

A young voice, followed by rough responses.

"How many times have we heard that nonsense!"

"You've missed the deadline by half a year. It's time to pay the price."

I headed towards the source of the commotion. At a crossroads of alleys, a shabby shop stood amidst them. The dispute was happening right there.

"If you take all my tools... I really won't have a way to live..."

"Enough of this. Take everything!"

Burly thugs were loading machinery onto a handcart. A woman, probably in her late twenties and seemingly the owner of the shop, desperately clung to the cart.

"Just give me one more week, no, five more days..."

"Wasn't it you who turned that week into half a year!"

Thud. The thugs pushed the cart away, and the woman, unable to resist, fell to the ground. Even with scraped knees, she reached out towards the cart.

"My potion, it's still incomplete..."

"Damn, got stuck dealing with a crazy alchemist. Lady, I'm telling you, never dabble in potion-making again!"

The cart creaked away, disappearing down the alley.

Left behind was the despondent shop owner and onlookers, including myself, who had come to see the commotion. The spectators murmured among themselves.

"Tsk, knew that shop was doomed."

"Her potions are too expensive. Who pays 40 gold for a stamina potion?"

"Too young and naïve to handle business..."

Perhaps overhearing them, the shop owner suddenly snapped her head up.

"Expensive? I barely make a profit!"

Her appearance was rather pitiful. With greasy hair and old glasses, she looked more like a relic than a living person. Her voice was more like the shattering of jade than its rolling.

"I provide the best potions in Babylon for such prices! I should be thanked for opening a shop in such a rundown area!"

"Yeah, right. Dream on, girl."

"Acting all high and mighty..."

The onlookers shook their heads and dispersed.

Disgust!

It seemed impossible to feel any fondness for the shop owner.

"Wait, please! At least buy one stamina potion... My special potion can revive a dying hunter."

"No thanks, we're not buying!"

The shop owner's belated attempt to retain customers was futile. The crowd quickly vanished.

"It really works... It's not a lie..."

She eventually collapsed to the ground.

-Hey.

Having observed the whole spectacle, the Sword Emperor muttered.

-Don't tell me the 'extraordinary alchemist' you mentioned... is that loser?

"If I said yes, what would you do?"

-I'd seriously start worrying about your mental state. I'd think, 'He's died over 4000 times, now his brain's gone too.' Then, I'd recommend the best psychiatrist in Babylon for you.

I scoffed.

"I should have been concerned about my mental state the moment I started seeing ghosts. That shop owner, she's indeed an extraordinary alchemist."

-Not an extraordinary alchemist, more like an extraordinary loser! You're insane!

The Sword Emperor ranted, but I ignored him. I approached the shop owner, who was still sitting on the ground.

"Excuse me."

"Uh...?"

She looked up at me. Up close, she appeared even more downtrodden. Wearing mismatched, oversized clothes, only her white lab coat hinted she wasn't a beggar.

"Miss, are you still open for business?"

Of course, she was no beggar.

Nor was she just an ordinary alchemist.

"If you're still open, I'd like to order some potions."

Master Alchemist.

The alchemist who would eventually rise to the 5th rank.

Currently unranked, but destined for greatness.

"It's a bit pricey. Is that alright?"

"Yes, yes! Of course! I can make anything you need!"

Her face brightened. What a relief for her – just when her shop seemed doomed, a customer willing to pay for expensive potions appeared.

"So, how expensive are we talking...?"

"Well."

She might have been untouchable in the future due to her high prices, but not this time.

"I was thinking of ordering about 20,000 gold worth."

"..."

She was speechless.

So what if she looked a bit wretched? To me, she was a goose that laid golden eggs – pure gold, 100%!

I smiled.

"What are you waiting for? Take my order, Miss."

I was ready to become her most loyal customer.

Chapter 12:

Starting Alone (3)

"The place is a bit run-down... but please, come in."

The alchemist hesitantly led me inside.

The shop looked like it had been hit by a storm.

"Really, it's quite shabby..."

It was no exaggeration.

Broken glass bottles littered the floor, bookshelves had toppled over, scattering books everywhere, and dust fluttered in the air as a bonus.

Complete chaos.

-Wow.

The Sword Emperor was astonished.

-I've been told I was disorganized, but this young lady takes it to another level. Such a sanitary place. Do you really want elixirs made by her?

"Are you really going to place an order worth 20,000 gold with me...?"

The alchemist and Sword Emperor asked simultaneously.

I smirked.

"Should I pay in advance if that makes it more believable?"

"No, there's no need for that, but..."

The alchemist hesitated, then abruptly stopped.

"...Actually, yes, if possible, I would prefer an upfront payment."

Her face turned completely red, seemingly embarrassed by her own request. As expected, her financial situation must be quite dire.

"Take whatever amount you need from my vault at Sang-Ryun. I'll let them know in advance."

"As much as needed..."

The alchemist mumbled to herself.

"Yes. Of course, my wealth isn't unlimited. If you could keep the budget within 20,000 gold, I'd appreciate it."

"What kind of potion would you like to order?"

The alchemist seemed overwhelmed by the budget yet relieved.

"I'm sorry, but I cannot produce narcotics. I refuse to make any drug-related potions due to my personal beliefs. If your order is about that, I must decline..."

"Oh."

I internally agreed.

'She seems naive, but she's destined to become the Master Alchemist.'

It's rare to find someone who can firmly decline such a lucrative offer, especially after facing the downfall of their shop. Yet, she adamantly refused to make narcotics.

This alchemist, while seemingly weak, had a strong sense of pride.

"Haha, don't worry, it's nothing like narcotics."

"Ah. Then what specific potion are you looking to order?"

"Um..."

I looked at the Sword Emperor, who had been silent since entering the shop. He finally sighed after noticing my glance.

-Alright. I'll tell you the recipe, though I still can't believe she's capable.

About time.

-Listen. The liver of a rabbit-pig, eyes of a balloon cat, skin of a giant desert worm...

"I will now list the ingredients. The liver of a rabbit-pig, eyes of a balloon cat, and so on..."

I recited the ingredients as told by the Sword Emperor.

"Wait! Please, let me write it down!"

The alchemist hurriedly scribbled down the recipe. A total of 23 ingredients. As the list grew, so did her seriousness.

-That should be enough for the ingredients. The rest depends on the alchemist's skill.

"That's all for the ingredients."

"..."

The alchemist quietly stared at her notebook, biting her nails.

"If these are combined... they would greatly enhance reflexes. Not relaxation but more like stimulation. No, upon further consideration, it's more about awakening than tension."

-Huh?

The Sword Emperor looked at her in surprise.

Continuing, the alchemist elaborated on the intricate combination of ingredients, demonstrating a deep understanding.

-That's my concoction. The ultimate elixir, developed after consuming various poisons myself. It's a precious potion that's hard to come by in your world!

I chuckled.

"Even she praises it as a highly sophisticated combination."

-.....

"Recognizing the value of a combination after just one look. Trust her. Despite appearances, she will be the highest-ranking individual in the Alchemy Castle in 10 years."

The Sword Emperor remained silent, his expression turning grim. He looked exactly like a disgruntled toad.

-You just insulted me in your thoughts, didn't you?

"I'm dealing with a ghost who's after the living now."

I played dumb.

Always too perceptive for his own good.

Four days passed quickly.

The alchemist used quite a bit of money from my vault. Someone from Sang-Ryun even came to confirm if it was okay, but I told them to let it be.

No matter the cost, getting potions from the future Master Alchemist was a bargain.

-How about a bet, Zombie?

"What now?"

-That girl will run off with your money. I can tell. She has the look of a grand thief! Go ahead, commit suicide, Kim Zombie! Die four times and return four days back!

Obviously, ghosts have no knack for judging people.

On the exact fourth day at noon.

The alchemist personally arrived at my lodging, carrying bundles of elixirs.

"I'm sorry for the delay. I wanted to deliver them sooner, but the combination took longer than expected..."

"No problem. You promised to deliver within four days, so it's fine."

The elixirs she brought were in three boxes.

Considering three doses a day, it amounted to a 30-day supply.

Had I used the store the Sword Emperor knew, I could have only secured a two-day supply. The efficiency here boasted a whopping 15 times more.

'And the effects are likely to be even better.'

This is how money should be spent.

My lips curled into a pleased smile.

"Excuse me..."

"Yes?"

"Why did you entrust such a costly order to an unknown alchemist like me?"

The alchemist fidgeted with her fingers.

"I have confidence in my skills. The recipe you provided, only about two people in Babylon could comprehend and make it... But people only treat me as a weirdo..."

"Hmm."

The reason for entrusting her with the elixir production was clear: she was a prodigious genius, destined to be the Guild Master of the Alchemy Castle. I wanted to build a connection

with her, anticipating her eventual rise.

But it wasn't just that.

Before my 4000-day leap back in time, during the slum fire caused by the Flame Emperor, this woman, despite being a top ranker, was one of the first on the scene, commanding the firefighting efforts.

While helping, the future Master Alchemist murmured:

-...I don't like that Flame Emperor.

-It might be a bit rude to gossip here... But I think Saintess should meet someone better.

The one who recognized the true nature of the Flame Emperor.

'Probably guessed it purely on intuition, without evidence.'

Still, it showed her exceptional insight.

She was skilled, rushed to trouble spots, refused to make narcotics, and had the insight to recognize a psychopath. Wouldn't it be a loss not to befriend such a person?

I spoke up.

"Because you seemed kind."

"What?"

"I helped because you seemed kind. Even if I hadn't, you would have succeeded on your own. Like us kind hunters, we should help each other rise, right?"

"No way can we just let crazy psychopaths be the only ones to succeed. It's infuriating. Let's both fight hard, Ms. Alchemist."

I was brutally honest. It was the best I could do. How she took my words was up to her.

The alchemist stared at me intently, then spoke.

"...Right. We need to succeed to change the world."

Her tone implied determination.

"Thank you! I'll work hard too!"

She clenched her fist.

"Contact me anytime for more orders! I'll always prioritize your requests!"

"Thank you."

We shook hands and parted with smiling faces.

Unfortunately, my smile didn't last long.

-Oh boy. Hearing someone call themselves a 'kind hunter' and the other person actually believing it. You guys are nuts. Absolutely insane.

"...I feel embarrassed about what I just said. Let's just go train."

The next day.

We headed for the hunting grounds, backpacks filled with sleeping bags and elixirs.

The only difference from usual was that we were at the 3rd floor hunting ground, not the 2nd.

Here, tougher monsters like goblin groups and orcs loomed around.

I gazed at them from afar and asked.

"What should we do now?"

-Start by drinking the elixir.

I nodded and gulped down the elixir from my thermos without any doubt.

"Hmm."

It tasted ordinary.

Even pleasantly lemony with a hint of honey.

As I was relieved it wasn't bitter like ginseng extract, suddenly...

"Uh...!?"

Thump.

My heart beat fiercely.

At first, I thought it was an illusion, but it wasn't. Sweat streamed down my back. Surprisingly, I could distinctly feel each drop.

'What's happening?'

Thump.

Not just the sweat, but the sensation of air around my fingers, the pressure, the texture of the ground under my feet, even the time it took to blink felt incredibly slow, as if 30 seconds long.

"This is..."

-The effect of the elixir.

Only the Sword Emperor's voice remained normal amid the slowdown.

-It drastically slows down your perception of events. Think of it as extending time indefinitely. As much as I hate to admit, that girl has decent elixir-making skills.

It was terrible.

Every hair, every follicle felt vividly alive. I could even sense my eyeballs' blood vessels. If I hadn't known, I'd have mistaken it for poison.

-Do you feel it?

"What do... you mean?"

-The wriggling in your heart.

Thump.

There was something. No, something was flowing. It wasn't blood.

It was softer than blood, finer than blood vessels. But something definitely flowed through my body, emanating from my heart.

Something I never distinctly felt before.

-That's Aura.

The Sword Emperor explained.

-Every hunter who enters the Tower has Aura. It's just that they live unaware of it. How consciously you can use this Aura, how freely you can draw it out, that's what decides the battle.

The Sword Emperor chuckled.

His laugh echoed in my head for over 20 seconds. What should have been a fleeting moment, my mind perceived as 20 seconds long.

The fatigue was overwhelming.

-Normally, you'd practice quietly alone or sit in meditation to get used to the Aura flow. But...

Then, something massive approached me.

-That would take too long, wouldn't it?

Boom.

Footsteps.

Like the laughter, the footsteps resonated long. Barely lifting my head, I saw a large orc approaching me.

-If you lack talent, you suffer.

Damn.

-Alright, Zombie! If you don't want to get hurt, use your Aura! You need hands-on training! Even if you die, you won't really die, so what's the harm?

"This ghost... really...!"

-Huh? Can't hear you. Are you mumbling because you can't use Aura?

Again, the Sword Emperor burst into laughter.

-In pain? Then kill yourself. Oh, then your kill count will go up again. That would make Sword Saint even nicer to you, right?

Ah.

My partner was indeed a terrible being.

Chapter 13: Do you have skills, too? (1)

-GRROOOAAAR!

The orc bellowed.

It might have been just a growl, but to me, it sounded like a prolonged outcry, echoing in my ears for nearly 50 seconds.

"Cr-, ugh...!"

I felt a splitting headache.

-Concentrate.

In the endlessly slowed time, the Sword Emperor urged me.

-Don't get intimidated by a lowly creature like an orc! Their attacks are simple and predictable. Once you know where it's going to hit, it's easy to dodge and counterattack. They're ridiculously easy.

"That's... easier said than... done!"

-Here it comes.

WHOOM!

The orc swung its club. No, it was swinging it, slowly but surely targeting my head. I had to move, or my skull would be smashed in less than 20 seconds.

"Damn, legs!"

I attempted to jump aside with all my might, but my body didn't respond as expected.

'So slow!'

Just one step would have been enough to dodge the orc's strike, but that single step felt excruciatingly slow. It was frustrating. I knew where the attack was coming and that it was avoidable!

-You can dodge it. Don't give up.

The Sword Emperor spoke softly.

-Concentrate Aura on your feet. Enhance your kinetic force! Imagine the flow in your heart moving to your right foot, hurry!

Damn it.

'A ghost who's only good with words!'

It was my first time feeling Aura. How could I focus it on my legs? It sounded so simple.

But I had no other choice. As much as I was fearless of death, I didn't want my head to explode under an orc's club!

'Move!'

The flow from my heart felt cool and clean, like clear stream water. I focused on this sensation, trying to guide it to my right leg.

A twitch.

There was some success as the Aura stirred in my heart, but...

-It's hard, isn't it?

It was challenging.

-You don't have pathways for Aura flow yet. It's like your body is a narrow trail in deep woods. To use Aura efficiently, you need highways. Right now, your body is like a path overgrown with weeds.

"Gr-, ugh...!"

Despite the Sword Emperor's rambling, I kept focusing on my right leg. If the heart was a clogged faucet, then my right leg was a cup placed beneath it. Drip by drip, Aura trickled down, but it was far from enough.

'It's frustrating, but he's right.'

A secluded trail in the wilderness.

A fitting description for my current state.

What would happen if I could break free from this level?

"How do I... do it!"

-Huh.

The Sword Emperor chuckled.

-Remember how you were killed by the Sword Saint?
Without being able to do anything?

Yes, I remembered that scene under the crescent moon.

His words sank into my mind.

-That was like a clean, lined avenue.

"..."

A lined avenue.

Such a beautiful strike was just an avenue.

-The Sword Saint still has a long way to go. And you're not even worth mentioning. Zombie, I'm not harassing you for fun, it's because you deserve it. Chuckle.

Crack.

I clenched my teeth.

-Hmm?

Determination surged within me.

"Huff...!"

I threw my upper body forward.

WHOOOSH!

The orc's club passed just above me, creating a whirlwind. A split-second difference, and I would have been shattered.

"How did I..."

Before I could relax from dodging the first attack.

"Can I...?"

The orc snorted in frustration. Probably irritated that a

seemingly weak prey dodged its attack. It immediately raised its club again.

-GRRRR!

This time, a horizontal swipe aimed to slice my waist.

There was no time to rest.

I focused Aura on my upper body.

-What? How's that going?

"I'm trying to... make a path... like a highway...!"

It was still hard. The heart's faucet remained clogged. No sign of a free-flowing stream. Despite my thirst, the Aura dripped only a drop at a time.

'Frustrating, but his words ring true.'

A secluded trail.

A fitting analogy for my current state.

So, I wondered.

What if I could break free from this level?

"How does it... work!"

-Hmm.

But I wasn't about to let the third attack come.

-Ah?

I gathered strength in my knees.

-What's this?

And concentrated Aura on my feet, not just gathering it, but trying to coil it like a spring. 5 seconds... 3 seconds... 1 second... It was clumsy, but when I felt enough Aura had gathered, I leaped with all my might.

I raised my sword.

Aiming for the orc's throat!

-GROO?

The monster looked down at me in confusion. My reflection in its eyes, along with my sword's tip, grew larger. In a moment, my sword pierced its throat, contorting its face in pain.

-GRAAAA!

A scream echoed across the hunting ground in the evening sky.

When I thought it was over.

-Don't let your guard down to the end!

The Sword Emperor shouted.

-Ork skin is thick! Focus Aura on the tip of your sword! No, that's too hard. Just pour it all in!

I did exactly that.

-GRAAAAA!

The orc's screams intensified. I wrung every last drop of Aura from my heart, pouring it all into the sword. With each drop of Aura, the monster's agony deepened.

-GRO, GA... GRRR...!

Blood splattered. The orc's blood slowly covered my face like slow motion. I didn't avoid it. Instead, I struggled to load even a single drop of Aura onto the blade.

"Die, now...!"

In a brief moment, I felt my sword pierce through the orc's neck to the other side.

-GRROOOOO... R...

The orc staggered.

Even its staggering seemed prolonged. Gradually, the orc fell backwards. THUD! Since I didn't let go of my sword's hilt, I fell along with the collapsing monster.

"Hu-...uck, ugh! Huhuk...!"

I gazed down at the orc's corpse, struggling to breathe.

The struggle wasn't just with my breath.

Throb. A wave of pain belatedly surged through my body. My vision spun. It felt as if my bones were shattering and my veins bursting.

"Ugh...!?"

-Does it hurt? Must be excruciating, right? Yeah. That's what you get.

The Sword Emperor hovered around me, snickering.

-You recklessly used Aura without proper pathways. Your frail body couldn't endure it! Serves you right.

"You... evil...!"

-But, you did well at the end, coiling Aura like a spring. That deserves praise. Always remember, creativity is key in using Aura. People often misunderstand, but those with sharp minds are better in combat.

I wasn't interested in that right now.

"Hi-, huk...! Kuhuk...!"

This pain!

A torment as if my bones were crushed and veins burst. How

could I alleviate this agony? Normally, pain fades over time, but with the time dilation from the Elixir, there was no relief. It just hurt, continuously.

I felt like I was dying.

-Does it feel like dying?

"You wouldn't... know..."

-Then, just die. It'll be fine.

What?

-If you forcibly open Aura pathways, you become half-paralyzed. No potion can cure that. It's a permanent scar. So, you basically crippled yourself fighting that orc.

"What... are... you..."

-Didn't I tell you, Zombie? If you didn't have the Return skill, I wouldn't have suggested such a harsh training method. Even

the Sword Saint takes elixirs, but he just meditates. He doesn't recklessly charge at monsters like you.

This damn ghost!

-But you can return from death. It's amazing! Even if you train aggressively, you remain unscathed. I'm envious. How great it would have been if I had a Return skill too!

Wow.

How can someone be so irritating?

Could he have a passive skill like [Snarkiness] or [Lack of Tact]? Otherwise, there's no explaining his rotten character.

-Zombie. But if you commit suicide, your kill count increases.

"So what... about it...?"

-It's unnecessary to increase the kill count here. It's

dangerous to attract the Sword Saint's attention.

KUOONG.

An ominous sound echoed from behind. A sound I'd heard recently. Turning around, my bad premonition was confirmed. Another orc, identical to the one I'd just felled, stood drooling.

"Dam... n it..."

The monster looked the same, but my condition was far from it. As the Sword Emperor pointed out, I was practically paralyzed. My entire body was in agony, unable to move a finger.

-It's okay! Many hunters never grasp Aura in their lifetime, but you got the hang of it with just one elixir. Keep up this momentum, and maybe after dying 100 times, you'll have enough experience. Every journey begins with a single step, and mastering Aura starts with one death.

The Sword Emperor grinned.

-Let's go for the first death!

Simultaneously, the orc's club began descending. Slowly. Precisely targeting my skull.

I looked up at the club nearing my face and muttered.

"Ah... Li... fe... su... cks..."

WHACK!

Ever felt your nose break, skull shatter, and brain explode?

Probably not. And thankfully so. It's a terrible sensation.

But at least there was some solace. As my brain burst, a voice echoed.

[You have died.]

Time returned to normal.

Or more accurately, my sense of time returned.

'Sigh...'

A pitch-black space.

A brief stopover after death and before returning.

I'd grown somewhat accustomed to this place... though I wished I hadn't.

And there, floating idly, was someone I didn't want to be familiar with.

-Huh?

It was the Sword Emperor.

-What's this now?

'...This is where I linger briefly after dying, before returning. I encountered it when I was killed by the Flame Emperor and the Sword Saint. I've been calling it a temporary Netherworld.'

-So fascinating.

The Sword Emperor gazed around the dark expanse.

-But, Zombie. Why am I here too?

'Maybe because you're attached to me?'

"Just wait, and soon a voice will announce the return to 24 hours ago. By the way, I'm curious if you'll return with me or not..."

Just as I was about to express my curiosity, an announcement interrupted.

[The condition for your skill has been fulfilled by your death.]

[Randomly copying a skill from the monster orc.]

"...What?"

-What?

Both the Sword Emperor and I were startled. We turned to look at each other, both wearing faces of disbelief.

[Creating skill cards.]

In the darkness, two identical cards appeared.

I stared at them, muttering in confusion.

"...Monsters have skills too?"

And the Sword Emperor exclaimed in shock.

-What is this? That's ridiculous!

Chapter 14: Do you have skills, too? (2)

Regardless of the Sword Emperor's complaints, the voice continued to instruct me.

[Please select a skill card.]

This was undoubtedly reality!

Two bronze-colored cards began to whirl about rapidly. Their quick movement was dizzying, but what truly astounded me was something else.

-Ah, this is absurd! How can this be fair? Being able to copy skills from monsters too is just too much. Hey, who's managing this tower? Why give such a skill to this nobody when there are capable hunters like me?

"Ah, please, can you just be quiet?"

-What? This is invalid! Ah, I'm so angry right now!

The Sword Emperor flailed about in frustration, looking utterly ridiculous. It was like watching a child throw a tantrum over not getting candy. I couldn't help but think how pathetic it looked for an adult to behave this way.

"I need to focus on these cards."

I scrutinized the two bronze cards floating in the air.

"Neither looks promising, being bronze-colored and all..."

Still, I couldn't help but feel excited. To share a skill with a monster felt like a secret mischief. It was thrilling.

"I'm curious."

I slowly reached out my hand.

"Let's just pick one and see!"

Just as I was about to randomly select a card,

-Oh? You're choosing that one?

The Sword Emperor couldn't help but interject, instantly cooling my excitement. His talent for ruining the mood was unparalleled.

"Yes, it doesn't matter which one I choose."

-Why wouldn't it matter?

The Sword Emperor peeked from behind the card.

"You should aim for the better skill if you have the chance."

"But how can I know which card has the better skill? They're both the same color, and only the backs are visible. There's no way to distinguish them."

Then, the Sword Emperor tilted his head.

-I can see the front of the cards.

"What?"

-Yeah, I can see what's written on them.

The Sword Emperor nonchalantly claimed to see the other side of the cards, which baffled me.

"That makes no sense..."

Just as I was about to retort, it dawned on me: perspective! From my position, I could only see the backs of the cards. But the Sword Emperor, freely moving around in this dark space, had a different vantage point.

"Eureka!"

-Shit, what now? Why are you yelling?

Startled by my outburst, the Sword Emperor paid no mind.

"Eureka! Eureka! EUREKA!"

Ecstatic about this newfound realization, I ignored the Sword Emperor's puzzled look.

-This zombie's brain must be rotting like a true zombie. Tsk tsk...

The Sword Emperor's insight into the cards was like this:

[Blessing of Reproduction]

Rank: E

Effect: Nature gives us a home but also challenges. The orc race has maximized its breeding to overcome nature. Killed an orc? Don't worry. Nine more are hiding somewhere!

*However, you will be in heat all year.

[Tchweek, Tchwik]

Rank: F

Effect: "We always end our sentences with 'chweek.' No idea why, chweek! Try a sip of this, chweek." The orc gives a thumbs up. "You'll never escape the joy of 'tchwik' once you start, chweek!"

※However, tchweek tchwik.

"Wow..."

Truly garbage skills. I was astounded by their ridiculousness.

-How about it? If I hadn't stopped you, you would've chosen [Tchweek, Tchwik]. As a man, you should at least have the strength of an orc. Thank me now. Go on!

The Sword Emperor's nonsense was equally absurd.

"Hmm."

I ignored him and pondered my options.

"If I must choose, [Tchweek, Tchwik] seems better."

-What? Are you crazy?

"No. I think I'm right."

I nodded confidently, my decision made.

"Regardless of how you look at it, [Tchweek, Tchwik] is far more useful than the [Blessing of Reproduction]."

-Hey, hey! Wait! Just think a little more. Consider it calmly...!

I smirked as the Sword Emperor fumbled in panic.

"It seems like you're thinking the same as me."

Before the Sword Emperor could protest further, I swiftly snatched the brown-colored card. The cards flew around rapidly, but it wasn't a big issue. It might have been a problem if there were many, but there were only two at the moment.

[Selection complete. Copying skill.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

-No, don't do it!

"Let's do it!"

Our shouts echoed together like a chorus.

[You are currently an F-Rank Hunter.]

[There is no penalty for the skill usage.]

With that, the dark world brightened.

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Flash. I opened my eyes.

"Hmm!"

My mind felt refreshed.

"Ah, that's good. Indeed, a comfortable sleep is the best cure for fatigue."

This place was no longer the tiny 2-pyeong room. It was an accommodation I had arranged through Sang-Ryun. Though not spacious, it was a hotel room ample enough for one person. After winning the first prize in the lottery, I decided to stay here for a while.

Meanwhile.

-Damn it! I thought I could fool you, but you're just too cunning!

"Hehe."

The Sword Emperor was floating in the air, kicking at nothingness. It seemed quite frustrated at not being able to trick me. Hmm. Just watching it was calming, almost like a beautiful landscape painting.

"Alright, let's gather the elixir again... and check the status window."

There was no reason to waste time here. I checked my status window as I headed to the hunting grounds.

+

Name: Kim Gong-Ja

Rank: F

Skills (4/4)

1. I Want to Become Just Like You (S+): Passive

2. Returner's Winding Clock (EX): Passive

3. Sword Constellation (A+): Passive

4. Tchweek, Tchwik (F): Active

+

"Good. No problem."

The skill slots were full, but it was okay. When the time came to acquire a new skill, I could just overwrite [Tchweek, Tchwik].

I will use it to my heart's content until then.

-Gong-Ja. I've thought about it... Maybe we should just meditate peacefully in a lotus position. Why suffer and die during training? Meditation. Mental cultivation. Isn't that wonderful?

"Hoo."

I arrived at the 3rd floor hunting ground.

In the distance, an orc was wandering around.

-Tchweek... Tchwik.

I took note of the orcs' positions and pulled out the elixir. The steaming thermos. I one-shotted the elixir it contained.

-Hey, Gong-Ja? Are you not listening to me? Let's train peacefully in meditation. I can help you master the aura within half a year. What does it matter how we train, right? Just trust me.

"Kheh! Tastes good."

This was my second time drinking it, but it already seemed addictive. The Apothecary must have paid attention to its taste while making it.

I waited for the effect of the medicine, then spoke.

"Sword Emperor, do you know something?"

-Huh? What? Are you going to meditate?

"When it's advantageous for you, you call me a zombie, but when it's not, you call me Gong-Ja. And you've been calling me Gong-Ja, not a zombie, just now."

Thump.

"I'm kindly informing you to change your habit."

As soon as I finished speaking, the world in front of me seemed to slow down.

My heart throbbed. Along with the pounding heart, I felt a faint flow again.

Aura!

There was definitely an effect in the training method devised by the Sword Emperor. Unlike the previous loop, I could clearly sense the aura this time.

"Hu, uuh... Hoo..."

I approached quietly, steadying my breath. The orc's ears twitched at the faint sound. To this massive green monster, it must have been bewildering to see prey walking towards it.

-Grrrrr!

The orc, deciding to humbly accept this fortune, raised its club high.

The moment I inwardly smiled was then.

[Activating skill.]

I opened my mouth.

"Tchweek...! Tchwik...!"

Hesitation. The orc's eyes widened even more. Its club, which had been cutting through the air, stopped midway.

-Tchweek... Tchweek? Tch...week?

The orc tilted its head, puzzled over how a mere prey managed to learn the language of its kin.

Of course, given the orc's limited IQ, understanding the current situation was impossible, and I was not lacking enough IQ to miss this perfect opportunity.

"Tchweek!"

Perfect Orcish flowed from my mouth.

A level of proficiency comparable to a native speaker!

-Krr? Tch...week?

The monster in front of me was even more bewildered. It was clearly confused and unsure of what to do. Even as I charged, the orc failed to put up any proper resistance.

Swish!

My blade smoothly slit the orc's throat. I carefully controlled it, allowing just a drop of aura to flow into the tip of my blade. Boom! A fountain of blood erupted as the orc's hefty body fell.

-Tch...week...? Grr... Tchwik...

As if lamenting something unjust, it grumbled.

Perhaps, in human terms, it was a dying cry like 'Et tu, Brute?'

"Tchweek."

I smiled victoriously. Using the aura forcefully made my body ache, but I was in much better shape compared to the last loop. It was fine. Using just this much aura wouldn't pose a problem.

-You sneaky bastard! I knew it would be like this!

The Sword Emperor trembled with rage.

-How does it feel to deceive a good orc like that! Huh!? Have you ever thought about how the orcs feel, you filthy human? It's because of humans like you that the pure orcs of this world suffer!

I didn't retort with 'Didn't you say there's no high or low in training methods?'

Instead, I just gave back a mocking laugh.

"Tchweek!"

-Aaargh! I'm angry! I'm annoyed! Why did the tower give such a trickster a cheat-like skill!?

A week later.

I had breached up to the 5th floor hunting ground.

Chapter 15: Do you have skills, too? (3)

A week had passed.

-Grrrr...

The monster stumbled with a sound like a boiling pot. The Great Goblin. Almost the boss of the 5th floor hunting grounds, it eventually collapsed with its throat cut.

I looked down solemnly at the corpse of the Great Goblin.

"Gorr."

This monster was the toughest opponent I had faced in the past week. Ah, how many times had I died to defeat this beast? I felt like an honorable warrior bidding farewell to a rival as I stared at the Great Goblin...

-You're talking nonsense. Like a crazy zombie.

"Ah. Come on. It took me 6 coins to finally hunt it down. Can't I indulge in my thoughts for a moment?"

6 coins meant I had risked my life six times. This being the sixth coin meant I had died five times while trying to defeat the Great Goblin.

The Sword Emperor snorted disdainfully.

-Getting sentimental over killing a monster is the definition of insanity. I only state the facts.

"Wow, that's how you are. Our Sword Emperor really has a great personality."

As already evident from my free conversation with the Sword Emperor, I had become accustomed to using aura. Even now, under the effect of the elixir, time flowed sluggishly around me.

But I was speaking 'much faster' than usual because I was focusing aura on my tongue.

"Gorr."

Even if it wasn't a fair fight but a trick.

I pulled out a brown-colored card and checked it.

+

[Goblin High Society]

Rank: F

Effect: The Great Goblin pondered deeply. 'Our goblin culture is too lowly. Every language ending in Kerk or Keruk. How can I, the boss, shine with such a language!' Then, a stroke of genius hit him. 'That's it! From now on, I will not say Keruk, but Gorr. Gorr! A pronunciation befitting my refined sensibilities.'

*However, this causes internal conflict within the tribe.

*Skill copied from the monster Great Goblin.

+

I clicked my tongue.

"Goblins worry about such pointless things. Keruk or Gorr, it's all the same."

-That's why they're goblins. Humans aren't much different, though.

"What?"

-Nothing, just talking to myself.

Just as I was about to ask what he meant, a voice echoed in my head.

[Your existence becomes better defined.]

A sound I had never heard before.

But I knew what it meant. Many hunters had testified in interviews, and some even showed it in personal videos.

"At last!"

Level up!

[Hunter Kim Gong-Ja is leveling up.]

"Ah..."

It was exhilarating. I had lived my whole life as an F-rank hunter, worried I might remain so forever. But after acquiring the clone and return skills, and overcoming countless pains... finally, my moment to level up had come.

[Your skill slots have expanded!]

[You are now an E-Rank hunter!]

Even though it was still just E-rank.

[May fortune be with you.]

Whoosh!

Red aura burst from beneath my feet. Flames or maybe just a stream of red fluid – it enveloped my body for a moment before flowing down and disappearing.

-...Flames, perhaps?

The Sword Emperor narrowed its eyes.

-No, blood? Tch. It's confusing. Looks like flames or blood...

"That was the level-up effect, right?"

-It's not just an effect to look cool.

The Sword Emperor scratched its head.

-It's a kind of hint.

"A hint?"

-Yeah. The type of effect shown during a level-up determines the [Shape of Aura]. Take that Yoo Soo-Ha guy you killed, for example. His aura's shape was undoubtedly [Fire].

"Flames."

I recalled the memory. The scene where Yoo Soo-Ha burned Saintess in a slum alley. An unpleasant memory I didn't want to revisit... But it was certain Yoo Soo-Ha used aura in the form of flames.

-The shape of aura usually depends on the hunter's trauma.

Trauma.

-A significant event, scene, or memory that has shaped their life. It manifests as the shape of their aura. Like an unconscious image, I guess? Not necessarily a negative trauma, but mostly.

"I see."

-From what I see, you, zombie, are either flames or blood.

I got curious as I listened.

"What about Sword Saint? What shape is his aura?"

-Moonlight.

The Sword Emperor said nonchalantly.

-Marcus got lost in the mountains as a child. He climbed to the top, not wanting to die, and as he neared the summit, the leaves blocking the night sky thinned. Finally, at the peak, he saw the vast dark sky lit up by moonlight.

Moonlight.

-He thought at that moment, the moon, which does not shine by itself but reflects the sun's light, can be beautiful just by accepting. Ah. I want to shine by accepting, like the

moonlight.

"..."

-He was deeply impressed and carried that memory throughout his life.

I was dumbfounded.

"He was a child at that time?"

-Yeah. He was 12 years old.

"What kind of 12-year-old thinks so deeply?"

The Sword Emperor nodded.

-That's why Marcus is a born old fogey. Tsk tsk. When I was 12, all I thought about was how to efficiently beat up the bullies in front of me.

"Well, that's also... not exactly normal..."

If Sword Saint was a born old fogey, what about the Sword Emperor in front of me? A born ruffian?

-Anyway, you've gotten used to the 5th floor. Let's move up to the 6th floor hunting ground.

"Ah, about that."

I spoke up.

"Why don't we just go straight for the 10th floor boss?"

-What?

"I can replicate monster skills now. And I'm somewhat familiar with aura. I think I'm more than capable of taking down the 10th floor boss."

The Sword Emperor fell silent for a moment.

His gaze on me was piercing.

-Kim Gong-Ja. Are you getting arrogant already?

"Absolutely not."

I answered firmly.

10th floor!

Our world hadn't conquered the 10th floor for years. It was known as an impregnable fortress. To suggest clearing such a difficult area, it was natural for the Sword Emperor to be worried.

"I really believe I can do it."

But I truly believed I could conquer it.

Actually, I was certain of it.

"If I can't defeat the 10th floor boss within 2 coins, I'll call you Master."

-What? 2 coins?

The Sword Emperor suddenly looked intrigued.

-You, who took 6 coins just to defeat a goblin leader, think you can defeat the 10th floor boss within 2 coins? Really? You know, I've never gone easy in a bet.

"But! There's a condition."

-Oh?

I raised my index finger.

"Don't hide any information about the 10th floor boss's skills from me. No lying. And no cheating with the cards."

-Hmm. Well, that's reasonable...

"And!"

I smiled slyly.

"If I win, you must call me 'Sir Gong-Ja.' With utmost politeness and manners."

-.....

"Why? Are you scared? Hey, if you're scared, just give up."

A twitch.

The phrase 'Are you scared?' is probably the most disliked by a ruffian. And the Sword Emperor was not just any ruffian. He was the strongest ruffian from another world who had conquered up to the 99th floor.

The Sword Emperor's facial muscles twitched.

-Pah, spit! How dare this thunderous brat, with just a few cheat skills, mock the great Sword Emperor? Fine, let's see

about that bet!

"Deal."

-Deal! Kim Zombie, you will fail to conquer the 10th floor boss and for the rest of your life, or rather eternity since you can't die, you'll call me Master. Ah! You'll have to live forever with the word 'Master' in your mouth.

"Are you hallucinating? Better start preparing to serve 'Sir Gong-Ja.'"

-Hehehe.

"Hehehe."

We exchanged sinister laughs, staring each other down.

Hunters hunting goblins in the distance murmured.

"Hey, that guy has been mumbling to himself."

"Now he's even laughing alone. Does he have a mental issue?"

"Shh! Don't let him look this way. Act like you don't know him."

"....."

...I should probably cut down on talking to myself.

I quietly shut my mouth and headed to the 10th floor.

Unlike other hunting grounds, the 10th floor boss room had a guard standing in front.

The person dispatched from the Hunter Association frowned upon hearing my story.

"You want to challenge the boss alone?"

"Yes."

It took less than 2 seconds for the guard's expression to change to 'Who is this madman?'

"Look, I don't know if you've seen the recent news... The Black Dragon Guild sent 30 elite members and 4 top-rank hunters in an assault team and still failed. Solo hunting is suicidal."

"So what?"

I stood my ground confidently.

"It's the Hunter Association's rule to allow any hunter who wishes to challenge the boss."

"That's true, but..."

The guard looked troubled.

"No offense, but I record every hunter that enters here. If my superiors check the records later... I'll be the bad guy who let a sure-to-die hunter enter. Please consider my situation too."

"Hmm."

What should I do? I calmly stroked my chin.

-What? Hunter Association? We didn't have such nuisances in our world when conquering the tower!

Of course, I was the only one being calm.

-These guys stepping in! Creating Hunter Associations and guilds, politicking around, I've always disliked it. Wasting their energy on such things, and still they struggle at the 10th floor! Hey, Kim Zombie! Just beat up this guy and enter the boss room.

'No. Why should I hit an innocent person?'

-He's blocking our way, isn't he?

Typical of a psychopath, considering human rights as insignificant as a mosquito's.

"Guard sir."

I sighed inwardly and took out my purse.

"I can see you're always working hard. You're right, Guard sir. Going in alone is just suicidal. But... I really want to commit suicide."

"What?"

"I've been having a tough time lately..."

I put on a bitter smile.

"My lover died a year ago. Recently, Alchemy Castle diagnosed me with an incurable disease. They said I have at most half a year to live. I can't bear to live that half-year without my lover."

"Ah..."

-What?

The Sword Emperor was puzzled.

-What nonsense is this zombie spouting now?

I ignored it and continued whispering to the guardian.

"But I'm a hunter, even if just a lowly one. I don't want to end my life waiting for death in Alchemy Castle. Even if I die, I want to challenge monsters until the end."

"That's a sad story..."

The guard's expression slowly turned sympathetic. You know the kind of expression people make when they hear a stranger's tragic misfortune. That one!

"Here's the money I saved up for my treatment."

I handed the heavy purse to the guardian. It contained a hundred gold.

"It's of no use to me now... You take it, Guard sir."

"I can't accept this kind of money!"

"I want to leave this world light, without leaving anything behind. Guard sir, please don't record my entry here. It's my last request in my hunter's life..."

The guard's expression grew heavy, almost as if he was about to cry. Perhaps the weight of the purse added to that heaviness.

"...Alright. Go ahead. I didn't see anything..."

-Oh dear.

The Sword Emperor was incredulous.

-Hey, are you two shooting a movie? Is this some kind of hidden camera show?

Regardless, the guard let me pass.

I bid farewell to the guard and proceeded. A stone path led to

the residence where the 10th floor boss dwelled, reminiscent of an old noble's mansion. I walked down the path leading to the mansion.

'The 10th floor was originally cleared by Flame Emperor Yoo Soo-Ha.'

I stood in front of the mansion's gate.

Slowly, I pushed the doors open with both hands.

'This time it's different. I'll replace the Flame Emperor... No.'

Creak.

The hinges trembled as the doors of the mansion opened.

'I'll write a more splendid legend than the Flame Emperor.'

I took a step forward.

And it began.

-Cackling laughter!

Laughter echoed from all directions. At the same time, the door I had opened shut behind me. Bang! The surroundings instantly darkened, and the eerie laughter intensified from the darkness.

Candles lit up one by one.

-Will you play with us?

Here and there, candles stuck to the floor lit up, untouched by anyone. Wherever a candle was lit, a doll was inevitably placed. Dolls that looked like young ladies, the kind often played with by children.

-Will you play with us?

The dolls opened their mouths.

-Freeze Tag? Rose of Sharon Blooming? Hide and Seek?

-The ice has melted. The flowers are torn. Let's play Hide and Seek!

-Yes! Play with us! Play Hide and Seek with us!

-Tehehehe!

I got into position.

"Alright. I'll play with you."

Aura, honed over the past week, blossomed from my body.

As if waiting for that response, a voice sounded in my mind.

[You have entered the boss stage.]

[Challenger: Hunter Kim Gong-Ja. Alone.]

[May fortune be with you.]

A stage that no one in humanity had yet conquered.

The so-called 'Inferno Mansion's Hide and Seek' had begun.

Chapter 16: Trauma Penalty (1)

Black Dragon.

The guild that has reigned supreme from the day the tower appeared in this world.

"We didn't fail to conquer the 10th floor because of lack of skills."

The second-ranked hunter and leader of the Black Dragon, the Black Witch, had attempted the 10th floor dozens of times. Despite failing each time, the second-ranked hunter always managed to bring back all the hunters who participated in the assault.

In an interview, the Black Witch said:

"It was just a bit of bad luck."

On the other hand, Flame Emperor single-handedly broke through the 10th floor and declared:

"Luck is also a skill, losers."

It was an interview that later came to be known as the Loser's Declaration.

Black Dragon, now labeled as a group of losers, started to see the Flame Emperor as an adversary... but well, that's not important anymore. Yoo Soo-Ha is already dead by my hand. The possibility of such an interview has disappeared.

The question is this.

'Why did other hunters fail and only the Flame Emperor managed to conquer the 10th floor?'

'Was it because the Flame Emperor was overwhelmingly strong?'

Or...

'Was there another reason?'

The answer now unfolds before my eyes.

[Initiating the boss stage.]

As the voice echoed, the scenery of the mansion transformed dramatically.

Whoosh!

Candles toppled everywhere, igniting flames. It seemed as if they had been pre-oiled. The fire demon swiftly engulfed the Western-style mansion.

-"Tehehehe!"

In the midst of the blazing flames, only the dolls remained intact.

-"You're it, Mister! We'll run away!"

- "Run, run! Let's run away from here!"

Hundreds, no, thousands of lady dolls. Just in the 1st-floor lobby alone, countless dolls were scattered. Probably, the entire mansion would be hiding tens of thousands of dolls.

'Among them, there's just one.'

Gulp. I swallowed.

'Hidden somewhere in the mansion is the [real doll].'

One in tens of thousands chance!

This was the reason behind the failure of all previous assault teams.

'While searching for the real doll, everyone burns to death. If trying to escape before dying, at best, they only have about 10 minutes to search.'

The flames burning in the mansion were not ordinary. The

Fire demon. Karma fire. The so-called hellfire, a form of [aura] manifesting as flames.

In other words.

'The entire mansion is burning with aura.'

A boss monster that knows how to use aura!

All previous teams either burned to death in this aura inferno or escaped before dying, meeting one of these two ends. Some hunters risked their lives for the one in tens of thousands chance, but it was in vain. They died screaming in agony.

The impregnable inferno.

And here lies the reason why only the Flame Emperor could clear the 10th floor.

"Lucky bastard."

I muttered.

That's right. Flame Emperor and the boss monster shared the same form of aura.

To other hunters, this mansion was hellfire, but to Flame Emperor, it was as comfortable as his own living room. The karma fire of the 10th floor boss monster was also the element of Flame Emperor Yoo Soo-Ha.

"Tch."

In short, it was a perfect match.

'He must have casually wandered around until he found the real doll.'

And then he had the audacity to claim that luck is also a skill.

I really didn't like the guy.

-The one living off luck is you, zombie.

"What do you mean? I'm struggling to maintain my aura right now."

I frowned at the Sword Emperor's teasing.

A sweat droplet rolled down between my eyebrows. The intense heat! The flames were unbearably hot, much more than any sauna. If it weren't for the aura wrapped around me, I would have burned to death long ago.

-Yeah, but you'll only last another minute at most.

Annoyingly, the Sword Emperor pinpointed my condition precisely.

-By the way, Marcus could easily last 30 minutes here. Want to know why he hasn't challenged this place yet? He's waiting until he can extend that to an hour.

"Ah, yes. Thank you for reminding me of the difference in our skills."

-Hehehe.

The Sword Emperor flew freely in the flame-engulfed mansion lobby. Dolls laughing below, a ghost cackling above. It was like a haunted house.

-So? With only 2 coins left, what are you going to do now?

"What else? First, I die and see."

-Oh wow. You think your aura will suddenly increase after dying here?

The Sword Emperor scoffed.

-There are only two ways to clear this place! Either find the real doll by luck or use aura skillfully enough to withstand the flames until you find it. But you stupidly set yourself only 2 coins, didn't you? It's not going to work, probably.

"Hehe."

Despite sweating profusely, I didn't lose my smile.

"You only know one thing but not two. Or rather, you know two but not three."

-What?

"Let's see who wins after I die once."

With only 20 seconds of aura left.

I approached the nearest doll. There was no particular reason. Standing still and dying seemed boring. Maybe by a stroke of luck, the doll in front of me was the [real one].

-Will you play with us?

Creak.

The doll's head turned. Just the head. It could have been cast in a horror movie on the spot. The doll was dressed in a frilly dress, which remained unburned despite the surrounding

flames.

As if it were immune to fire.

"Gotcha."

I placed my hand on the doll's head and spoke.

-Crack.

Laughter spilled from the doll's expressionless mouth.

-Ding! I'm not it!

It wasn't just laughter that flowed from the doll's mouth. Lips. Skin. Eyes. The doll's body melted like candle wax. The flames engulfed it instantly, and even as it was consumed, the doll muttered like a broken record player.

-I'm not it! I'm not it! I'm not it!

-Not it! I'm, not it. I'm... I'm... not it... I'm...

-I'm... not it...

It melted away completely.

"Wow..."

I was at a loss for words. Despite the intense heat, a chill ran down my back. The scene was more horrific than I had imagined.

"Creepy. Why do they have to make boss stages so disturbing?"

-Who knows the holy will of the tower. Even giving a cheat skill to a pansy like you is the will of the tower. If the tower had a personality, it would be a perverted psychopath.

"Really, your words..."

I couldn't complain any further.

"Argh!?"

My aura had run out.

As if waiting for this moment, the flames rushed at me. Sizzle! First, the soles of my shoes melted. Then my sleeves. And flames caught on my hair.

"Ah,"

From head to toe.

"Aaah! Aaaaaah!"

My whole body burst into flames. My flesh melted. Even as my skin flowed away, the flames did not stop. Rather, they clung more tenaciously as if they found tastier prey within my flesh. Nerves. Bones. Throat. Organs.

"Ouch, f...! Ugh, Aaaargh!"

-And you're a bigger pervert than the tower. Geez. Even

though you want to become the world's best hunter, accepting burning to death so nonchalantly. I admit it, Kim Zombie! You're a real pervert!

I wanted to die.

Quickly, as soon as possible!

“Ugh...!”

I couldn't speak. The sound was muffled. My eyes and ears had been scorched.

As my mind felt like it was about to burst from overheating, the long-awaited voice finally echoed in my consciousness.

[You have died.]

Damn it.

I wish death had come a little sooner.

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‘-Puhah!’

I breathed as if I had just surfaced from a deep dive underwater. Of course, it was just a feeling of exhaling, not actual breathing.

This place was the Netherworld. My bare body wandered around like a ghost in this pitch-black space.

[The condition for your skill has been fulfilled by your death.]

[Randomly copying the skill of the monster Hellfire Maiden.]

And this was also a place of opportunity for me.

[Creating skill cards.]

Cards floated in the dark void. Surprisingly, there was only one golden card despite it being a boss monster. The rest shone either silver or dung-colored.

‘You remember the promise, right?’

-I know, you rascal. Did you think I'd break a bet? Don't worry.

The Sword Emperor chuckled.

-Let's see what skills this lady had.

The Sword Emperor floated up to read the other side of the cards, keeping the promise to tell me the contents of the skills.

-Oh! Wow, this is a jackpot?

The Sword Emperor started with the golden card.

+

[Hellfire Barrier]

Rank: S-

Effect: Resentment, grudges, unfulfilled desires. Burn everything with your unresolved anger, unheeded voice, and unfulfilled wishes. 'It's hot.' Isn't it hot? Turn the world into a fiery heap. 'Feels like dying.' Kill them. If you wish, a 2km radius will be engulfed in aura inferno.

No one can leave this hell without your permission.

No one.

*However, you must also be inside the barrier.

+

It was a terrifying skill.

-This is a must. Zombie, just pick this skill without thinking.

‘.....’

-What? Hey, Kim Zombie. Why aren't you responding?

‘No, it's just...’

I frowned.

‘I don't know why, but it bothers me a bit.’

What's the matter?

It was indeed a powerful skill. Yet, something felt off. Like eating something and feeling bloated, unable to pinpoint exactly where it went wrong.

‘...Anyway, read the next skills.’

-Huh? There can't be a better skill than this. Just choose this one.

‘I have a different skill in mind. Come on, hurry up!’

-Sigh.

Despite pouting, the Sword Emperor read the cards as I requested.

-Alright, listen. [Labyrinth Architect] Rank A-, [Puppeteering] Rank B, [Remote Control] Rank B-, [Trap Setup] Rank C...

Pause.

-.....

The Sword Emperor, who was reading the cards enthusiastically, suddenly stopped. At the last skill, a silver-shining card caught his eye.

-Damn it?

I smirked.

‘As expected.’

-No, wait... just a second...

‘It's fine. I get it. No need to read it.’

I was certain.

That was the card I wanted.

[Please select a skill card.]

The cards started flying around in the air, moving quickly. But I had only had my eyes on one card from the start, so it wasn't confusing for me.

-Hey! Sir Gong-Ja! Hey! Let's not do this.

The Sword Emperor desperately yelled.

-Look at this. Wow, a golden card! Wow, an S-rank skill! Amazing! If you get this, you can create a Hellfire whenever you want. How cool is that?

‘I’m not so sure.’

-Why don't you understand! I object! If I were a woman, I'd fall head over heels for your hellfire charm! Let's go! Kim Gong-Ja's top star life, let's goooo!

I chuckled.

‘I should have sensed something was off from the start.’

There were clues.

‘Among tens of thousands of dolls, only [one real doll]. Since the real doll is the one using the skill, it obviously wouldn't get damaged by the flames.’

I reached out my hand.

‘But why didn't the fake dolls burn in the flames either?’

And I grabbed the silver card.

-Aaagh! No! No! Damn it, no!

‘There's only one answer, isn't there, Sword Emperor?’

I flipped the silver card.

+

[Only You Can Prevent Fire]

Rank: A

Effect: Ah, it's so hot! If left unchecked, this heat could burn down our house. But worry no more. Any lifeform or object you designate becomes immune to fire and will no longer burn. Free yourself from the fear of fire demons and enjoy a safe life!

*However, damage from water and ice skills increases by 300%.

+

That was it.

The 10th floor stage. Inferno Mansion's Hide and Seek.

The boss didn't just possess the ability to [burn things].

‘Aha!’

Contrarily, it also had the ability to make things [unburnable].

I clenched my fist, overwhelmed with the euphoria of victory.

‘Here I am! I saw! I conquered!’

-No... No, this is wrong... It's not supposed to be like this...

The Sword Emperor's mental state crumbled.

‘What's wrong? Now, I just need to cast fire immunity on myself with this skill. Then leisurely find the real doll. It's game over. You have to call me Sir Gong-Ja from today!’

-Damn it... Fuck... This is cheating. It's a broken game...

‘Mwahaha! Hurry up and call me Sir Gong-Ja!’

My laughter filled the dark space.

Another voice, not my own, quietly echoed.

[Selection complete. Copying skill.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

A celebratory announcement of my victory in our bet.

Now, I just had to return to a day earlier and challenge the 10th floor boss again.

I was on the verge of clearing it.

[You are currently an E-Rank hunter.]

But today, it didn't end there.

[You are penalized by the skill.]

-Huh?

‘Ah. Right.’

A notification I had never heard before, remaining as an F-Rank hunter.

But now, as an E-Rank hunter, I faced my first penalty.

What would the penalty be?

[Re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

[The level of penalty is weak. Hell Realm*.]

‘Huh? Trauma?’

Confused by the unexpected term, I tilted my head.

‘What does it mean to re-enact an enemy's trauma...’

Whoosh!

Before I could finish my thought, the space before me turned white.

*Hell Realm is one of the 6 realms in buddhism. There are six Enlightened Buddhas that exist in each of the six realms. These six Buddhas have also been known as the "Six Sages." Their names are Indrasakra (Buddha in the god realm), Vemacitra (Buddha of the petty god realm), Sakyamuni (Buddha in the human realm); Sthirasimha (Buddha in the animal realm), Jvalamukha (Buddha in the hungry ghost realm), and Yama Dharmaraja (Buddha in the hot hell realm).

For more info check out:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saṃsāra_\(Buddhism\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saṃsāra_(Buddhism))

Chapter 17: Trauma Penalty (2)

[Initializing the penalty.]

[Creating the trauma of the monster Hellfire Maiden.]

In a desolate Western-style mansion.

Suddenly, I found myself there.

Or rather, it was odd to say 'I was there.' My body wasn't present. Only my consciousness floated around like a ghost, viewing the unfolding scenes in the third person.

‘What's this?’

I was perplexed.

‘What’s happening...?’

-Help, please.

A child’s voice reached me.

A young child was tied up in a corner of the mansion's first-floor lobby. At first, I thought the plea was directed at me, but it wasn't. The child was begging someone else.

-Please, I’m so hungry... I need food... please...

-Hmm.

A nobleman, dressed lavishly.

-You orphans are a plague to this kingdom.

-Food...

-Left alone, you spread disease, wandering from one town to another, not working. I am the warden and guard who isolates you from the kingdom.

Suddenly, various scenes invaded my consciousness.

In an era plagued by famine and vagrants.

The nobleman gathered orphans and confined them in the mansion, ostensibly running an orphanage. To the outside world, he was a compassionate philanthropist, a great businessman, an intellectual with a conscience.

-Others may see you as rotten from the root, but not I.

But inside this grand mansion.

-I shall educate you.

The nobleman was nothing but a tyrant.

-Being hungry doesn't justify snatching whatever food is in

front of you. You might have been born like animals in the fields, but must you grow up as animals?

-I'm hungry... my stomach...

-Endure it. Even if you're hungry, endure. Become human through endurance.

The nobleman smiled benevolently while looking down at the emaciated child. He was the kind who could smile at such a scene. In some world, in some era, such behavior was considered virtuous.

-Repent!

Madness attracted more madness.

-Aaaaaah!

-Oh, children of witches! The poison of Zuraqua and the disease of our kingdom! Do not worry. God never abandons His faithful. Just as I will never abandon my lambs!

-Pain... it hurts... it hurts...

A priest of some god raised a hammer.

-Pray!

An era where madness was disguised as virtue.

The mansion never ceased to echo with screams.

-I'm hungry...

Hunger.

-No... please forgive me... why... please forgive me...

Torture.

-Thank you... kind nobleman. Kind sir... A reward for enduring pain. A promise. Thank you. Thank you, kind sir...

Brainwashing.

The orphans were dragged into the mansion like corpses and left as corpses. They never imagined the agonizing pain that awaited them between arriving and dying.

Dozens. Hundreds. Thousands of them in the mansion.

Dozens, hundreds, thousands of deaths.

‘.....’

I was stunned by the rapidly unfolding scenes before me.

‘What is all this...’

-What the hell is this?

Thankfully, the Sword Emperor snapped me out of it.

‘You saw it too? I thought you weren't there.’

-I've been watching from the start. I didn't know you were there either.

‘It seems like only our consciousnesses are floating around...’

-That doesn't matter.

The Sword Emperor said.

-What kind of lunatics are these? Educate humans? What non-human creatures think they can educate others?

‘I guess this is the origin of the 10th floor boss stage.’

Just before my consciousness arrived here, a voice had informed me.

[Re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

The enemy that killed me this time must be the real doll hiding somewhere in the inferno mansion. Thus, the scenes unfolding before us were the doll's trauma.

‘I had no idea....’

I whispered softly.

‘That a monster was once human...’

-Monsters aren't always like that. It's mostly just the bosses. Boss monsters are based on actual events from other worlds.

The Sword Emperor scoffed.

-Beings native to other worlds, heroes who performed feats there. Such things. This tendency becomes even stronger after the 11th floor.

‘Why didn’t you tell me this before?’

-You didn’t ask.

‘.....’

I was speechless at his blatant attitude.

-But even I’ve never seen something like this.

‘Seen what?’

-The origin you mentioned. These scenes. I knew boss monsters were based on other worlds, but how could I know what they experienced? I don't have mind-reading skills...

The Sword Emperor murmured.

-This really sucks.

I agreed.

‘...Yeah.’

While such horrors are always happening somewhere in the world, worse than this, thinking about them and seeing them directly are different.

Just different.

Unfortunately, or fortunately.

-Fire!

The [trauma] soon ended.

A servant accidentally knocked over a candle. Unaware, he passed by. In the dark night, while everyone slept, the fire quietly spread. By the time someone noticed, it was too late.

-Cough, choke. Cough!

-We need to escape...

Flames surged.

The ropes and chains in the basement burned. The shackles holding the orphans burned. The brainwashed child, the tortured child, the starving child burned. It seemed the fire would consume all the brainwashing, wounds, and hunger.

-Ah...

The children opened their mouths.

Red-hot chains bound their wrists and ankles. They couldn't move, like dolls, only able to scream.

But I heard them.

-I don't want to die.

Resentment.

-I'm hungry.

-I want to live...

-Kind sir.

Hatred and grievances directly entered my consciousness.

-I did nothing wrong. I had no family. It was okay. I wanted to play more. Still...

-It's not our fault. It's unjust. I didn't do this.

-I'm hungry.

The mansion burned.

The chandelier-decorated lobby, the nobleman's bedroom, the luxurious bed, the antique curtains, the deep basement with stone stairs – all incinerated.

-I don't want to die.

Crackle.

Crackle-.

Flames leapt into the air.

All that was visible was the mansion burning in the distance.

[Trauma re-enactment complete.]

[Penalty Finalized.]

And I returned to a day earlier.

•

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When I opened my eyes.

The Sword Emperor and I said nothing. We both sat on the bed in silence.

Not so much shocked, but unsure how to react.

-Um...

After a long time, the Sword Emperor scratched his head.

-It's a tragic and sad story. We saw it, but what can we do?

“Wow. That's the first thing you say? You're really...”

-Yeah. So? I have terrible character.

The Sword Emperor scowled. Ever seen a gorilla angry? It was remarkably similar.

-But truth is always harsh! That 10th floor boss is just a monster, and the children it originated from died long ago in some other world. An old event. You can't do anything, zombie! Even if it happened in this tower, you could die 4000 or 5000 times and return to the past. But this? It's just from another world, another era. Even I couldn't fix this! Not even if I were a Sword God, not just a Sword Emperor.

He was right.

-Kill the real doll. Clear it.

The Sword Emperor advised.

-Then climb to the 11th floor. The 20th, 30th, 40th, 50th, all the same. If you're determined to reign as a top hunter, solve these issues yourself!

Again, he was right.

Yet.

“Yoo Soo-Ha probably thought the same.”

-Huh?

“Yoo Soo-Ha. Flame Emperor. The first human I hunted.”

I got out of bed.

I packed my sleeping bag in my backpack. Put on the backpack. Strapped the sword to my waist. In other words, I was ready to climb the tower. As I left the lodging, I was equipped like a hunter, albeit clumsily.

“Did you know? Yoo Soo-Ha definitely found the real doll and crushed its head. Regardless of seeing the trauma or not. Without any hesitation.”

-So what?

“I don’t want to become like that guy.”

I climbed the tower.

As before, I deceived the administrator.

And once again, I stood before the mansion's door.

The Western-style noble mansion, just like in the trauma.

-Hey! You're not a child. You won't skip the boss just because you don't want to be like him, right? What will you do? You must defeat the boss to clear the stage, zombie!

“Who decided that?”

-What?

I placed my hands on the gate.

And murmured.

“Damn. I acted stupidly.”

-What are you saying now?

“I'm saying I was stupid! So were you. 'Not knowing the answer even when it's right in front of you' perfectly describes us right now.”

The Sword Emperor frowned.

-Are you out of your mind? Sure, your stupidity is a universal truth, but why am I stupid? I've been called a prodigy since I was young.

“The skill card.”

I muttered irritably.

“The S-rank skill card we didn't choose. Remember? Hellfire Barrier. You insisted I should choose that one.”

-Yeah? Of course, I remember.

“Say it once.”

-Sigh. You see me as something... Fine. Listen.

The Sword Emperor recited the skill details without missing a beat. Perhaps his claim of being a prodigy as a child wasn't entirely false. He remembered the skill card perfectly.

+

[Hellfire Barrier]

Rank: S-

Effect: Resentment, grudges, unfulfilled desires. Burn everything with your unresolved anger, unheeded voice, and unfulfilled wishes. 'It's hot.' Isn't it hot? Turn the world into a fiery heap. 'Feels like dying.' Kill them. If you wish, a 2km radius will be engulfed in aura inferno.

No one can leave this hell without your permission.

No one.

*However, you must also be inside the barrier.

+

I quietly listened to the skill's content and then questioned.

“Sword Emperor, don’t you find something strange?”

-You're exasperating. What exactly is strange?

“The last part.”

[No one can leave this hell without your permission.]

[No one.]

I said.

“Nobody can escape the Hellfire Barrier without the boss's permission. Not a single soul. Then how, by what means, did

the hunters who attempted the 10th floor escape alive?”

-Oh?

The Sword Emperor blinked.

...What the hell?

There's a guild named Black Dragon.

A guild that has reigned supreme since the day the tower appeared in this world.

The Black Dragon, led by the second-ranked hunter, the Black Witch, attempted the 10th floor dozens of times. They always failed. The second-ranked hunter returned alive each time, saving all the participating hunters.

Everyone returned alive.

“It doesn’t make sense.”

I exerted strength in my arms.

The gate slowly began to open.

“If the boss doesn't permit it, escape is impossible. It's a skill designed that way... yet hunters have escaped without killing the boss. Everyone. It makes no sense.”

-Then... what's going on?

“It's obvious!”

Creeeak.

The gate fully opened.

“The boss allowed them to escape! Told them to run away!”

The boss of the tenth floor.

A stage that no human had ever conquered.

The blazing inferno mansion was revealed.

[You have entered the boss stage.]

[Challenger: Hunter Kim Gong-Ja. Alone.]

[May fortune be with you.]

“They allowed anyone who came to escape willingly. The boss, they, never saw the hunters as enemies from the start.”

-.....

[Initiating the boss stage.]

“They just wanted to play with those who visited.”

Candles.

Candles toppled over here and there in the mansion. Flames erupted from where they fell.

-Hahaha!

Among the flames, the dolls remained. As if tied to somewhere, the dolls couldn't move, only managing to turn their heads towards me.

-Wanna play?

The dolls opened their mouths.

-Will you play with us?

-Freeze Tag? Rose of Sharon Blooming? Hide and Seek?

-The ice has melted. The flowers are torn. Let's play Hide and Seek!

-Yes! Play with us! Play Hide and Seek with us!

-Hahaha!

Flames surged.

The lobby with the chandelier burned. The nobleman's bedroom burned. The ornate bed, the antique curtains, and the deep basement with stone stairs – all incinerated.

Yet, the children, turned into dolls, remained unburned.

“.....”

I clenched my teeth for a moment.

“Alright. I'll play.”

[Activating Skill: Only You Can Prevent Fire.]

The flame immunity skill I obtained from my last death. As soon as the skill activated, the heat enveloping my body vanished like washed away. Breathing became easier. The scenery, obscured by the hellfire, became clearer.

I saw the dolls' faces.

-Oh?

-You're not burning.

The dolls had different faces. Although expressionless, I could tell.

-Aren't you hot?

-Strange man.

-Can you play?

-Will you play with us?

I nodded again.

“Sure. Hide and seek, right? Be careful. I've never lost at

hide and seek since I was a kid.”

-Hahaha! Strange man!

-Hide! Everyone, hide!

The dolls laughed. They said to hide, but none moved. They were all fixed in place. Dozens. Hundreds. Thousands of children laughed.

-Hide well, don't let your hair show. Hide well...

The game of tag began.

“...Got you.”

I wandered the mansion. As I walked, I caught each doll. As I gently stroked their heads, they would tilt their heads with a creak. Each time, the dolls opened their mouths.

-Ding! I'm not it!

The dolls disappeared, laughing.

-I'm not it!

-I'm not it!

Wherever I went, there were dolls. Many. I walked and caught each one.

-.....

One.

-Hey, this is...

Another.

-This is a soul consoling ritual.

The Sword Emperor murmured.

Consoling souls.

I silently toured the mansion. I saw the shackles that hung the orphans, the chains that bound the children. Where shackles and chains were placed, there was always a doll.

Flames surged.

-I'm not it! I'm not it! I'm not it!

-I'm not it! I am, not it. I am... I am... not it... I am...

-I am... not it...

Time passed.

Thud.

Eventually, my steps stopped in the basement. At the end of the long stone staircase. The dolls on the stairs lay fallen. As if they tried to crawl up to escape and suddenly stopped.

“.....”

After comforting all the children on the stairs, I finally stood before the last doll.

The basement.

-Will you play with us?

In the depths of the mansion, the doll leaned against something.

Around the doll lay hammers, awls, saws.

-.....

I walked slowly.

And gently stroked the hairless head of the doll.

“Caught you.”

The head of the child who created the inferno was small. Small enough to be encircled by one hand.

“...Now you're the seeker, kid.”

Silence followed.

The doll slowly raised its head. Like the others, it was expressionless. With a face devoid of expressions, the doll opened its mouth.

-Kind sir.

Not just a voice flowed from the doll's mouth. Lips. Skin. Eyes. The doll's body melted like wax. Flames instantly engulfed it, and even as it burned, the doll murmured like a broken record player.

-Thank you.

And it melted.

-Thank you so much.

The doll burned. Chains melted and flowed. Shackles, hammers, awls, saws, all burned. Hunger and traces of hunger. Like wax melting away, everything vanished.

There was no trace of death.

No trace, in the midst of the mansion's ruins, I stood.

“.....”

For years.

[Congratulations.]

A place no human had cleared for years.

[Normal Stage Cleared.]

[Hidden Stage Cleared.]

[You have cleared the boss stage.]

That day. The tenth floor of the tower was cleared.

Chapter 18: Trauma Penalty (3)

[Challenger: Hunter Kim Gong-Ja. Alone.]

[Calculating clear reward... Calculation complete.]

[The reward will be given 24 hours later, upon entering the 11th floor.]

Boss stage cleared.

An achievement no one else had achieved. And it was I, not yet ranked or known by any alias, who accomplished it. If this news spread, it would undoubtedly turn the world upside down.

“Sigh.”

Yet, my feelings were unsettled. A mix of joy and melancholy occupied my heart. Like a lonely poet, I wandered the ruins, nothing but ashes around me.

-Hey. Why the long face? You even cleared the hidden stage. Even in my lifetime, I could count on one hand how many times I tackled a hidden stage. The reward should be substantial.

“You wouldn't understand why I'm down, being a psychopath with no human emotions.”

-Hmm. I see. It's not just a long face, you're actually shitting bricks.

“.....”

It was astonishing. Sword Emperor's single remark wiped away my gloom. Right, staying sentimental around this lunatic was impossible.

“It's just that the world seems a bit messed up.”

-Oh?

Sword Emperor nodded.

-People's nature is the same everywhere.

We stood silently for a while, just absorbing the moment. The Sword Emperor shuddered suddenly.

-Enough of that. It doesn't suit me! Besides, Kim Gong-Ja, you were impressive earlier!

“Huh?”

-Your unique approach to tackling the boss. It was remarkable. I'll give you that!

I frowned. Perhaps he was trying to compliment sincerely, but it felt eerie.

“Why are you complimenting me all of a sudden?”

-What? I give credit where it's due. You overcame that challenge with your skill, not luck. Our Gong-Ja is my partner,

and when there's a cause for celebration, we should celebrate together, right?

I furrowed my brows even more.

“Something's fishy...”

-Ah, stop it. Nothing's fishy. Well done, Kim Gong-Ja! Awesome, Kim Gong-Ja! Once the 11th floor opens, let's rush through and grab the number one rank! Who cares if others call it cheating? If they're jealous, let them get their cheat skills!

The Sword Emperor laughed heartily. What's with him all of a sudden? Unless the sun rises from the west or the tower collapses, the Sword Emperor acting like this is unthinkable.

Then it happened.

[This is a Public Announcement.]

[Today, the 10th floor stage has been cleared.]

A voice.

[Announcing again to everyone.]

It wasn't just for me; the voice echoed, filling the sky.

[Today.]

[The 10th floor stage has been cleared.]

An announcement declaring the dawn of a new era.

[In 24 hours, the 11th floor stage will open.]

Whoosh!

Something burst in the sky. Fireworks. First, purple fireworks exploded, followed by red, blue, yellow, and dozens of colors and thousands of streams of fireworks brilliantly bloomed.

“Ah...”

I gazed blankly at the sky. The fireworks didn't disappear after bursting. They moved on their own. Each firework, like a dragon, twisted and slowly took shape.

[24:00:00]

A clock.

[23:59:59]

And the clock in the sky began to move.

“.....”

Beside the Sword Emperor, I looked up at the celestial spectacle.

Suddenly, the Sword Emperor muttered.

-Finally, the main event begins.

I nodded.

“Indeed.”

-Once I saw a similar fireworks show in my lifetime.

“This is my second time seeing this. But.”

I clenched my fist.

“Back then, I was in a bar on the first floor. Just a spectator. Clueless about what was happening. Eventually missed the opportunity and remained a F-rank hunter for life... Damn. Thinking about it, I was foolish.”

-Haha.

The Sword Emperor laughed.

-Right. Upgrading from an extra to a protagonist, how does it feel?

I didn't respond immediately. Instead, I took out my smartphone.

I wanted to check the reaction in the hunter community.

-What's with the fireworks?

-I'm on the 1st floor watching fireworks. Is this only happening here?

-I'm at the 3rd-floor hunting ground, and there's a fireworks show going on here too.

Unsurprisingly.

The midday fireworks stirred up all the communities.

-Just heard a voice.

-Heard about the 10th floor being cleared, is it true?

-Did Black Dragon guild clear the 10th floor?

-No official announcement, what's going on?

Post after post.

-The next planned assault by the Administration is in two weeks.

-Definitely not Black Dragon! Their executives are all at a cafe near Babylon Bank on the

1st floor. Attached proof photos.

-Who cleared it then?

Another post.

-[Breaking News] 10th Floor Cleared!

-The guild that achieved the clear remains unidentified.

-[Breaking News] Black Dragon did not declare a clear.

Every second, dozens of posts poured in. Not just one place. All hunter communities were ablaze, and soon the fire spread to other communities.

The news agencies operating in Babylon frantically released brief breaking news, and the rumors turned into fuel, igniting the communities further.

-If not Black Dragon, then who?

-I'm currently praying in the Temple of the Omnipotent God, and I saw the Heretic Inquisitors suddenly gathering the clerics. It's chaos. The Temple also doesn't seem to be the clearing party.

-It's Sword Saint!

-Sword Saint cleared it alone. Definitely.

-Ah, if it's Sword Saint, that makes sense.

Initially, the flames in the communities burned separately. Some backed the Temple of the Omnipotent God guild. Others pointed to Sword Saint. Countess, Viper, Paladin, and other top-ranking hunters were all mentioned at least once.

But...

-What are you talking about? Sword Saint is drinking milk at a bar right now.

-Not Sword Saint. Attached proof photos.

-Viper is teaching students at his dojo.

-What are you saying?

-Paladin is working in Babylon Square.

-I asked directly. Sword Saint said it wasn't him.

-Just wait a minute. This doesn't make any sense logically.

-A Sang-Ryun executive here. I can't reveal my real name or alias, but it's not Sang-Ryun.

-Why hasn't any guild declared the clear yet?

-What the heck.

The separate fires of the communities soon merged into one.

-So who is it?

-Does no one know who cleared the 10th floor?

-Who is the Hunter that challenged the 10th floor?

-Who on earth could it be...

...

...

I turned off my smartphone screen.

Then, I decided to answer the question the Sword Emperor had asked earlier.

“How do I feel right now?”

Before I knew it, a smile had formed on my lips.

“To be honest, it's exhilarating.”

It was a feeling I had never experienced before. Even without being taught by anyone, I instinctively knew what this emotion was. It was the feeling of standing at the pinnacle.

“It feels like I have the world in my hands.”

-Right?

The Sword Emperor smiled mischievously.

-Of course, it's just an illusion for now. You haven't conquered the world, you've just cleared the 10th floor. But it's not entirely a delusion either. Kim Gong-Ja, you are now closer to the top than anyone else in your world.

“I know.”

I looked away.

“Now, all that's left is to truly reach the top.”

A figure was seen rushing up the stairs leading to the 10th floor – it was the guard I had deceived about my incurable disease.

“Huff, huff...! Hunter...!”

The guard was drenched in sweat, seemingly having run

desperately. He stopped in front of me, catching his breath.

“Just now... Did you...?”

“I'm not sure what you're referring to.”

“The 10th floor clear!”

He shouted.

“I was in charge today... and you were the only one who challenged the 10th floor today, so... it's chaos now. The Administration keeps calling me...!”

“Hmm.”

I eyed the guard. His pocket buzzed incessantly, probably with phone calls. It seemed the tower was indeed in turmoil over the recent event.

“If I really did clear it, what would you do?”

“Uh?”

“If I'm really the Hunter who cleared the 10th floor, what would you do?”

“That, well...”

The administrator looked flustered.

“I didn't properly check your ID... I should check it now...”

“Come on, guard sir. That's a bit strange to say. You did take 100 gold from me, after all.”

“That, well...”

“Keep up the good work.”

Thump.

I gently patted his shoulder. The guard stared at me blankly as I passed by him and leisurely descended the stairs.

From behind, a desperate plea came.

“Wait, just a moment, please! Hunter! Even your alias will do! Please tell me your alias before you go! If you don't, my seniors at the Administration will have my head!”

I didn't look back but responded.

“I don't have an alias.”

“.....”

“Take care. Oh, and don't follow me. If you do, I'll really run away.”

Fortunately, the guard didn't chase after me. Even if he had, it wouldn't have been a problem. He seemed too exhausted from climbing the stairs, making it easy for me to outrun him.

-Hey. He looks utterly dumbfounded. Like he's seen a ghost.

The Sword Emperor chuckled, glancing back.

-Anyway, well done. You should always elevate your worth like that. Yep. Keep your identity hidden and make others seek you out. I don't need to teach you; you're already doing well...

“Sword Emperor.”

-Huh? Why?

I stood before the teleportation stone at the entrance to the 10th floor.

“I've realized something.”

-What did you realize?

“Why you suddenly praised me.”

As I reserved my teleportation to the 1st floor, I spoke.

“The bet.”

The Sword Emperor flinched.

“You remember, right? If I clear the boss within two coins, you have to call me 'Sir'. Oh, what a dilemma. I actually cleared the 10th floor within just two coins. Sword Emperor, you're in trouble now.”

-Hey, Gong-Ja... We're partners, after all... Isn't that a bit much?

The Sword Emperor pleaded with a crestfallen face.

-Think about it. A partnership implies equality. You and me. Equal. The conqueror of 99 floors and the future challenger of the 100th. Ah, partner! Friend! How magnificent and beautiful is that!

I gave him a bright smile.

“That's enough. From now on, address me as ‘Sir’.”

-.....

“For the rest of your life.”

The look of despair on the Sword Emperor's face was the moment of his realization.

Chapter 19: A Moment of Leisure with a Cup of Coffee (1)

Buzzing chatter.

"Who really cleared the 10th floor?"

"I've been watching the news, but there's nothing. Just rumors..."

"What if the Black Dragon Guild is hiding it on purpose? To dramatically reveal later..."

"Ah. It's definitely the Sword Saint!"

The city of Babylon on the 1st floor of the tower was abuzz.

People rejoiced that the seemingly impenetrable 10th floor had finally been conquered. They gathered in outdoor cafes, speculating about the identity of the mysterious conqueror.

What would their reaction be if they knew I, sitting right next to them, was the one who had broken through the 10th floor?

"Hmm."

"This is delicious."

I commented on my caramel macchiato. At an outdoor café across from the Sang-Ryun headquarters, this was the only Starbucks in Babylon.

Despite the fact that once you enter the tower, you can't leave, their spirit to open a branch here was admirable. There were even franchises with a red-nosed clown and a generous old man as mascots.

Ah, human desires!

"What do you think, Sword Emperor? Victory is really sweet,

isn't it? I feel like even if I drank espresso right now, it would taste sweet. Right?"

-.....

"Huh. Is my earphone broken? That's strange. I can't hear any response."

I took out my earphones and tapped them. Of course, no sound came from them.

It was just a ruse.

Talking to myself without earphones would make me look crazy, so I pretended to be on a call with someone. It worked quite well. No one in the café looked at me strangely.

"Sword Emperor? Sir Sword Emperor? Hey, Psychopath Sir. Hey, Crazy Man Sir?"

...Oh.

"Ah, finally. I was worried you had gone deaf. Tsk, tsk, making a noble lord like me worry. That's not how humans should behave."

-.....

"Ah, right. You're not human, you're a ghost. I forgot because I'm a bit slow. Oh! Sword Emperor, can we drop the formalities now? It would be weird for me to use informal speech when you're addressing me as 'Sir', right?"

-Just kill me...

The Sword Emperor cried out.

-Just overwrite [Sword Constellation] with a new skill! That would kill me, you bastard! I'd rather die!

"Oh, my. You're making quite a scene. We're partners, aren't we? Lifelong friends. Best buddies! Who would kill their best friend? We're going to be together forever."

-Oh... I'm done... I won't say anything more. Marcus... I want to go back to Marcus...

Ah, sweet victory.

I sipped my coffee and looked up at the sky.

[22:32:50]

The celestial clock had already marked an hour and a half.

Just when I was thinking it was about time for them to arrive...

-Meow.

"Hmm?"

A brown-furred cat approached me. Not looking like a stray, rather well-groomed. The unique feature was that instead of a bell, it had two gold coins around its neck.

"....."

Gulp.

I considered how to react.

'The Gold Coin Cat.'

-?

'Gold Coin Cat. It's really famous... Ah, people might not know it yet.'

This cat wasn't an ordinary pet.

In about five years, it would become a widely recognized mascot.

'...I didn't expect such a big shot to come to me directly.'

I had no choice but to pretend ignorance.

I calmly looked down at the cat, managing my expression.

"Lost your way?"

-Meow.

The brown cat rubbed against my leg. It would've seemed like a genuinely friendly cat to anyone who didn't know its true identity.

"Shall we hang out until your owner comes?"

-Meow.

"Up you go."

I picked up the cat and placed it on my lap. The brown cat comfortably curled up as if it had aimed for this spot from the start. It even yawned while purring.

'Head over heels for a cat. Such incredible acting skills.'

While stroking the cat's head, a group of Hunters approached the café. One of them spoke to me first.

"Excuse me. Are you Hunter Kim Gong-Ja?"

"Hmm."

At a glance, their gear was impressive. Not just any randoms – these were at least guild executives, if not leaders. They had gathered at this outdoor café.

I pulled out my ID and showed it to them.

"I was wondering how long it would take. Exactly 1 hour and 30 minutes."

".....!"

Their eyes wavered upon seeing my ID. A ripple of disturbance spread among them. The Hunters hastily took out their phones and started contacting someone.

"Yes. I found him!"

"At the café right opposite the bank..."

"No, it's not from another guild... Yes. Yes! Understood, Colonel."

"It's alright. We won't let any other guild snatch him!"

The calm before the storm.

I watched the unfolding scene with satisfaction.

'Feels like a true VIP, doesn't it?'

-Well, most guilds will be eager to recruit you. You're the first to clear the 10th floor alone. Of course, you are a VIP.

'Hmm. Well, if I'm getting called 'Sir' by someone who cleared up to the 99th floor, it would be strange not to feel like a VIP.'

-Curse it! Curse it! Damn it!

The Hunters finished their calls one by one.

Then, one after the other, with tense faces, they turned to me.

One of the guilds was about to make the first move. A burly, blonde Hunter stepped forward.

"I'm the HR manager of the Vigilante Corps Guild. Hunter Kim Gong-Ja. As you know, the Vigilante Corps is the most honorable guild in Babylon. If you join us..."

"Wait a moment, please."

I raised my hand. The HR manager of the Vigilante Corps paused.

"Sorry to interrupt. But let's clarify two things first."

"....."

"First, don't leak it to the media yet."

I looked around at the Hunters. There was not a single one among them with a rank lower than mine. Back in the days before my regression, I wouldn't have dared to look up at these Hunters.

But I was not intimidated at all.

Achievements!

I had the feat of being the first human to conquer the 10th floor of the tower.

This was like a golden tower that no one could tarnish, regardless of their rank.

Capable Hunters valued achievements highly. If they were truly capable, they couldn't treat me lightly.

"Any guild that leaks my name to the media will never make a deal with me. I won't even consider them. Keep that in mind."

"Until when, exactly?" another Hunter asked, raising his hand.

"The journalists from Summons Times are scouring every guild as we speak... Mr. Kim Gong-Ja, even if we try to keep it secret, I honestly can't say how long we can keep this under wraps."

"Well, I'm not asking you to keep it a secret for long."

I pointed to the sky.

The Hunters also looked up.

[22:25:31]

"Just for today. Keep the embargo until that clock hits 00:00:00."

"Ah! Yes. We can manage that."

The Hunters sighed in relief.

I smiled.

"I can't be reckless with the media. I need to rush to the 11th floor as soon as it opens."

I spoke again.

"That was the first condition. Now, for the second..."

The Hunters watched me intently, tense with anticipation of another tough condition.

I grinned and gestured around.

"This is a public place, let's be considerate of other customers."

"Excuse me?"

"Can't you feel everyone looking over here? Everyone's panicked because you all suddenly crowded around."

I was right.

Other customers at the café were stealing glances our way. Whispering. Many looked at us with suspicion, some even trying to discreetly film with their phones.

"It's causing a disturbance."

"....."

"I understand you're all busy looking for me, but let's take it slow. I'm not going anywhere."

"Sorry for the inconvenience."

Realizing their oversight, the Hunters dispersed, apologizing to other customers and negotiating with the café owner for privacy.

"Let's begin the discussion. Please, state your offers."

Interestingly, the Hunters each had a coffee cup in hand.

They had ordered coffee in response to my comment about causing a disturbance. Cute.

"The Vigilante Corps offers a signing bonus of 10,000 gold."

That was the starting point.

"10,000 gold? Showing off your poverty in such a gathering? Mr. Kim Gong-Ja! Join the Adventure Guild. 20,000 gold as a signing bonus, and we'll offer you an executive position."

"Join Chun-Moon Guild. We're a specialized guild in Babylon that trains combat-focused Hunters. We'll welcome you as an instructor with a signing bonus of 25,000 gold."

"An instructor is just a nuisance. Think about it. Mr. Kim Gong-Ja! Join the Temple of the Omnipotent God. We promise you an honorary position. Honestly, we'd like you to handle external and internal promotions for the temple. 30,000 gold as a signing bonus, plus additional per project...!"

"Come to the Hunter Association! Become a promotional ambassador!"

The chaos ensued.

The HR managers desperately wooed me. I understood their position. Up until now, the top guilds had been somewhat suppressed by the name 'Sword Saint'.

A rank 1 Hunter, unaffiliated with any guild, dominating the scene!

Such a presence makes people wonder if joining a guild is really necessary. They think maybe solo play is the real answer...

'But that's just because Sword Saint is special.'

Guilds' images definitely took a hit.

'A new hero as sensational as Sword Saint has emerged?'

I smiled.

'They'll do anything to recruit me.'

For the HR managers, it must have been an order: recruit me at all costs, no matter what. It was obvious.

"Vigilante Corps can offer 36,000 gold..."

"Let the poorer guilds step back, please?"

"Are you seriously competing in thousands of gold units? Can't you read the atmosphere?"

"We at Alchemy Castle offer...!"

Then, a weighty voice resonated.

"Sang-Ryun."

"500,000 gold."

"....."

All heads turned in the direction of the voice. It was the cat on my lap. When it jumped off, it had the paws of a soft-furred animal, but by the time it landed, it had turned into human feet in shoes.

"500,000 gold as a signing bonus. And I'll offer you the position of Vice-Guild Leader of Sang-Ryun."

The Hunter ranked 3rd.

The Countess, the guild leader of the Merchant Union.

"500,000 gold and the position of Vice-Guild Leader. What do you say?"

The woman with the [Transformation] skill smiled. Over 40, but looking like she's in her 20s, she must be consuming top-grade life-extending potions daily.

Typical of the wealthiest Hunter in the tower.

"Hmm."

A person I would never have met in my previous life.

I maintained composure and smiled.

"Now, the negotiation finally feels like a negotiation."

The first phase of the negotiation for my worth was complete.

Chapter 20: A Moment of Leisure with a Cup of Coffee (2)

"Hmm, you have quite the nerve."

The Countess slightly lifted the corners of her mouth.

"Seeing a cat transform into a human and not even flinching... Not quite the reaction expected from the youth these days. Ah, that's a compliment, by the way."

"Thank you. I've always had strong nerves. Even see ghosts and all that."

"Ahaha. Even making jokes now. Impressive."

The Countess chuckled, fanning herself with a folding fan.

I meant it seriously, though.

"Uh..."

"Hmm..."

The Hunters glanced at each other. Except for the Countess, no one dared to laugh. The HR managers, previously shouting out signing bonuses, quieted down as soon as the Countess arrived.

"Excuse me, Guild Leader, but..."

The burly blond Hunter cautiously began.

"Please, go ahead."

"Is offering 500,000 gold and a vice-guild leader position not a bit excessive? Of course, the achievement of conquering the 10th floor is remarkable. However, Kim Gong-Ja Hunter's

actual abilities are still... unknown..."

His voice trailed off, not from sudden aphasia, but because the Countess was glaring at him, smiling behind her fan.

"....."

The Hunter closed his mouth, realizing that nothing he said would make a difference. The Countess was a powerhouse, ranking 3rd. Simply put, they were not in the same league.

"Is that all your concerns?"

"...Yes."

"Then, before you become more discourteous, summon your superiors. I'm sorry, but I can't have a meaningful conversation with you. Ah, if anyone here can offer more than 500,000 gold, feel free to stay. Otherwise, please take a seat."

A polite way of saying 'get lost'.

Middle managers had no choice but to leave when told to do so. The HR managers left, one by one.

Ten minutes later, a new group of Hunters walked in.

"Damn Sang-Ryun! Bloodsuckers!"

Rank 5. The leader of Chun-Moon Guild, Viper.

"Hmm. We've been outmaneuvered. I must admit it was our oversight."

Rank 4. The leader of the Temple of the Omnipotent God, Heretic Inquisitor.

"Oversight is an odd word. Our task today wasn't to welcome a new hero, but to prevent existing Hunters from getting agitated. The Guild Leader went too far."

Rank 8. The vice-guild leader of the Vigilante Corps, Paladin.

"....."

And even the leader of the Black Dragon Guild, the Black Witch, ranking 2nd.

'Wow.'

I marveled inwardly.

'A total mobilization. Total.'

The scene was formidable.

The top rankers I had only seen in interviews or articles were now alive, sitting right across from me. It was a moment when I truly realized how much my value had risen.

"Please, take a seat."

The Countess smiled, resting her chin on her hand.

"Been a while since we all gathered like this. Seems like only yesterday we were together conquering the 2nd floor. Time is indeed cruel. We've grown old."

"Shut it, Sang-Ryun! Before I boil you into butterfly soup."

Viper growled.

The one-eyed Hunter of Chun-Moon Guild, known for being the first to conquer the 2nd floor, had a bandage over his face – a scar from challenging Sword Saint.

"I heard on my way here. What, 500,000 gold? Vice-guild leader? Always playing dress-up as an animal, and now you've lost your mind too? I'd expect this kind of nonsense from you, Sang-Ryun, but vice-guild leader, really? Just..."

"Let's order our coffees first!"

The Heretic Inquisitor cheerfully interrupted.

"It's rude not to do business after entering a shop. We, the leaders of the great guilds responsible for the tower, can't be like that! I'll have a café mocha. What about you all?"

"Ah, I'll have a hot Americano."

"I'm in the mood for an iced café latte."

"...Hazelnut latte. Hot. Extra shot. Grande size."

The guild leaders ordered as if they had been waiting for this.

Only Viper was left confused.

"What? Coffee? No. Hey. The 10th floor's been cleared, the world's in chaos, and you've got room in your stomachs for coffee? What, are your brains soaked in caffeine or something...?"

"Chun-Moon Guild Leader wants a rich espresso, got it."

"I swear, this religious nut..."

"Barista! Take our orders, please!"

Ignoring Viper, the Heretic Inquisitor called out. The barista, startled, trembled. Suddenly tasked with making

coffee for the top rankers, the barista's face turned pale.

"Your orders, please?"

"Yes!"

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled brightly.

The young leader of the Temple of the Omnipotent God, known for his politeness even to terrorists during interrogations, ordered cheerfully.

"An iced café mocha, tall. A hot Americano, tall. An iced café latte, tall. A hot hazelnut latte with an extra shot, grande size. And a doppio espresso! That's our order!"

"Yes! Yes, yes...!"

"Oh, and-"

The Heretic Inquisitor slowly turned his head.

"What would you like to order, Hunter Kim Gong-Ja?"

Everyone's gaze turned to me. The table fell silent in an instant. Curious looks. Hostile looks. Innocent looks. Calm looks. Expressionless looks. Ten eyes from five faces watched me, testing my reaction.

-Don't flinch.

The Sword Emperor, who had been quiet until then, spoke.

-They're nothing special. Nothing at all! You've even died to Marcus, remember? None of them are better than him.

'I know.'

I was well aware.

'Just a simple test of nerves.'

And it was all an act.

I shrugged my shoulders casually.

"Barista, don't you have a menu?"

"Sorry?"

"I had a macchiato earlier, so I'm not really feeling coffee. I'd like to see the menu... No, never mind. If you have hot chocolate, just give me that."

"Okay, coming right up."

What I needed to show was composure.

'These people didn't just coincidentally gather in a group.'

When the HR managers came earlier and now, different guild Hunters arrived simultaneously.

Was this timing just a coincidence?

'Absolutely not!'

A calculated strategy.

It was all just an act.

'They're trying to unnerve me by swarming in all at once.'

A classic tactic. Similar to a gang cornering someone for intimidation.

'Well, they're a bit more intimidating than ordinary thugs, but...'

The tension in the air was like walking on thin ice.

'Compared to burning alive, it's nothing.'

In other words, it was just thin ice.

Before being killed by the Flame Emperor, I would have been shaking in fear. But now, I wasn't scared at all.

The reason was stupidly simple.

'If they're so tough, let them kill me.'

They couldn't kill me anyway!

The Sword Emperor nodded in agreement.

-Right. That's your talent and strength! Tell them to try and kill you if they dare. Stare them down. Ask them who dares to claim they're a top ranker when they can't even kill!

'Well, thanks for the support. But the punishment won't be lifted.'

-Damn it...!

The Sword Emperor held his head in despair.

"Hmm."

The Heretic Inquisitor's expression changed.

"It's fascinating. Until conquering the 10th floor, Hunter Kim Gong-Ja had no significant achievements on record. Suddenly, a complete transformation... The world is truly unpredictable!"

"It wasn't entirely without achievement."

The Countess, hiding her mouth behind her fan, gave a sly smile.

"This young man recently won our guild's lottery. Lucky indeed. He's got guts and, seeing his conquest of the 10th floor, apparently skill too. Luck, guts, skill – if a young one possesses these three, success is almost guaranteed."

"Hah... That's what I was saying."

Viper sighed from across the table.

"Should've just recruited him without the theatrics! Did you really think someone who conquered the 10th floor would be a clueless newbie? Tsk, pointless act..."

"That's not important right now."

Suddenly, the Black Witch, who had been quiet, spoke up.

"Let's stop the unrelated topics. We can talk about those at our own time."

"Cough..."

"Hunter Kim Gong-Ja."

The Witch looked at me.

"I'll ask you directly. Do you plan to join any guild?"

Her dark eyes fixed on me.

"If you plan to stay unaffiliated like Sword Saint, just let us know. We'll need to discuss how to handle the media accordingly."

"And if I am considering joining a specific guild?"

"Then a fierce bidding war will start."

The Witch spoke calmly.

"We've been stuck on the 9th floor for too long. It's been shameful, to put it mildly. It was disgraceful. But thanks to you breaking through the 10th floor, we have a new opportunity to advertise the value of the tower to the outside world."

"An opportunity."

"Yes, an opportunity. Not just for war refugees but to attract various humans from the outside world."

The barista served coffee on a tray. The guild leaders each took a cup without a word. The Witch too quietly sipped her hazelnut latte.

"Especially since opening the 10th floor will motivate the Hunters who've been lounging in the city on the 1st floor. What unknown worlds await from the 11th floor onward? Even the most pragmatic will be curious."

Indeed.

"The food shortage might get a little relief."

"....."

The Witch looked at me, somewhat surprised.

"...You catch on quickly. Right. We're struggling to meet food demands with just the items harvested from below the 9th floor."

"Even though you keep the trade route with the outside world open 24/7."

The Countess laughed.

"As I get older, it's becoming a bit more challenging. Not as spry as I used to be."

"We need new products now."

The Witch continued.

"We have to attract adventurers to worlds beyond the 10th floor. We need to find items exclusive to those regions."

"So, for an effective appeal to the outside world and the tower, we need a means to loudly proclaim [A New Era Has Begun!]. And that means you."

"Right. Precisely."

All of this was to happen in the future.

The reason why the great guilds couldn't easily manipulate someone like Flame Emperor, who lived only for himself, was this. A hero, whether liked or not, becomes an icon of a new era.

For the tower to continue growing, such a hero is essential!

'But still, the Black Dragon tried to assassinate the Flame Emperor.'

I recalled the conversation I overheard in the slum alley.

-Who ordered my assassination? Just answer that.

-Was it the Black Witch of the Black Dragon who orchestrated this?

At that time, the Saintess slowly nodded her head.

If the Saintess didn't lie, the Witch in front of me actually attempted to poison the Flame Emperor. The reason is unknown now, but...

'We'll get along just fine.'

Why?

'Anyone who hates that Flame Bastard can't be all bad!'

An enemy of an enemy is a friend, perhaps.

A sense of camaraderie seemed to arise.

"I understand what you're saying. The guild that successfully recruits me will become a symbol of the new era. The rest will inevitably end up as supporting cast."

"Yes."

"Then let me propose this..."

The Hunters focused on my words.

I pulled out a deck of playing cards from my pocket.

"...Playing cards?"

The Witch tilted her head.

"Don't tell me you want to decide which guild to join through a game? Poker?"

"Yes."

"....."

"If I win the poker game, I'll join the guild of the winner. No need for a signing bonus or a position. But!"

I grinned.

"If I win, I will [simultaneously join] all the guilds represented here."

"....."

"Ah, I mean just in name. Treat me as an equal. It's good for you to exploit my image, and it's good for me to be treated on par with the leaders of top guilds. What do you think?"

Suddenly, the guild leaders' expressions changed.

"Ahaha."

The Countess burst into laughter.

"A young man who's just conquered one floor wants to be treated the same as us?"

"Yes. If I win this card game against you."

"Interesting. I'm in."

The Countess put down her coffee cup and looked around.

"What do the rest of you say?"

"I'm fine with it, provided there's no cheating!"

The Heretic Inquisitor was the first to agree.

"...We won't use skills. Otherwise, it's too advantageous for you. If caught using a skill, that person is automatically disqualified."

Then Viper agreed.

"I'm in. We can't afford to bid anyway. If we lose, we lose nothing, but if we win, it's a jackpot."

And Paladin consented.

"....."

Finally, the Witch nodded.

"Fine. I accept your offer."

The gamble was set.

We discussed the detailed rules of poker. The rules were standard, with the top rankers meticulously checking to ensure there were no tricks or cheating involved.

'Sword Emperor.'

As the cards were dealt,

-Eh...?

'Sincerely, I really hate calling you 'Sir'.'

I called out to the still-despondent Sword Emperor.

'Let's make a deal.'

-What kind of deal...?

'Just call me 'Sir' until this game ends.'

The Sword Emperor's eyes widened.

-Really? Can I do that!?

'Yes, of course.'

I grinned.

'In return, tell me what cards these Hunters are holding.'

-Yay! Yay! Awesome!

The Sword Emperor jumped in excitement.

-That's easy! Ah, Master! You're truly magnanimous! Who else could be as generous as our Master! You want me to tell you their hands? No worries. I'll even tell you if they're cheating or not! Master!

Alright.

Let's start the game.

Chapter 21: A Moment of Leisure with a Cup of Coffee (3)

-Sir! She has a straight. Be careful.

"I fold."

-Ah. Sir, that guy is bluffing with just one pair. How pathetic. Just call and crush him.

"Call."

-Aha, you and he have the same hand, both with two pairs. But your two pairs are higher. Oh, this is going to be fun. Let's see who drops out first, Sir!

"Raise."

-Wow, this guy is aiming for a full house? Don't worry, Sir. I just peeked under the table and checked their cards. He won't make a full house even at the end. Trust me and let's go for it!

"All-in."

The poker game had gone around thirty rounds.

"....."

The man opposite me, Viper, was trembling. The one-eyed Hunter's face was turning red and blue in rage.

"Damn it! This is a scam!"

Viper stood up abruptly, shaking the table. Other Hunters, as if expecting this, lifted their coffee cups in unison, avoiding a coffee spill on the table. Impressive timing.

"It doesn't make sense! We've been playing for over 30

rounds and this guy hasn't lost once. His bluffs never fail. He's definitely using some sneaky skill! It's cheating! Cheating!"

"Do you have any evidence?"

I sipped my hot chocolate, which had now turned into a bland chocolate latte. It had its own charm.

"You're accusing me without proof. That's unfair. Please, be a little kinder, senior."

"Is this guy really registered as an F-rank Hunter!?"

Viper shouted, looking around.

"How can he be F-rank! I'd believe it if he was at least B-rank, given his sly demeanor!"

"Wow. How did you know I'm not F-rank?"

"That's right! I knew it..."

"Actually, I just advanced to E-rank yesterday. I've been too busy conquering the 10th floor to report it to the Hunter Association."

"....."

I smiled.

"Thanks for thinking highly of me. But, Viper, you're out of chips, aren't you?"

"Ugh..."

Viper turned his back and walked away with a defeated stride, joining the other eliminated players in the spectator area.

"Welcome, Viper!"

The first to be eliminated, the Heretic Inquisitor, greeted him with a bright smile.

"I thought it was about time for Viper to be out. So, I ordered another espresso for you! Don't hesitate, enjoy it."

"I hate espresso..."

"Yes! I know. You should overcome your pickiness!"

"Damn religious nut..."

In the end, only three Hunters remained in the game: me, the Black Witch from Black Dragon, and surprisingly, Paladin.

"Umm."

Paladin looked down at her cards, furrowing her brow.

The Deputy Guild Leader of the Vigilante Corps, known for her righteousness and fairness. Vigilante Corps, a guild established to maintain the order in the City of Babylon on the 1st floor of the tower, was akin to a police chief in the outside world. She was known for donating her entire fortune to orphanages.

"I'm out."

Paladin sighed and laid her cards down.

"I thought I had a good poker face. Kim Gong-Ja, do you possess a mind-reading skill?"

"Who knows? Maybe mind-reading, maybe clairvoyance. Take a guess."

"...The young ones these days are really something."

Paladin gave a wry smile, nodded at me, and joined the others in the spectator area.

"Hey! How can you give up so easily, you fool!"

Viper, already seated among the eliminated, scolded her. He had apparently spilled some espresso on his face.

"Shouldn't you cling on like a hunting dog? Are we just going to let this trickster get away?"

"Calling a new hero a trickster. That's harsh."

"Can't you see he's blatantly using his skills!?"

Paladin shrugged.

"I knew it from the start."

"What? Really?"

"Of course. It would've been strange not to know. Did you think a rookie would propose a poker game based purely on luck without any preparation? Proposing the game itself was a declaration that 'I have the confidence to beat you without getting caught using skills.' We accepted that challenge."

Viper's mouth hung open.

"Was that it?"

"Viper... Focus on martial arts is good, but use your head too."

Paladin looked at him with pity.

"From the beginning, this game was risk-free for us. Winning would be a windfall, of course. But even if we lose... Didn't the rookie say he would join all our guilds? That's also a decent outcome."

"But, but... Our pride! How can we treat a green youngster as our equal...?"

"Does pride feed you?"

Viper turned mute.

"Espresso does! Here, Viper. Finish it!"

"Damn it..."

Ultimately, the last to remain were the 2nd-ranked Hunter, the Black Witch, and me.

"....."

The Witch gazed at her cards before speaking.

"Lucky."

"What do you mean?"

"You seem to be a reasonable human after all."

The Witch bet chips. Raise. She was provoking me.

"I'm from Ukraine. Or rather, from a place that used to be Ukraine. I've been a wanderer since I lost my family in a civil war. As you know, whether in the tower or the outside world, it's tough for a woman to survive alone."

"That's true."

I willingly accepted her challenge. Reraise. I increased the bet.

"....."

After a moment's hesitation, the Witch tapped the table twice. Tap. Tap. A sign of accepting the duel. The Countess, who had volunteered to be the dealer after being eliminated, laid out the cards.

"What are you trying to say?"

I pretended to ponder, stroking my chin.

"Those who entered the tower, especially the first generation, it's harder to find someone without a story. I'm just a plain orphan."

My card hand was One Pair.

"...This tower is like my homeland."

The Witch's hand was a Flush.

"The tower doesn't ask about origins. Or rather, we've made it so. It doesn't matter that I'm from Ukraine, Viper is from China, and you're from Korea... In our tower, that doesn't matter."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. Thanks to the tower's grace, we can understand each other's words. Here, we are all equal challengers... at least more so than in the outside world."

If the game continued as is, I would lose.

But I confidently raised the bet again.

"People in the outside world treat this place like a trash can."

"It's called a trash can. Not a trash cannot."

The Witch firmly signaled a call.

"Kim Gong-Ja, the moment the sky clock hits [00:00:00], the media will flood with articles about you. A completely different life will begin. I hope you handle it wisely."

"That sounds good."

Another card flipped on the table.

"I love getting attention. I want people to praise me, look up to me, envy me. I'm serious. That's all there is to me."

My hand had changed to Two Pair.

"...You're frank. Quite the opposite of the Sword Saint."

The Witch's hand remained a Flush.

I was still at a disadvantage, but I went all-in.

"....."

"I'm confident."

I looked directly at the Witch, detaching my gaze from the cards.

"I might as well tell you all now. I don't just want your respect because I conquered the 10th floor. I plan to conquer the 20th, 30th, 40th, 50th, all the way up to the 100th floor. No matter how long it takes, I will conquer the tower."

"....."

"I understand you all cherish the tower. I respect that. I have no intention of needlessly fighting with you. However, I will consider you all as my rivals."

Who will be the first to conquer the tower?

Who will be praised as the greatest hero?

To be remembered, praised, envied, and looked up to by everyone, to build a tower of gold in their eyes.

"I want to see the world beyond the tower."

Thus, I will ascend the tower.

"I don't have time to worry about things like war refugees or food shortages, honestly. If you need my name to solve these problems, use it. Just support my climb up the tower."

That feeling of conquering the 10th floor today, the sensation of being at the top, I wanted to feel it again. I had only tasted it once, but I already seemed addicted to that feeling.

It was just that incredible!

"Ha..."

After a moment of silence, the Witch sighed.

"I was wrong. You're not the opposite of the Sword Saint; you're exactly the same."

The Witch pushed all her chips forward with both hands. All-in.

"A compliment?"

"No, it's an insult. Greedy people."

The final card was turned.

Her hand was still a Flush.

My hand... a Full House.

"Turns out it is a compliment."

I grinned.

"Thank you."

I had won.

"As promised, I look forward to being treated equally with you all."

"Can we expect you to carry the duties as much as you enjoy

the rights?"

"Isn't a Hunter's duty to ascend the tower? Don't worry. I'll continue to fulfill my duties as a hunter."

"Such arrogance in a rookie..."

The Witch smirked.

-Yeah, if there was a skill called 'Arrogance', Zombie boy here would be S-rank.

"...Are you really going back to calling me a zombie right after the game?"

-Of course, you zombie! Zombie brat!

The Sword Emperor excitedly flew around.

-Zombie! Zombie! Zombie brat! Ah, how sad it was not to be able to call this arrogant guy a zombie! Never again will I make a bet with this pretentious guy!

"Disgraceful..."

How could the so-called Sword Emperor be so disgraceful?

I shook my head inwardly and stood up.

"Leaving already?"

"Yes. The 11th floor will open soon. I need to prepare to not fall behind others."

"How can you prepare when you don't even know what the 11th floor holds?"

Hmm.

'Giving a little hint here wouldn't hurt.'

Now that I've been promised equal treatment, creating a bit of a debt would make future endeavors smoother.

I gathered my thoughts and spoke up.

"Role-playing."

"Huh?"

"The theme from the 11th to the 20th floor is role-playing."

The Hunters all looked at me, their eyes ablaze. It was natural. Even a small hint could provide a significant advantage.

"The reward for clearing the 10th floor included this hint."

Of course, it was a lie.

I hadn't received my reward for conquering the 10th floor yet. The reward would be given when the sky clock hit 00:00:00. But I already knew what was going to happen.

Knowledge of the future. There was no reason not to use it.

"That's all I know."

"...Thanks for sharing the information."

The Witch nodded.

"I'll repay this debt later."

An exciting statement for the future.

After a good night's sleep, I went to the plaza.

The city was in a festive mood, celebrating the first conquering of the 10th floor in years. Some bars were giving away free beer, and some talented individuals performed songs in the square.

"But who really conquered the 10th floor?"

The only lingering question among the people.

"There's still no official announcement..."

"I heard the guild masters gathered in one place."

"Did you see the video denying it was the Sword Saint? He seemed genuinely upset, insisting it wasn't him."

"Then who is it?"

Murmurs filled the air.

I held back my laughter.

'I'm right here.'

I was standing right in the middle of the festive crowd.

[00:02:09]

Almost a day since the 10th floor was conquered, the sky

clock's numbers were slowly ticking down.

[00:00:10]

"Ten!"

Unprompted, Hunters began counting down as the clock reached ten seconds.

[00:00:09]

"Nine!"

[00:00:08]

"Eight!"

The plaza echoed with the synchronized voices of countless Hunters. Seven, six, five... It felt like welcoming the New Year.

[00:00:04]

"Four!"

I checked the media on my smartphone.

I wanted to see if the embargo was still being respected, if there were any articles about me yet.

[00:00:03]

"Three!"

That's when articles began appearing on the media sites operated by Babylon. Maybe they were eager to get the scoop even a second earlier.

[00:00:02]

"Two!"

I browsed the articles.

-[Breaking] The Hunter who cleared the 10th floor is an unknown E-rank rookie!

-[Breaking] Real name Kim Gong-Ja, a Korean...

-[Breaking] The 10th-floor conqueror has joined several major guilds simultaneously.

-[Breaking] Official statement from the Black Dragon Guild. Welcoming the new hero...

I smiled.

[00:00:01]

"One!"

A new era had begun.

Chapter 22:

Welcome, Warriors!

(1)

[00:00:00]

The sky clock struck zero.

"Zero!"

The Hunters cheered. Many threw their hats into the air, with thousands of hats soaring in the plaza, like countless dandelion seeds swirling on a spring day.

Before the hats had even landed -

[This is a public announcement.]

A voice echoed from the heavens, addressing everyone.

[Today marks the end of the tutorial.]

Signifying that the preview had finally come to an end.

[Repeating.]

[Today marks the end of the tutorial.]

And finally, the curtain rose on the main stage!

"Wow!"

People exclaimed with excitement. Heat, passion, fervor. When had the Hunters last been this animated? Even the old man who retired to open a shop, the middle-aged who had given up ascending beyond the 2nd floor, were now cheering in the plaza.

At least for this moment, they were all Hunters.

"11th floor! 11th floor! 11th floor!"

"Open the 11th floor already!"

"Hey, have you seen the news just now...?"

Responding to their enthusiasm,

Whoosh!

The light rays forming the sky clock burst brightly. The blinding light was like the sun. Hunters squinted or peered through their fingers to gaze at the sky. I was no exception.

[Warriors, the ones who chose to climb the tower.]

[Congratulations on clearing the Hellfire Mansion.]

In the sky hovered a majestic figure, not a human but more akin to an angel or goddess, draped in white, radiating a holy light.

A scene that seemed worthy of a divine painting.

"Wow..."

"She's beautiful..."

Admiration echoed from all around. Most Hunters were captivated by the divine figure above.

-Zombie, snap out of it. That's not a goddess.

But the Sword Emperor remained unimpressed.

Sword Emperor, an entity that had climbed up to the 99th floor in a different world, was not swayed by the scene.

-It's just a system explaining the quest to you.

"Sort of like an NPC?"

-Yeah. Even if there were such a thing as a goddess, that's just a pre-recorded video. It automatically plays after someone clears the 10th floor. Tsk tsk, pathetic.

I became curious.

"How do you know that?"

-Huh? Because...

Just as the Sword Emperor was about to answer,

[Warriors! A world in need of your help is calling. That world is under the invasion of a terrifying Demon King. From now on, you will be summoned as heroes to save humanity in that world. If you wish to accept this mission, say 'Transfer'.]

Whizz!

Before the voice could finish, someone leaped into the air.

"Whoo!"

The Hunter effortlessly scaled the rooftops of buildings. 3rd, 5th, 7th floors, quickly ascending higher buildings, and finally, powerfully stepping on the bell tower of the plaza. Then, the Hunter soared high into the air.

Sword Saint, Marcus Callenbury.

"Haah!"

The current number one ranked Hunter's sword strike cleaved through the sky. Where the blade passed, the goddess figure split in two.

It was a swift and beautiful strike.

People gasped at the sudden development.

"What...?"

But it was only for a moment.

The halved illusion of the goddess quickly restored itself.

Just as cutting through water is futile, the goddess returned to her beautiful form as before.

[...If you wish to accept this mission, say 'Transfer'. Warriors. Then, you will set foot into the grand 11th floor.]

The illusion of the goddess continued to shine.

But that light was no longer holy.

A once torn deity was no longer divine.

"Hmm."

The Sword Saint landed effortlessly on the bell tower's roof. Dressed in a black suit like the first time I saw him in the bar, the elderly swordsman looked discontentedly at the sky, then slowly surveyed the plaza below.

"....."

Silence fell over the plaza.

-Hm.

The Sword Emperor commented.

-See, I used to do that too. Look. It's an NPC, right?

I was speechless.

'...Did you really have to confirm that?'

-Yeah. Isn't it natural to want to slice through something grand that appears? Isn't that human nature?

'Sigh.'

As expected, they're all lunatics. Birds of a feather flock together.

I enhanced my vision and hearing with Aura, carefully watching the Sword Saint, making sure not to make eye contact.

"Transfer."

The Sword Saint murmured softly. Woosh! A bright light enveloped the elderly swordsman, just like the goddess's light. Moments later, the Sword Saint vanished without a trace. Only the white bird droppings remained on the roof of the Italian-style bell tower.

"Ahahahat!"

Laughter broke the silence in the plaza. The Hunters turned their heads.

The source of the laughter was the Heretic Inquisitor of the Temple, the guild master of the Great Temple. He laughed heartily.

"We got beaten to the punch again! Ah! What a splendid day!"

The Heretic Inquisitor took off his clerical hat, bowing gracefully to those looking at him.

"Then, I'll see you all on the 11th floor! Transfer!"

Bright light enveloped the Heretic Inquisitor. The next moment, he disappeared. Only after watching him vanish did the Hunters belatedly realize.

"Uh..."

Both the Sword Saint and the Heretic Inquisitor had already ascended to the 11th floor.

That was the starting signal.

"Me, Transfer!"

"Transfer!"

"Transfer!"

Numerous Hunters hastily shouted "Transfer." Whoosh! Whoosh! The plaza was quickly enveloped in bright light. Each time someone shouted, a beam of light shot up. The light beams from the plaza soon multiplied into thousands, illuminating the sky.

[Warriors, the ones who chose to climb the tower.]

Even amidst this chaos, the illusion of the goddess continued to recite softly.

[From the 11th to the 20th floors, you will face trials. The trials of faith.]

The goddess brought her hands to her chest.

As if praying to somewhere.

[...You will find answers. The answers you find will reveal who you truly are. Thus, you will come to know yourselves...]

However, few paid attention to the illusion of the goddess. Everyone was busy, desperate not to fall behind others.

The few remaining people were either filming or taking photos with their cameras and smartphones.

"It's a pity."

Someone approached and muttered beside me.

It was the Paladin, the deputy guild master of the Vigilante Corps.

"A pity?"

"Think about it. Whoever, whatever being created this tower must have put in tremendous effort. Even that is a message left for us. But no one is interested."

The Paladin looked melancholy.

"It should be a moment to marvel and admire. The fact that such a tower exists, that we can use skills, all of it should be miraculous... But we've become too accustomed to everything by the 10th floor."

"You're more sentimental than I expected."

"Hm. I studied music in the outside world."

The Paladin cracked a smile.

"Does a girl who graduated from a music college seem more attractive?"

"Ah... It seems like it would be hard to make money."

"Ouch. You hit me with the facts."

We chuckled together.

The Sword Emperor quietly joined our conversation.

-Zombie, be careful. This girl is suspicious. Huh?

'Oh, what now.'

-She wouldn't approach you, a good-for-nothing, without any ulterior motives. Are you handsome or kind? No, you're subpar in everything. Aha, perfect! This girl must be a dark-hearted swindler! 100% sure!

This guy really... No, let's just drop it.

"Excuse me!"

At that moment, individuals with cameras approached us. They seemed to be internet broadcasters rather than journalists.

"Are you... Hunter Kim Gong-Ja?"

"Ah."

The Paladin showed a look of annoyance.

"It seems my presence has drawn attention. My apologies, Kim Gong-Ja. I shall head to the 11th floor first."

"Wait a minute. Did you approach me intentionally just for this?"

A suspicion suddenly struck me.

The Paladin's face revealed she was caught off guard.

"Ha-ha. I have an eye for gauging a person's true intentions."

An eye for gauging a person's true intentions? She was confident in assessing people's character?

The Paladin awkwardly scratched the back of her head.

"I wanted to see what kind of person you are, so I engaged in conversation. Think of it as a sign of interest."

"So, what kind of person do you think I am?"

"Hm. Well, the true answer lies within your heart. Transfer!"

Incredible.

She blatantly escaped.

Eventually, the Paladin left me as prey to the journalists and disappeared on her own.

-See, I was right, wasn't I? There's never a fault in my predictions!

'Shut up. You're noisy.'

As the Paladin vanished, more people crowded around me. I found myself surrounded by individual broadcasters and journalists.

"Hunter Kim Gong-Ja! Please, just a word!"

"Is it true that you cleared the 10th-floor boss alone? There's widespread speculation that your simultaneous joining of the major guilds was a pre-arranged scenario!"

"There's been an official announcement that your rank is E. Many question its accuracy. Could you confirm this...?"

"What's your relationship with the Paladin from the Vigilante Corps? You seemed quite close. Do you have a personal relationship beyond professional?"

"Hunter Kim Gong-Ja!"

Wow.

'Is this the [numerous handshake requests] that only successful Hunters get...'

Having experienced it firsthand, I could see why the Flame Emperor was annoyed by journalists.

I decided to respond with just one statement.

"I will clear the 20th floor too."

"What?"

"Thank you for your efforts. Transfer."

Whoosh!

A white light began to rise from my feet.

"Wait, just a moment! Hunter Kim Gong-Ja!"

"No! Catch him!"

"Just a few more questions-"

Sorry.

I've always thought the mysterious approach is the best.

[Those of you who choose to climb the tower.]

Right before the light completely engulfed me.

The goddess' voice echoed one last time in the plaza.

[May fortune be with you.]

Whoosh!

The light that wrapped around me faded. Slowly, my vision began to clear.

The first thing I saw was... a vast battlefield.

-Grrrr!

-Chweek! Chwee!

Monsters.

Grotesque creatures swarmed from beyond the horizon. Goblins. Orcs. Ogres. Monsters from the tutorial up to the 10th floor were now rushing together regardless of their species.

It was an overwhelming horde.

"Block them!"

"It's impossible! There are too many enemies!"

"Don't retreat! If we fall here, the empire is doomed!"

Defending against this horde... was merely a handful of soldiers.

Perhaps from an ancient to medieval civilization era? A group of soldiers clad in armor desperately defended the port. Forming a defense line with a deep river behind them, the human soldiers resisted fiercely.

"What's this?"

"What's happening here...?"

"Wow! Be careful of the arrows flying everywhere!"

Suddenly summoned to the battlefield, the Hunters were bewildered.

It wasn't strange for the Hunters to be confused. Until now,

they had only hunted monsters in 'safely prepared hunting grounds.' They had never experienced a battlefield on the brink of explosion like this one.

But from the 10th floor onwards, such scenes were daily occurrences.

'It's truly the end of the tutorial.'

A battlefield where you could be beheaded at any moment.

A fight for survival on every floor.

"Wow!"

Suddenly, someone approached the confused Hunters. It was a soldier, but not just any - his armor was quite splendid. This general exclaimed as he approached us.

"Thank you! You've come to help our empire, brave warriors!"

The Hunters stirred.

"Warriors? What are you talking about?"

"Idiot. Didn't you hear what the angel said in the plaza? About the invasion of the Demon King. We must have been assigned the role of heroes."

"I can't hear from the back!"

"Wow, is this real? Are those soldiers real humans or NPCs...?"

"Quiet down there!"

Murmuring.

While the Hunters were chattering, more reinforcements kept arriving. People pushed and shoved each other in the chaos.

"Warriors! Please help us and save our empire!"

Fortunately, a few skilled ones like me knew how

to enhance their sight and hearing with Aura. While the less skilled were lost, a few Hunters heard the general NPC's words.

"This port is the last lifeline of the empire. To keep the capital supplied, we must defend this place. Warriors from another world! Please help us defend the Aegim Empire!"

Then, a voice echoed in my head.

[A Quest for Floor 11 has been given.]

Text appeared before my eyes.

+

[Defend the Port]

Difficulty: F~A

Mission Objective: A calamity has befallen the Aegim Empire. The Demon King. A being of legend has finally raised an army. It cunningly, viciously, and powerfully seeks to cut off the empire's supply route.

Defend the port!

This battle will be the first step in saving the empire.

*However, if defeated in battle, the 12th floor will not open.

+

Seeing is believing.

"A quest...?"

"See, I told you. The Demon King really did appear."

"Where is the Aegim Empire?"

Until a moment ago, the Hunters were disoriented, but they began to grasp the situation. Some silently drew their weapons, while others formed teams with their comrades.

And some Hunters launched their sword attacks toward the goblins.

"Indeed."

The Sword Saint at the forefront sheathed his sword and murmured.

"I'm not sure of the details. But it seems we just have to defeat them."

Then, the Sword Saint plunged into the frontline.

The Hunters who had been hesitating now roared in unison.

"Woah!"

"Good! Follow the Sword Saint!"

"Damn goblins! I've beheaded thousands of your kind over six years!"

Thousands of Hunters charged with weapons in hand, followed by thousands more. The defense force quickly grew in numbers.

As the war turned into a free-for-all...

"Okay."

I smiled from the rear.

Because I heard a voice that other Hunters couldn't.

[Welcome, Hunter Kim Gong-Ja.]

[Receiving Floor 10 clear rewards.]

That was my exclusive privilege – a voice informing me of my special perks.

Chapter 23:

Welcome, Warriors!

(2)

[Normal Stage Reward.]

[You are blessed by the Goddess of War's protection!]

[You have access to the map of the tower from the 11th to the 20th floor.]

Swoosh.

A translucent map appeared before my eyes. Was it some kind of mini-map?

Red and blue dots were chaotically intertwined across the map. Judging by the terrain, the red dots represented monsters, while the blue dots seemed to indicate human troops.

-Tsk, tsk... As expected, a cheat-like privilege!

The Sword Emperor grumbled, his face contorting.

-While others are crawling on the ground, you're just looking down from the sky. Ugh. Yes, always rely on your wits and not on hard-earned skills. This tower is a classic case of the rich getting richer, and the successful becoming more...

However, the Sword Emperor couldn't continue his rant.

[Hidden Stage Reward.]

[You are blessed by the Goddess of Humanity's protection!]

[You can observe the names, abilities, and locations of all NPCs from the 11th to the 20th floor.]

-...Eh?

The notification of privileges wasn't over yet.

[Hidden Stage Reward.]

[You are blessed by the Goddess of Wealth's protection!]

[Select and own one item that exists from the 11th to the 20th floor.]

Swish!

Lists appeared next to the mini-map. One listed the names and abilities of NPCs. The other clearly revealed the names and effects of items.

"....."

"....."

We were at a loss for words.

"Kill them! Push back calmly!"

"Kyaaak! Goblins are throwing spears!"

On the frontline, Hunters were fervently engaged in battle. Orcs howled, and human soldiers bled. Amidst the noisy battlefield, only silence descended between the Sword Emperor and me.

The silence soon broke.

"Ah. This is truly a skill-and-luck based game..."

-Fucking bullshit RNG!

Our reactions were a mix of admiration and screams.

Theme.

Each floor of the tower has a designated theme.

Maybe it's easier to understand if I say genre.

From the 1st to the 10th floor, it's literally [Tutorial].

Hunting grounds are prepared, and there's even a city where you can rest at your leisure. It's a phase for newcomers to get accustomed to the tower.

And from the 11th to the 20th floor...

'Demon King Invasion Story.'

Or a Demon King and Hero story.

It could also be considered a defense story, given the objective of protecting the empire of humanity.

'It's about repelling the armies of the Demon King that swarm like dogs.'

What's important is that the nature of the battles changes from what we've experienced so far.

Monsters no longer roam alone like in the beginner's

hunting ground. They form groups. They form units. They create armies.

There are only two ways to defeat a monster army.

'Either become a powerful one-man army strong enough to devour the entire army -'

I looked towards the frontline.

The Sword Saint was slaughtering monsters while scattering blue Aura.

'-or lead an army yourself in battle.'

I smiled.

'This time, I choose the latter.'

I've just received an extraordinary privilege.

Leaving such an immense privilege unused would be a loss.

Of course, I didn't have the knack for leading an army. I'd never done it before, so it was natural. But where there's a will, there's a way.

I was confident I could develop new talents.

"Status window."

Before diving headfirst into the battlefield, I first checked my current status.

+

Name: Kim Gong-Ja

Rank: E

Skills (5/5)

1. I Want to Become Just Like You (S+)

2. Returner's Winding Clock (EX)

3. Sword Constellation (A+)

4. Goblin High Society (F)

5. Only You Can Prevent Fire (A)

*Goddess of War's blessing is being applied.

*Goddess of Humanity's blessing is being applied.

*Goddess of Wealth's blessing is being applied.

+

Good.

I smiled and spoke.

"Hey, Sword Emperor. Did you just curse the game as a luck-based crap game?"

-Yes, I did! You rotten zombie!

"Let me show you why I called it a game of skill and excitement."

I first pulled up the NPC list.

According to the Human God's blessing, numerous NPCs were neatly listed.

+

[Enju] Position: Conscript / Location: 11th floor, Port City Kungur

[Karia] Position: Regular Soldier / Location: 11th floor, Port City Kungur

[Sort] Position: Peasant / Location: 13th floor, Baronial Territory Panbasa

[Rafa Casabella] Position: Sergeant / Location: 14th floor, Horome in the Wall Canyon

[Dop] Position: Blacksmith / Location: 12th floor, Imperial Capital Hakamunia

.

.

.

+

Tens, maybe hundreds of thousands of names appeared on the list.

So far, it was nothing but a chaotic jumble.

But.

"Display NPCs located on the 11th floor only."

The list began to move on its own, as if understanding my command.

Minor names disappeared as if being deleted, leaving only the NPCs located on the 11th floor, reappearing in a newly organized list.

+

[Enju] Position: Conscript / Location: 11th floor, Port City Kungur

[Karia] Position: Regular Soldier / Location: 11th floor, Port City Kungur

[Cort] Position: Sergeant / Location: 11th floor, Port City Kungur

[Amalgam] Position: Conscript / Location: 11th floor, Port City Kungur

•

•

•

+

I continued to speak without pause.

“Sort by highest skill level. Display only the top 100.”

-Huh.

The Sword Emperor let out a short gasp, clearly realizing my intention. His mood shifted from mere grumbling to genuine urgency.

-Wait a minute! Zombie! This is not right. Let's grow stronger step by step, shall we? Slowly train, accumulate skills, learn swordsmanship -how good does that sound?

“That can wait.”

-Eek! Even if you're a cunning one, this is crossing the line! Aren't you ashamed to bear the title of a noble?

“Hmm. No, not really ashamed?”

Regardless of what the Sword Emperor said, the list moved according to my command. The characters in the air scattered and then came together again.

The newly formed list appeared.

+

[Rohan Panbasa] Position: Panbasa Knight Commander

[Sarbast Aegim] Position: Commander of Kungur Front

[Jeshua Camancha] Position: High Knight of the Imperial Knights

[Tomund] Position: Chief Senior Soldier of the Shield Unit

•

•

•

+

Almost there.

Ignoring the Sword Emperor's outburst, I shouted.

"Display NPCs with command skills! Top 3 only!"

-Aaaah! Aaaaah!

Exactly.

I didn't have the knack for commanding an army.

But what's the issue?

If I lack the skill, I can simply steal it from other NPCs!

+

[Sarbast Aegim] Position: Commander of Kungur Front

[Rohan Panbasa] Position: Panbasa Knight Commander

[Sain Camen] Position: Regimental Commander of the Shield Unit

+

From a list of hundreds of thousands, only three names

remained.

I gave my final command.

"Display the locations of these three on the map."

-Cheater!

[Goddess of Humanity's blessing] scattered the names, turning them into green lights that merged into the mini-map provided by [Goddess of War's blessing]. Perfect. The map now displayed the locations of NPCs with command skills.

"Okay. Show my current position!"

Finally, my own location was added.

"See? It's all about application. People can turn decent privileges into extraordinary ones with just a bit of ingenuity. It's all thanks to my strategic thinking."

-Making noise! It's not strategy, just manipulative cunning!

“Hehe. Cunning is also a skill.”

Preparations complete. No reason to hesitate now.

I quickly ran to the nearest NPC indicated on the map. Fortunately, it was nearby. The general who had welcomed us as "heroes" upon our arrival was the NPC with the best command skill.

“General Sarbast Aegim.”

“Hmm? Oh, the hero from another world. What brings you here?”

The general, in the middle of issuing orders to his subordinates, turned to look at me. His mustache was impressive. His skills must be impressive too.

-Get away!

The Sword Emperor shouted.

-Run away, you foolish NPC! This guy is not a hero, he's a swindler! If you get caught by him, he'll drain you dry!

A swindler, huh.

This ghost really turned Korean after spending a few days with me.

“General, I have a request.”

“Speak! Thanks to you heroes, what seemed like a hopeless battle is now showing signs of hope. If it's within my capacity, I will gladly fulfill your request.”

“I need you to kill me.”

The general's eyes widened.

“What do you mean?”

“...I have a secret technique. It's a kind of self-destruction. If I die, divine protection will descend upon the entire

battlefield. If the blessing is activated, the empire will surely win.”

I tried to look as solemn as possible. Surprisingly, making a grave expression was easy. Just recalling being burnt to death by the Flame Emperor naturally made my face stiffen and my voice solemn.

-Lies! This zombie has no such self-destruct technique!

Hush.

Let's just ignore the ranting ghost of a loser who died just shy of the 100th floor.

“No matter how much it grieves me, I cannot do that!”

“General Sarbast Aegim. Think about what's more important. Whether you draw your sword or not, I'm going to commit suicide. This is the surest way to help the empire.”

I spoke with a grave face.

“I'm asking you for a favor.”

“A favor...?”

“The general, burdened with the responsibility of this harbor, desires the empire's victory more than anyone. Rather than killing myself or dying at the hands of evil monsters, I'd like to entrust my life to you, the battle commander.”

“.....”

“There's no time. Please!”

The general's face turned miserable.

"Even if I must strive for the empire's survival, to take the life of a hero who has come from another world with great effort..."

-Hey. Hey! Do you believe this? Oh, man! How can you believe this? Of all the trustworthy people in the universe, why trust this zombie Kim? Really?

"Oh. Our world must be truly cursed. The advent of the Demon King, only spoken of in legends, the ceaseless onslaught of monsters. And now, having to take the life of a hero – it's all a curse..."

-The curse is the level of your brain!

"Ah, dear God. Do not forgive our sins..."

The general lamented like a protagonist of a tragedy, then took hold of his sword's hilt. With a swish, a seemingly luxurious blade was revealed.

"...At least, I will send you off with a clean, painless cut."

"Thank you."

I was genuinely grateful.

I didn't mind dying, but I disliked pain.

"Please tell me your name."

"Kim Gong-Ja."

"Kim Gong-Ja... On behalf of the empire, I thank you. You are a true hero!"

The sound of the sword cutting through the air.

As promised by the general, it was a clean beheading. The aura-infused blade cleanly severed my neck.

[You have died.]

[Randomly copying a skill from NPC Sarbast Aegim.]

As expected, it was possible to copy a skill from an NPC.

As my head was severed and consciousness rapidly faded, I heard the Sword Emperor's scream.

-Stop dying, damn it! Do you enjoy stealing skills this way!

I mentally replied.

‘The noble says it's sweet as honey!’

Another thrilling day repeated.

Chapter 24:

Welcome, Warriors!

(3)

There is a saying.

Above one who runs, there is one who flies.

Here's another saying.

Next to a hunter who wields a sword, there's a hunter who commands soldiers.

These are the words of Lord Confucius*.

*Gong-ja means Confucius in Korean.

"Hey, what's that!"

"Uh? By the looks of it, isn't that one of our hunters?"

In the midst of battle. Hunters, busy swinging their swords, turned their heads. Distracting oneself in the middle of a fight with monsters was dangerous. Fortunately, the hunters could afford to glance away momentarily.

I personally created that opportunity.

"Hero!"

The general glanced back and shouted.

"Is this the right direction?"

The general's body shook. Mine did too. And for good reason -we were both riding the same horse. The general spurred on his steed, while I sat behind him.

Although the ride was horribly uncomfortable, the feeling

was exhilarating.

"Absolutely. Just keep going straight and turn right – you'll find the Demon King's legion commander there. There are some monsters around, but don't worry. Just sweep them away."

"Oh! Understood!"

Why? Because behind the general and me, a thousand soldiers were following.

"All troops, follow me!"

The general raised his baton.

"Hero sent by the Goddess, protect us!"

"Uoooh!"

The soldiers roared and followed the general. A breakthrough attack! The soldiers, who had been defensive

until now, pushed through the monster horde. Goblins and orcs were struck down effortlessly.

"Heh."

It was the effect of the minimap.

I had advised the general to target areas where the monsters were fewer.

"Ah. Turn right here."

"Understood! Hero!"

Of course, gaining the general's trust wasn't just due to the minimap. Thanks to repeating today, several preparatory steps were necessary.

Let's talk about witnessing the general's trauma when gaining the skill some other time.

'Status Window.'

Now is the time to focus on the battle ahead.

First, the skill. The skill I had acquired was as follows:

+

Name: Kim Gong-Ja

Rank: E

Skills (5/5)

1. I Want to Become Just Like You (S+)

2. Returner's Winding Clock (EX)

3. Sword Constellation (A+)

4. Goblin High Society (F)

5. Battlefield Insight (B)

+

'The new skill is war-related.'

[Battlefield Insight] was, as the name suggests, an ability to assess the battlefield. Whether our side was at an advantage or disadvantage, where to strike the enemy for a breakthrough - all this became intuitively clear.

In short, it allowed me to pose quite convincingly as a specialist.

'But the skill isn't everything.'

I grinned and raised my sword.

It wasn't an ordinary sword. Nor was it the dagger I had used for suicide. A blade emitting a holy light, the hilt adorned with a lion's open mouth. As I drew it, soldiers around gasped in awe.

"The Goddess has blessed us with her light!"

"The holy sword of our ancestors... Ah, the gods have not forsaken our empire!"

"Long live the empire! Long live the hero!"

Indeed.

This sword was the final piece of the puzzle needed to command the army.

An item chosen through the blessing of the God of Commerce.

+

[Leafanta Aegim's Holy Sword of Protection]

Rarity: Legendary

Description: 'He who seizes the holy sword, shall conquer the continent.' The legendary ancestral sword of Aegim. Rumored to be bestowed upon the founder of the Aegim Empire by the Goddess. 'He who conquered the continent, shall be seized by fate.'

The founder named his successor and then disappeared. Suicide? Betrayed? In a time when legend and history had not yet diverged, his whereabouts became unknown, and the holy sword vanished without a trace. Leaving only a prophecy as a guide.

'On the day destiny arrives, he who seizes the holy sword shall also arrive.'

The owner of the Holy Sword of Protection receives absolute support and trust from those of the Aegim Empire.

+

The legendary item was phenomenal.

"Long live the empire! Long live the hero!"

"O Goddess, protect us!"

"Attack! Sweep away those filthy monsters!"

The soldiers charged with renewed courage.

"Kyaa."

To the soldiers, my skills and I were nothing short of a legendary hero. Though the real commander was the NPC general, and I was just an advisor... It felt as though I was directly reigning over the soldiers.

I felt uplifted.

'This is it. This is it. Ah, this is great. Just witnessing such a scene makes the effort of conquering the hidden stage worthwhile, doesn't it?'

-You trash, using an item like that!

As I soared high, the Sword Emperor ranted.

-It's just a sturdy, shiny sword!

'Tsk tsk. Such a bleak perspective from a ghost. It's a sturdy, shiny sword that makes NPCs go crazy from the 11th to the 20th floor. Got it? NPCs aren't just tools for giving quests.'

A simple change in perspective.

'They're beings to be used in completing quests!'

And this perspective indeed worked.

While other hunters were sweating and struggling in battle, I was enjoying a breezy ride through the battlefield with the general.

"What is that...?"

Every time we passed near the hunters, someone was dumbfounded. There were even looks of shock.

"Why is he alone with the general?"

"Is that an NPC?"

"Wow. Wait. He seems to be giving orders to the general..."

"No, look at his clothes. He's a hunter!"

"Who is that person...?"

Voices of astonishment, doubt, jealousy, and envy.

Typical reactions when humans look up to another human.

'Ah.'

I was intoxicated.

'This is it. This is what I've been looking for. Ah, it's incredible.'

-...This lunatic. You learned aura and instead of training

with the sword, you enhanced your hearing to eavesdrop on gossip. Gong-ja, you're truly something... a real zombie.

'Seriously, what's wrong with enjoying it!'

The assault was successful. The monster army was falling swiftly.

In a desperate attempt to stop us...

"Huff!"

To our left, the Sword Saint, leading a group of skilled hunters, was slaughtering orcs.

"Ahaha! Oh, what a touching day! A new battle! A new era! How much-"

"Shut up! If you have time to yap, kill another goblin!"

To our right, the Heretic Inquisitor, along with Viper and members of the major guilds, were making a mark.

The enemy's flanks crumbled. There was no reserve force left to stop our breakthrough. Clatter! Clatter! Under the hooves of the cavalry, goblins' heads were crushed, and orcs were impaled on spears.

"We can win!"

"Follow the general! Follow the hero!"

Charge! And another charge!

Before long, a breach appeared in the enemy lines. We had almost reached the location of the Demon King's legion commander. The minimap marked the legion commander with a particularly red dot.

-Gurgle.

Looking ahead over the general's shoulder, I saw a giant goblin hesitating in the distance.

'Huh.'

I inwardly scoffed.

'A giant goblin is the enemy commander? Really?'

Sure, it would be stronger than the great goblin I had killed on the 5th floor. It commanded a horde of thousands of monsters. But no matter how strong a goblin gets, it's still just a goblin. A cavalry charge would easily sweep it away.

Besides...

[Activating skill.]

I had a skill specialized for goblins.

-Gurgle! Gur!

The giant goblin raised its staff, rallying the nearby monsters. Perhaps in human language, it would translate to something like, 'Block those bastards! Idiots!'

To this giant goblin, I yelled.

"Gurrlle!"

In a perfect Goblin language!

-Gurk?

"Grrrle!"

-Gurk?

The giant goblin was visibly confused. As the leader faltered, the surrounding monsters fell into chaos. Meanwhile, our side continued to charge. What might have been the last hope to stop us vanished. Clatter! Clatter! Under the hooves of the cavalry, goblins' heads were crushed, and orcs were impaled on spears.

-Gorrle!?

The giant goblin frantically moved around. It seemed to realize it had been tricked.

But it was too late.

I swung the Holy Sword vigorously, infusing it with aura.

“A good gurrle!”

The holy sword sliced through the goblin like cutting through tofu. Ding! The blade momentarily caught on something, probably the monster's neck bone. The goblin couldn't even let out a proper scream as its head flew off.

“Ooh!”

The general slowed down the horse and shouted.

“The hero has slain the monster!”

It wasn't directed at me. It was for the soldiers to hear. The general put aura into his voice, striving to make it resonate even amidst the noisy battlefield.

Immediately, the adjutants riding along with us caught the

general's intention.

“The monster has been slain!”

“The hero sent by the Goddess has defeated the enemy leader!”

From the general to the adjutants, from the adjutants to the regimental commanders, and from them to their soldiers, the voices resonated and echoed, and the echoes thundered across the battlefield.

“Uoooh!”

The regiments waved their flags in response. Cheers and jubilations. On the battlefield where comrades were falling and monsters were rushing in, the soldiers finally rejoiced.

“.....”

I dismounted from the horse and looked around.

My eyes met with a standard-bearer. He seemed to have lost his left arm in the heat of battle. With his remaining right arm, he waved the flag. As our eyes met, the one-armed standard-bearer smiled broadly and raised the flag even higher.

The sun poured down on the sun-bleached flag.

"Long live the Aegim Empire!"

We had won.

"Purge the remnants!"

"Attack! Attack! Don't let a single one escape!"

The tide had completely turned.

-Keurk, keurr...

-Grrr!

The once ferocious monsters began to flee.

“Huh?”

“Look at these guys.”

Then, the hunters’ eyes changed. If it were a battle between armies, it might be different, but chasing down scattered monsters was a hunter’s specialty. The hunters bared their teeth and pounced on the goblins and orcs.

“Kill them all!”

It was time for the hunt.

The massacre didn’t last long.

Soon after, a voice as vast and clear as the echoes on the battlefield resonated in our heads.

[Stage Clear!]

[Today, the 11th floor stage has been cleared.]

It was a voice of victory.

[Once again announcing to everyone.]

[Today, the 11th floor stage has been cleared.]

Cheers erupted.

“Wow! Is this real?”

“Aren’t we too strong?”

“Long live the Black Dragon Guild!”

This time, not the soldiers but the hunters shouted in jubilation. Just like they had in the square, some hunters threw their hats in the air, and some embraced each other.

Clearing the 11th floor in less than a day!

It was an incredible achievement and a tide-like advance.

[Assessing raid participants... Assessment complete.]

[The raid has exceeded the participant limit.]

[Selecting the top 10 contributors.]

The hunters looked up.

Names were being etched in the sky in light.

+

[Raid Contribution Ranking]

1st. Kim Gong-Ja

2nd. Sword Saint

3rd. Heretic Inquisitor

4th. Viper

5th. Paladin

6th. Black Witch

7th. Countess

...

...

...

+

Familiar names appeared one after another.

However, as the list neared completion, the hunters began to murmur intensely.

“Huh? The first place has no alias?”

“Sword Saint is second?”

“Kim Gong-Ja...?”

My name hadn't been out in the media for long. It was understandable that people were bewildered. But the confusion was short-lived. Someone in the crowd shouted.

“Ah, it's the 10th-floor conqueror!”

“That's right! The conqueror of the 10th floor was named Gong-Ja!”

“A hunter without an alias from the tower in first place again?”

“Could it be some sort of reclusive expert or something?”

Hearing the people's whispers, the Sword Emperor looked puzzled.

-Well, look at that. A reclusive expert? Just a sly guy who's good at scheming...

‘You do acknowledge it's a skill-based game now, right?’

-I can't! I won't!

The Sword Emperor turned away, seemingly upset that I wasn't practicing swordsmanship. What to say about this ghost... He heavily favored basic skills over skills.

I let out a bitter smile.

‘I'll train in swordsmanship before we finish the 20th floor, so cool off.’

-Really?

The Sword Emperor perked up.

‘Yes, of course. Why wouldn’t I? I’m accompanying the Sword Emperor himself. How could I end it without learning anything? I should be begging you to teach me swordsmanship.’

-That's right!

The Sword Emperor started to circle in the air, rejuvenated.

-Ha, finally you recognize my worth, zombie. Though the tower you’re climbing is slightly different from mine, I soared through it in my world. The 11th floor was just light warm-up exercise for me...

Ah, it's easy.

This ghost was so simple to appease.

How could it be this easy?

"Hero sent by the Goddess."

While watching the Sword Emperor float, the general approached. He was covered in monster blood, but his face was clean with a neat smile.

"Thanks to you, we were able to win. I truly, sincerely thank you."

"It's nothing. We all worked together to win."

"Ahaa."

The general scratched his cheek awkwardly.

"I was worried for nothing."

"Pardon?"

"A long time ago, an oracle came from the temple. The Demon King would come, but so would heroes from another world, so don't worry... I was skeptical. Would heroes, not

even from this world, really fight hard for us?"

The general smiled.

"But it was unnecessary worry. Let me express my gratitude again."

The general extended his hand.

A handshake. Despite the different worlds, the meaning of clasping each other's hands seemed similar. Whether in this world or ours, humans have two hands, right?

"I look forward to your continued impressive performance."

"I'll try my best."

We shook hands.

[Assessing clear rewards... Assessment complete.]

[Rewarding the top contributors.]

Then, along with the voice, light enveloped me.

Not just me. Lights shot up here and there across the battlefield. One, two, three, four... Ten beams of light shot up into the sky.

[The top contributors will be given early entry into floor 12.]

[Until the top contributors receive their rewards, the remaining participants cannot enter floor 12.]

[Once again announcing to everyone. The top contributors...]

As expected.

The 10 who contributed the most to the raid received the rewards first. I felt sorry for the hunters who narrowly missed 11th or 12th place, but it was a quite reasonable system.

Right before I was completely engulfed in light, the general said.

"Please take good care of our empire."

And then, we were summoned to floor 12.

Volume 2 – Chapters 25-49

Chapter 25: The Chosen Ones (1)

Just as the dazzling light was about to envelop us, the Sword Saint hurriedly spoke.

-Hey, wait. If only the top 10 are being summoned separately, wouldn't Marcus be there? If he sees you, he'll flip out and attack, what will you do?

'Ah, don't worry. What's the worst that can happen? I'll die?'

-You, Kim Zombie...

The Sword Saint seemed about to nag further, but I quickly added,

'I have a plan, so it's fine. Don't you know? I'm Kim Gong-Ja, the sly fox acknowledged by the Sword Saint! Just trust me.'

-You have a plan?

‘Of course! A solid one. I’ll show you in a moment.’

-Hmm.

The Sword Saint crossed his arms, still displeased.

But whether he liked it or not, it was too late. The summoning had begun, and a white light completely enveloped us. Whatever the outcome, I had no choice but to face the Sword Saint.

I closed my eyes, and,

[Transfer complete.]

when I opened them again, I was already summoned to the 12th floor.

It was a place completely different from the 11th floor. Opposite, to be precise? If the 11th floor was a fierce and dirty

battlefield where life and death were at stake, the 12th floor was a luxurious and lavish palace. The imperial palace of the Aegim Empire.

‘...Or maybe not.’

I looked around.

‘In terms of fierceness and dirtiness, palace politics might be the same.’

In the audience hall of the imperial palace, the other top contributors were being summoned one after another. Some were unfamiliar, but most were hunters I met yesterday, like the Witch and the Countess. Not surprisingly, they were the leaders of the major guilds.

I caught eyes with other hunters.

“Oh?”

“Hmm.”

Their reactions varied. Some smiled broadly as if to say, 'I knew you would be here first,' while others frowned, seemingly surprised at my top rank.

“Hunter Kim Gong-Ja! You were amazing!”

The Heretic Inquisitor belonged to the former.

“I enjoyed watching your performance on the 11th floor! Using NPCs like that. I was moved!”

The Heretic Inquisitor scurried over. His short stature made him look like a puppy rushing towards me.

“Is the sword at your waist a special item? After seeing that sword, the NPCs started following you without hesitation. Did you receive it as a reward for clearing the 10th floor?”

“Well. Yes...”

“Exactly!”

The Heretic Inquisitor looked up at me with a beaming smile.

“Using the reward from the 10th floor to lead the way through the 11th floor. Your adaptability is impressive!”

“Ah, well, it wasn’t really that big of a deal...”

“From now on, many people will be jealous of you. They might treat you as a lucky upstart. Ignore them! It’s all your skill!”

Uh.

What's with this person? An angel?

-Hey! Kim Zombie! You idiot!

The Sword Saint suddenly shouted.

It was different from his usual teasing tone. It was an urgent cry.

-Be careful! Right now, behind you...

At that moment, before the Sword Saint could finish his sentence, everything happened.

“Hmm.”

The first to react was the Heretic Inquisitor in front of me.

The Heretic Inquisitor, who had been all smiles, narrowed his eyes and grabbed my wrist, pulling me. My posture wavered and crumbled. One step. The Heretic Inquisitor pushed me back and stepped forward in my place.

“Holy Technique, God of Flesh.”

It was a whisper from the Heretic Inquisitor. Clang! The sound of steel fiercely colliding with something echoed. It wasn't just any steel.

A sword.

A stroke of a sword imbued with clear killing intent.

“Ahaha.”

The Heretic Inquisitor laughed.

His eyes, however, were not smiling.

“Surprising, Sword Saint. When did you change professions to an assassin?”

“Move aside.”

The well-dressed elderly gentleman, the Sword Saint, spoke coldly.

He was holding a long sword, pointing it at us.

No, I misspoke.

“I will kill that man.”

Not at us, but at me.

Silence enveloped the audience hall.

Electricity seemed to flow in the air, tingling my whole body.

“Hmm.”

Only the Heretic Inquisitor remained unfazed.

“Excuse me, but when you say 'that man,' are you referring to Hunter Kim Gong-Ja?”

“Indeed.”

The Sword Saint replied.

“If you don’t move aside, I may have to take off one of your arms as well.”

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled subtly.

“That would be quite inconvenient! I can’t afford to make way for you right now. Hunter Kim Gong-Ja is acknowledged by the Temple of the Omnipotent God and the five major guilds. Leaving him to die here would be disgraceful for the guilds!”

“So, you intend to lose an arm, young one.”

“Ah, that too is problematic! My arms are still quite useful.”

The Heretic Inquisitor tilted his head, still smiling.

“May I ask why you are targeting Hunter Kim Gong-Ja?”

“I have no obligation to tell you.”

“No intention of backing down, then?”

“Stop talking and move aside.”

The Sword Saint firmly refused.

Right. From the old man’s perspective, I was a murderer who killed over four thousand people. Without knowing about my skill, the Sword Saint had no choice but to act like this.

“I repeat, I will kill that man.”

“Hmm! Then there's nothing I can do.”

The Heretic Inquisitor joined his hands together.

“I will subdue you here. Holy Technique, God of Teleportation.”

At that moment, light burst behind the Sword Saint. Bam! Bursting through the light were two hunters.

The leader of the Chun-Moon Guild, Viper, and the vice-captain of the Vigilante Corps, Paladin. These two well-known

fighters shouted their battle cries. They swung their weapons at the Sword Saint's back.

“Haaah!”

The Sword Saint frowned.

“Annoying flies...”

He clicked his tongue. In the time it took to click his tongue, a single sword strike flew. A blue aura sliced through the air, creating a small blood spray. Two strikes. With just two strikes, the Paladin had a wound on his cheek, and the Viper had a gash on his arm.

“Th-this monstrous old man!”

It was a lightning-fast skirmish.

“How come an old man like you is so spry? Eat less, please! Retire already! You’re stifling the youth like me!”

Viper yelled, fuming.

The Sword Saint let out a small snort.

"There's an old saying that goes like this: behind every strong man, there's an even stronger one."

The Sword Saint, Marcus, spoke sharply. "You're over 40 yourself, aren't you? To the truly young, you're just as old."

"Don't joke! Being in the 40s is just the prime of life! It's practically the true beginning of life..."

The Viper, the leader of the Chun-Moon Guild, was interrupted by the Paladin, a leading member of the Vigilante Corps. "You're old, face it! You look older than you are!"

"Haah," sighed the Paladin.

"Focus on the enemy in front of us, Viper. We're in a disadvantageous fight."

Despite his sigh, the Paladin remained on guard. Actually, he seemed even more alert. The Heretic Inquisitor, the Viper, and the Paladin, three top rankers, were surrounding the Sword Saint, yet he stood tall and alone.

"Hmm. This is indeed a disadvantage."

The Heretic Inquisitor seemed to realize the current situation as well.

He cheerfully called for reinforcements. "Countess!"

"Why?"

"Lend me some money!"

"How much do you need?"

"Thankfully, the Sword Saint hasn't lost his sanity. A brief restraint should suffice. I need 10,000 gold, please!"

"15% interest. Compounded."

The Countess, who had been quietly watching the fight, unrolled a fan.

"Three-month interest-free installment. Would that be acceptable?"

"Ahaha! You misunderstood me! I didn't ask for a loan. I asked for a donation."

"How dare you demand a donation from a merchant?"

"Yes! It's dirty money anyway. Donate it to the temple and go to heaven!"

"You're a worse robber than I thought..."

The Countess shook her head and pulled out a bag with a snail pattern.

"Withdraw, 10,000 gold."

The bag opened its mouth, and countless gold coins poured

out. The bag itself must have been a rare item. As the coins piled up, the Countess gathered the bag.

"Here you go, priest. Exactly 10,000 gold."

"I'll take it!"

The Heretic Inquisitor gleefully joined his hands together.

"Holy Technique, God of Donation!"

The spilled gold coins emitted light. The golden light filled the hall, and the Heretic Inquisitor quickly moved his hands, muttering.

"Holy miracle, physical enhancement. Target, Paladin. Viper. Duration, 300 seconds each. The gold will bind our hands. Completed!"

"Hmm."

"Che..."

Then, something strange happened. The gold coins vanished without a trace.

Instead, the light from the coins moved onto the Paladin and the Viper. They were surrounded by a golden aura. "Now," announced the Heretic Inquisitor, "for the next 300 seconds, the Paladin and the Viper will be significantly transformed. Sword Saint! Even someone as strong as you will struggle against us four!"

"..."

"Plus, the Countess's coffers are still far from empty. It's uncertain whether her coffers will run out first or your head will be taken first. If you want to test it, feel free to!"

The Countess, standing afar, pursed her lips.

"Why involve my coffers in your test? I simply donated because the priest asked. Oh, how hard it is to be a merchant, whether outside or in the Tower..."

"Let me add one thing."

The cold voice flowed from the Black Witch, the 2nd rank hunter and the leader of the Black Dragon Guild. She broke her silence.

"The combined attack won't end with just four of us. I, too, will participate. Hunter Kim Gong-Ja yesterday formally made an agreement with all five major guilds."

The Sword Saint furrowed his brows.

"An agreement?"

"Yes, an agreement."

The Witch nodded.

"Hunter Kim Gong-Ja joined all five guilds without being tied to any specific one. In return, we promised to treat him as equal to a guild master. Sword Saint. If you point your sword at Hunter Kim Gong-Ja, it's the same as attacking us all."

"..."

"Of course, by 'us,' I mean the five major guilds."

The Witch took out a mirror.

"Black Dragon. Sang-Ryun. Temple of the Omnipotent God. Chun-Moon. Vigilante Corps."

The mirrors floated and circled around the Witch like protective dogs.

"Are you really prepared to face us all, Sword Saint?"

Five hunters pointed their weapons at the Sword Saint.

".."

The old swordsman remained silent.

That's right.

'No matter how fearsome the Sword Saint is.'

At this moment-.

'He's not strong enough to make enemies of all five guilds.'

I made an agreement with the guild masters for this moment.

I might become stronger than the Sword Saint someday. But that day wasn't today or tomorrow. Until then, I had to have a plan.

I smiled inwardly.

'Do you see? This was my plan. Now, be amazed.'

-Tsk. As expected of a sly fox...

The Sword Emperor sighed.

But he didn't seem too displeased, knowing that I hadn't ascended to the 12th floor without a plan. He's always been one to worry.

I stepped forward.

"Sword Saint."

The hunters in the audience hall turned their attention to me, including the Sword Saint. I deliberately smiled to show confidence.

And I looked directly at the Sword Saint.

"Let's have a conversation?"

Listen well. It's a word from the master himself.

Chapter 26: The Chosen Ones (2)

"...A conversation?"

"Yes. Frankly, I'm quite perplexed."

In the audience hall of a palace, inspired by some empire's royal court, on the 12th floor stage, my voice softly flowed.

"I don't understand why the Sword Saint is attacking me. Although the Sword Saint is seeing me for the first time, I have always admired your noble swordsmanship. But now you draw your sword against me, and it's quite troubling."

The Sword Saint's expression hardened.

Even though I was speaking nothing but the truth.

'It can't be helped.'

The old man's face had hardened for a reason.

On the night the Sword Saint and I first met - a night he probably no longer remembers - he accused me:

-Were you sent by the Black Dragon as a top-class assassin?

-I don't know if it was the Black Witch from the Black Dragon or who hired you, but I will kill you with all my might!

He suspected me of being an assassin.

'An assassin raised by the Black Dragon.'

Even now, the Sword Saint probably harbors the same suspicion. I'm perceived as an assassin employed by the Black Dragon. Or rather, he might suspect even worse.

'Perhaps a top-class assassin secretly nurtured by the five major guilds.'

-Hmm. Well.

The Sword Emperor nodded in agreement.

-From a third-party perspective, you do seem rather unusual.

'Exactly that.'

An unexpected hero appearing out of nowhere!

A mere E-rank hunter conquers an invincible stage. Immediately after the conquest, he forms an agreement with the five major guilds and is promised treatment equal to that of a guild master...

'It's too suspicious.'

-Right. To Marcus, you're not a self-made hunter. You're a fake hero created by the major guilds conspiring together. Tsk.

The Sword Emperor clicked his tongue.

-You said your kill count was about 4090, right?

'Probably around 4093 by now?'

-Right. To Marcus, that number 4093 doesn't just represent the humans you've killed. Because you're not a lone hunter, but a puppet raised by the major guilds.

From the Sword Saint's perspective, it could only be seen that way.

-In short...

'Yes.'

A collusion.

'The major guilds used me to assassinate that number of people.'

The major guilds, reigning over the tower.

They have been secretly assassinating at least 4093 humans.

It was a mere misunderstanding and delusion, but to the old swordsman, it was a most repugnant sight.

"Huh."

If the Sword Saint had been a slightly less righteous old man, he might have backed down here.

"Whether it's the outside world or Babylon, they're much the same."

However, the Sword Saint knew no compromise.

He knew, yet refused.

"Ever since I entered this tower, every day, you all have been throwing your offers at me. You kept insisting to join a guild. But I firmly refused. Do you know why?"

The Sword Saint gripped the hilt of his sword tighter. His

hands were old. The skin sagged. But the bulging veins under the skin were not old at all.

A lion's mane may age, but its teeth remain sharp.

"In this tower, in this new world, I wanted to show that one can reign supreme alone. That one can succeed solely on their talent and effort."

"..."

"Such was the hope I intended to give to many people, and that's why I have not joined any clique until now. But what are you all doing?"

The Sword Saint pointed his sword.

"You all are nothing more than stagnant, rotten muddy water."

The guild masters stirred.

Anger. Humiliation. Resentment.

Dark emotions swirled on the guild masters' faces. The Sword Saint's recent remarks were a declaration of war. While some, like the Heretic Inquisitor, remained unaffected and smiled, most guild masters' expressions soured.

"Sword Saint. You, of all people, should not be saying such things..."

"Ha! Have you already forgotten how you skipped out on conquering the 5th floor all by yourself? Old man. It seems your head's gone senile!"

"And you too. Mr. Callenbury. If you had used your connections in the outside world, the current food shortage would have been much less severe, and our Sang-Ryun would have..."

The uproar boiled over.

The hunters gathered here had known each other since the tower's early days. Was it because of the accumulated emotions? The atmosphere in the audience hall quickly turned murky.

"You should have shown the attitude befitting the number one rank. But you lived alone, thinking only of yourself. If you hadn't been so proud, do you know how many hunters could have been saved?"

The Black Witch cursed.

"Not just the 5th floor, but the 7th and 9th too. If only you had cooperated, the losses would have been halved!"

Viper from Chun-Moon Guild spat out venomously.

"As a member of a wealthy family in the outside world, if you had lent a hand, our current situation would have been much more stable. You say we are like stagnant muddy water? Then you're nothing more than a responsibility-shirking child."

The Countess from Sang-Ryun glared bitterly.

A complete mess.

The guild masters' curses, murderous intent, and glances met the Sword Saint, who only slightly furrowed his brow. His dismissive comment only added fuel to the fire.

"Be quiet."

"..."

"Adults like you are babbling on and on... Do you think I'm your grandfather? Shut up. If you want to fight, use your swords."

The atmosphere in the audience hall became uncontrollably hostile.

-Bravo! That's Marcus for you, my one and only disciple.

The Sword Emperor alone admired, oblivious to the mood.

-Hunters talking about connections and politics is the most annoying. If they have time for that, they should swing their swords more!

He had a point.

But...

I felt regret, unlike the Sword Emperor.

"It's sad that even among just ten of us, there are fights."

The hunters in the tense atmosphere looked at me.

I sighed.

"Even the NPCs of the 11th floor fought together to protect their empire. But look at us. We, the hunters, are pointing fingers and arguing who's more at fault. Isn't that a bit shameful compared to NPCs?"

"...Hunter Kim Gong-Ja."

The Black Witch spoke up.

"This is none of your business. It's more serious than you think..."

"I understand. But as hunters, shouldn't we focus on what we need to do?"

I looked around the audience hall.

"Let's focus on clearing the 12th floor."

"..."

"Being a beacon of hope and reducing sacrifices in conquering the tower are noble, but please, let's focus on clearing the stage in front of us."

I particularly looked at the Sword Saint.

"Even if they are just NPCs... their empire is in danger of extinction, right? They're asking for our help. If the summoned heroes, instead of caring for the empire's wellbeing, are just squabbling among themselves, what kind of farce would that be?"

"You..."

I was sincere.

The Sword Saint couldn't threaten my life anymore. The disparity in power was clear. So, my focus now was only on how to clear the 12th floor.

The complex emotional battles and political fights among hunters were of no concern to me.

"What's so hard about being a hero? Solving problems that others can't – that's a hero. We've cleared the 11th floor, so let's clear the rest too."

"Kim Gong-Ja is right."

Fortunately, someone responded to my words.

The Paladin.

The Deputy Guild Master of the Vigilante Corps stepped forward.

"Although it's hard to understand why the Sword Saint attacked Kim Gong-Ja, it's clear that now is not the time for us to fight each other. Everyone's too heated."

" ... "

" ... "

The Paladin tried to mediate, but no one relaxed their guard. Not the Sword Saint, not Viper, not the Countess, not even the Heretic Inquisitor. Everyone was prepared to attack if necessary.

It seemed mere words wouldn't convince them... everyone was too deep in distrust.

"Ha."

Realizing this, the Paladin sighed.

"Alright. I'll make a sacrifice."

As the word 'sacrifice' came up, the hunters looked his way.

In the focused attention, the Paladin softly chanted.

"Open Skill Card."

A soft light emerged from the Paladin's hand. Shortly after, a silver card appeared in the air.

A card that could never be seen by others unless the owner permitted. It was the Paladin's skill card.

"...Deputy Guild Master."

The Black Witch looked worriedly at Paladin. Top-ranking hunters rarely ever revealed their skill cards. A skill was a hunter's secret weapon. Revealing it to others was akin to scoring an own goal.

"It's fine. It doesn't matter."

However, the Paladin calmly flipped the card.

"Everyone, take a good look."

[Lie Detection]

Rank: A-

Effect: You can detect whether someone is lying or not. This applies to people, NPCs, and monsters alike! However, what the other party believes to be 'true' might objectively be 'false'. Is it trust or doubt? The final decision is always up to you.

*However, there is no guarantee that people will believe what you say.

+

I was taken aback.

'Lie Detection!'

This was the skill that the Flame Emperor once falsely claimed to possess. Indeed, it wasn't the Flame Emperor but the Paladin who had it.

'It's a skill perfectly suited for the deputy guild master of the Vigilante Corps!'

The Vigilante Corps was a guild maintaining law and order. Naturally, the tower was rife with criminals. Just look at the Flame Emperor and the Sword Saint, who tried to kill me away from prying eyes.

In such a world, [Lie Detection] would be immensely useful in identifying criminals.

"As you can see."

The Paladin spoke while holding the card.

"I have the ability to detect lies. It's the skill that helped me rise to the position of deputy guild master of the Vigilante Corps. Sword Saint."

"...What is it?"

"If you trust me, ask Kim Gong-Ja anything right here. I will tell you if his answer is a lie or the truth."

The Paladin looked back and forth between the Sword Emperor and me with a neutral gaze.

"Kim Gong-Ja, the same goes for you. If you trust me, I will vouch for whether your answers are lies or truths."

"..."

"Doubt is a poison that eats away at humans, and truth is the most powerful antidote. We may not be able to regain the trust we've lost so far, but at least we can cooperate on the 12th floor."

"Hmm..."

The Sword Saint stroked his beard, deep in thought.

'Wow.'

I thought to myself.

'This is brilliant!'

It was an unexpected stroke of luck. But it was the right answer. The reason I became a suspect in the first place was because of the Sword Saint's skill, the so-called [Eyes of a Detective]. Since the skill had caused the suspicion, it only made sense to use a skill to resolve it!

"I'm fine with it."

I responded immediately.

Being the first to accept it put me in a more advantageous position.

"...Paladin girl. You are the only one here who hasn't harmed a single person. Very well. I will trust you too."

The Sword Emperor accepted it with a meaningful statement.

The Paladin nodded.

"Both parties have agreed. Then, Sword Emperor, please ask Kim Gong-Ja any question. I will fairly verify their conversation, staking my honor and the reputation of the

Vigilante Corps."

"Hmm."

The Sword Saint glared at me.

His face was resolute, as if he had been waiting for this moment to expose my heinous crimes to the world. It was a look of assured victory.

-Ah, dear...

The Sword Emperor let out a wail.

-Ah, my Marcus! Old stubborn man. This is why I always say not to rely too much on skills. Those who live by the skill, perish by the skill! Ah, dear, dear.

'Be quiet.'

Unfortunately, the Sword Emperor's voice didn't reach the Sword Saint. He was my ghost after all.

"Hunter Kim Gong-Ja."

"Yes."

"You have killed over 4000 humans. Isn't that right?"

The old man pointed his finger at me dramatically, as if to say, 'Now, your evil deeds will be unveiled to the world!'

I smiled.

"Yes."

"Oh, look at that! You wretched beings. You employed this lad as an assassin and committed atrocities. I will reveal this to the world and..."

"It's a lie."

The Paladin stated.

"What?"

"It's a lie."

The Paladin repeated calmly.

"Kim Gong-Ja said 'yes' to your question. That answer was a lie. To clarify, Kim Gong-Ja did not kill over 4000 humans."

"..."

"Are there any more questions?"

Silence.

The Sword Emperor remained silent, while the Paladin tilted his head.

"But 4000? Strange. Is it even possible for one person to kill that many? Logically speaking, it seems near impossible."

"That's because you all... raised this young man as a top-class assassin..."

I laughed brightly.

"Right. I am a top-class assassin."

"It's a lie."

"..."

The aged swordsman's mouth hung open in shock.

"Pa-Paladin girl. I misjudged you! I trusted that you would mediate without deceit, but..."

"Whether to trust my words or not is up to you."

The Paladin replied steadily.

"Believe it if you want, or don't if you don't. Didn't I ask the same question to both of you from the start? Will you really trust me?"

"..."

"To change your words now would be... petty. No, very petty. Sword Saint, that's not like the attitude you usually show."

"Wa-wait!"

The old man looked at me desperately.

"Surely you must have killed at least one person!"

"Ah. Yes. I have indeed eliminated someone."

The Paladin nodded.

"That's true."

"See!"

"But it was just one person."

"...What?"

The Paladin nodded again.

"That's true."

" ... "

"Of course, killing one person doesn't change the fact that I am a murderer. But, Sword Saint, I can tell you this much. I killed him because he truly deserved it. He tried to kill me first."

"That's true."

"No, it would have been better if he only tried to kill me. He was a mass murderer. A mass murderer! I even witnessed him committing murder, burning people alive without batting an

eye! That wretched man!"

"That's true."

"I bet he killed dozens, no, hundreds of people. Yes, he would do that. I killed such a man. Call me a murderer all you want. But you know what? If I could go back, I'd deal with him first. Ah, how can a person be as vile as he was!"

The Paladin slowly nodded.

"It's all true."

"..."

The Sword Saint fell silent.

He slowly looked around. The look on his face said he didn't understand what was happening, but looking around probably helped him grasp the situation.

Because all the guild masters were looking at the Sword

Saint with a '...what are you doing?' expression.

"Ahahaha! Ahahat!"

The Heretic Inquisitor burst into laughter, holding his stomach.

"Kim Gong-Ja, a top-class assassin of our 5 great guilds! What an interesting idea. It would have been great if it were true, but, Sword Saint! Unfortunately, we only met Kim Gong-Ja yesterday!"

"And that's also true."

"..."

The Sword Saint's silence deepened.

-Tsk tsk tsk. The one who thrives on skills perishes by skills.

The Sword Emperor only clicked his tongue.

"Hmm. Anyway, I've answered your questions."

I grinned mischievously.

There was nothing wrong in the words of the young master.

"Apparently, there was a big misunderstanding between us. I'm glad it was just a misunderstanding. But, Sword Saint. Because of that misunderstanding, you attacked me, and if the guild masters hadn't protected me, I would have likely died unfairly."

" ... "

"I think I deserve an apology at this point. What do you think?"

The Paladin nodded.

"An impeccable truth. Not a bit exaggerated or biased."

" ... "

"Apologize to Kim Gong-Ja, Sword Saint."

The old man's face became pale.

Chapter 27: The Chosen Ones (3)

"I... I am..."

After a long pause, Sword Saint finally spoke.

The hunters were watching him. The old man's lips were parched.

"I have to tell Kim Gong-Ja..."

Here, Sword Saint had much to say.

Above all, he did not have to trust the Paladin. There was no reason to. Although the Paladin was famously upright and fair, she was still a power player in one of the 5 great guilds. Why should he trust her?

'I've been fooled by all of you conniving together!'

Sword Saint could have been furious.

Or... rather, Sword Saint could have revealed his own skill card. [Eyes of a Detective]. The ability to see the other person's kill count. Revealing his own skill to others was not a wise choice. But it was sufficient as an excuse.

'It's not because I'm an old fogey that I doubted Kim Gong-Ja. It's all the skill's fault! The skill tells me so, what can I do? It's only natural to trust one's own skill rather than hastily trusting others.'

People tend to distrust others or make excuses when they have done wrong.

'There are psychopaths like the Flame Emperor who just kill their opponents.'

Distrust. Excuses. Silencing.

Just as the Flame Emperor chose [Silencing] and proved himself a psychopath... Sword Saint's choice would also

determine what kind of person he is.

It was just such a story.

"Uhhh."

Sword Saint licked his lips.

And he made a decision.

"Your name was Kim Gong-Ja, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"If you truly did not massacre innocent people... No. No, that's not it."

Sword Saint shook his head in the middle of speaking.

The old man sheathed his sword. Shrrrng. As the sword was

sheathed, sighs of relief echoed around the audience chamber. The hunters surrounding Sword Saint relaxed a bit. Amidst this, Sword Saint straightened his tie.

"Let me speak again."

The old swordsman bowed deeply.

"I am truly sorry."

The old man apologized.

"I was wrong. I thought too simply and misunderstood easily... Thus, I almost killed someone too easily. Until now, I believed that those who deserved to die must be eliminated from the earth as quickly as possible, based on my own judgment. And I have killed according to that belief."

Sword Saint bowed his head a little lower.

"However, from now on, such a thing will not happen again."

His voice was low in the audience chamber.

"Merely apologizing in words is useless. If there is anything you desire, I shall grant it... If only I could say that, it would be splendid."

A self-mocking tone tinged his low voice.

"Please forgive me for taking a life. I beg of you. I still wish to live. To reach the top of this tower... I've made a grave mistake, and I nearly killed you. Yet, can you forgive this wretched old body and let it live on?"

The palace's audience chamber fell silent.

The old man could have chosen differently. He could have distrusted the Paladin. He could have made excuses with his skill. But he did not. Instead, the old swordsman acknowledged that [maybe he was wrong].

"....."

The Paladin glanced at my face. Our eyes met. Without words, she nodded slightly. Though no conversation passed

between us, I knew what the Paladin wanted to say.

'It's the truth.'

That everything the old man said was true.

Apologizing, not killing people based on [Eyes of a Detective] anymore. Not just that, but not wanting to die.

Wanting to live longer.

So, please forgive him.

-Just like an old geezer.

The Sword Emperor murmured. But did not add anything more. Just looked at the once disciple, the old man, with a hint of regret in his eyes.

Was he leaving the decision to forgive Sword Saint or not entirely up to me?

"Hmm."

Listening to that silence, I also made up my mind.

"Sir Sword Saint."

"Yes."

"Please teach me the sword."

"....."

Sword Saint raised his head that he had bowed to look up at me.

"Well, to be precise... if I ask for a sparring match, please accept anytime. I've managed to find a swordsmanship teacher, but I still don't have a crucial sparring partner. It would be great if Sword Saint could be my sparring partner."

It was a promise I had made with the Sword Emperor on the 11th floor.

To seriously train in swordsmanship before clearing the 20th floor.

It would be fitting to have Sword Saint as a training partner here, to keep the promise.

Ultimately leading to my benefit and growth...

"....."

No.

That's not it.

That's not what I want to say.

I shook my head.

"Sorry. Let me speak again."

".....?"

"Honestly, I can forgive you without any compensation. But."

I began to speak.

"Then it would be somewhat embarrassing. It would make me seem far more magnanimous than you, Sword Saint. I'm not that great a person. It's just that... I'm modestly satisfied with the fact that a strong hunter like Sword Saint is no longer hostile to me."

"....."

"But it's embarrassing to say okay! And to forgive you after we've even come to blows. Pretending to be generous unnecessarily is embarrassing. I just don't like it. So, please teach me something valuable. Like swordsmanship."

I felt somewhat embarrassed.

No, my cheeks twitched.

"This way, I won't be embarrassed... and Sword Saint can save face."

"....."

"....."

Damn!

I didn't realize pouring out my heart would be such an embarrassing act!

My goodness. How did Sword Saint manage to ask for forgiveness, saying his life is precious and begging for it? He seems to have a strong pride. Amazing. Impressive. Can a person sincerely apologize to someone? Beg for forgiveness? I could never do it. Won't do it. I'd rather die.

"...My goodness."

The Paladin murmured.

"Incredibly... it's all true."

Silence descended in the audience chamber again.

It was heavy.

Even though it was the same silence, the atmosphere was completely different now.

"Huh."

Viper was the first to crack open his mouth.

"Really? You can ask Sword Saint for anything and you're embarrassed to show off...? So, you just want him to be your sparring partner?"

"It's hard to believe, but at least according to my skill, it's the truth."

"What? This newbie. Is he some kind of natural monument?"

Shut up before I boil you in snake soup.

"...Refreshing."

The Witch spoke with a wry expression.

"How should I put it? I'm used to seeing kids scrambling to gain even a little more advantage... Seeing someone like Hunter Kim Gong-Ja is quite rare. You've managed to survive until now."

I died. A lot.

Specifically, more than 4000 times. Happy now?

"Ahhh."

For some reason, the Heretic Inquisitor's eyes were wet.

"Truly repentant and truly forgiving! What a beautiful sight! Yes, humans constantly fight each other. But paradoxically, that's why they can endlessly forgive! A true holy miracle! Ah,

everyone. I-"

"Shut your trap."

At Viper's word, the Heretic Inquisitor really shut up.

It was a surprising miracle.

"Uh, it seems like things ended well for both of you. But, does that mean my 10,000 gold was just wasted?"

No one paid attention to the Countess's lament.

I sighed. I really craved a strong drink now.

"Anyway, that's it. Sword Saint. There's no need to start sword training right away. Just join me when I ask for it. Please be my sparring partner."

"....."

Sword Saint said nothing for a while, just stared straight at my face. Then, suddenly, the old man slowly opened his mouth.

"Like this,"

The old man's lips trembled along with his mustache.

"To misunderstand such a kind young man like this!"

"Uh..."

"Oh! You asked to be taught the sword. Asked to be a sparring partner. Of course! Yes, indeed! I'll be your sparring partner anytime!"

Thump. Sword Saint grabbed my hands with both of his.

"Uh, Sword Saint?"

"Call me Grandfather Marcus!"

"What?"

"How old are you, young man? Hmm. Judging by appearance, you're not yet 30. I left a very kind granddaughter in the outside world. A child with a gentle heart. If she enters the tower, I'll actively promote your charms to her!"

"No, really, it's fine..."

I wasn't interested in romance. More than that, my hand hurt. It hurt.

Not just for show as the top-ranked, Sword Saint's grip strength was tremendous.

"What? Are you saying you're not interested in my granddaughter?"

"Uh. Yes. Sorry, but not just Sword Saint's granddaughter, I'm not really interested in romance right now..."

"Ah-ha! That would be terrible!"

My grip strength leveled up by one.

"In youth, the spring breeze of love should naturally blow. You don't necessarily need to marry. But romance is essential! Through romance, you see sights you've never seen before, and you learn a lot of things you didn't know! Ahem. Most importantly, you discover how far you can fall!"

"Ah. Yes..."

"Do you know how important it is to realize one's own ugliness? Let me tell you about my experience. It was when I was 16, when I still took the world lightly. But after meeting a girl my age..."

Huh?

This gentleman suddenly became awfully bothersome.

His face was too close. I could see the pores and blackheads on his nose.

Honestly, it was uncomfortable.

I wished he would back off.

-Didn't I tell you he's an old geezer?

The Sword Emperor clicked his tongue.

-Whether for better or worse, he's an old geezer. Do you know what that means? It's someone who doesn't listen to others. Gramps just doesn't listen. To put it nicely, he has his own principles. To put it badly, he's so set in his ways that he's almost ascended to heaven.

I had no idea.

Nor did I want to know.

"Anyway, don't worry. Young man! From now on, I will take good care of you. Ah, do you need an allowance? I've piled up so much money in the Sang-Ryun vault that I can't even manage it all."

"Uh, I can earn my own money. Besides, an allowance? I'm a fully grown adult..."

"You're dressed so shabbily! Ah, people must be neat in their clothing for their minds to be clear. I know a tailor with excellent skills. How about getting a suit tailored!"

What is this?

Is this also a kind of [Countless Handshake Requests]?

Receiving kindness from the current top-ranked hunter should normally be a cause for joy. But I wasn't happy. Instead, I was severely embarrassed. It felt like listening to a real grandfather bragging about his grandchild.

Why should I bear this embarrassment?

'Should I just commit suicide and start the day over?'

-You're insane...

That was the moment.

[Welcome, Hunter Kim Gong-Ja.]

[You have conquered the 11th floor in 1st place.]

A voice echoed in my mind.

As if waiting for my battle to end.

'Ah.'

I reflexively looked around.

Most were sighing in relief. Grateful that Sword Saint had peacefully stopped the fight. It seemed that no one else had heard the voice yet.

'I'm first!'

A smile formed on my face.

'I don't know why, but there was very little information about the floors from 12 to 20.'

Was there media control? I had no way of knowing the details. However, before my 4000 deaths and return, while other floors had extensive information available, the 12th to 20th floors notably had little.

It seemed like the major guilds had united to forcibly hide information.

[You will receive the 11th floor's clear reward.]

I soon learned the reason.

[The Goddess of Protection offers you a reward.]

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain offers you a reward.]

[Please select one of the two rewards.]

'What?'

I blinked in surprise.

'Choose a reward?'

I had not heard such a voice in the previous stages.

Responding to my surprise, a selection window floated up before me.

+

[The Goddess of Protection]

Description: The goddess who protects the Aegim Empire is moved by your dedication! She has decided to entrust you with an important position in the empire.

You can become the Prime Minister, the Grand General, or the Commander of the Knights of the empire. Choosing a position will also grant you the abilities and reputation associated with that position!

Warrior of the goddess! Join forces with your fellow warriors.

And destroy the Demon King's core located on the 20th floor!

*However, if you choose the Demon King's reward, you cannot choose the Goddess's reward.

+

I read the reward carefully.

I nodded.

'This is exactly as I knew it.'

Role-playing!

Hunters actually become part of the Aegim Empire and act accordingly. Some can become the empire's Prime Minister, others the Commander of the Knights.

It's not just about filling a position. If you're the Commander of the Knights, you inherit the abilities and reputation that come with it.

[Displaying the special class you can choose on the 12th floor.]

And hunters who conquered the previous stage with high ranks were rewarded.

The right to choose a 'special position' one step ahead of others!

+

[Prime Minister of the Aegim Empire]

[Grand General of the Aegim Empire]

[Finance Minister of the Aegim Empire]

[Foreign Affairs Minister of the Aegim Empire]

[Commander of the Knights of the Aegim Empire]

[Captain of the Imperial Guards of the Aegim Empire]

•

•

•

+

A dazzling array of prestigious positions lined up.

'Wow.'

I admired them in my mind.

'In the past, I could only choose roles like Guard A...'

I had reached the 12th floor before my regression, but the situation then was entirely different. Not only the position of

the Commander of the Knights, but even roles like the Captain of the Guards had been monopolized by the upper-middle rankers.

But now?

'The stage rewards are really impressive.'

I could choose to be the Prime Minister or the Grand General of the empire.

What a drastic change.

The saying "strike while the iron is hot" couldn't be more true.

'...But what's this reward from the Demon King?'

I shifted my gaze.

There, I saw content I had never seen before.

+

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain]

Description: The Demon King admires your achievements. The Demon King proposes you secretly collaborate with them. The Demon King promises the same rewards as the Goddess but adds an additional gift.

Kill all the top 10 Heroes except yourself!

Then, the Demon King will use his power to transfer you directly to the 99th floor.

*However, only 1 among the top 10 will receive the Demon King's reward.

*If multiple people choose this reward, only 1 will be randomly selected.

*If no one chooses, the Demon King's reward will disappear.

+

"....."

I was at a loss for words.

As I belatedly reacted, two voices overlapped in my mind.

'What?'

-Huh?

Sword Emperor and I.

We blinked and read the Demon King's reward again.

But the sentences remained the same.

[Kill all the top 10 Heroes except yourself!]

[Then, the Demon King will use his power to transfer you directly to the 99th floor.]

It was clearly written.

I looked around. Sword Saint, Witch, Heretic Inquisitor, Countess, Viper, Paladin, and other top-ranked hunters who were already familiar to me stood there.

'To kill all these people...'

And clear up to the 99th floor in one go?

I swallowed hard.

Finally, the voice echoed again.

[Hunter Kim Gong-Ja.]

[Please choose one of the two rewards.]

Chapter 28:

Autumn Rain of Blood (1)

Silence lingered.

It was a silence that only the Sword Emperor and I seemed to feel. The Demon King's reward. The 99th floor. I read the Demon King's reward over and over again, the words about being transported directly to the 99th floor echoing in my mind.

-It's a trap.

The Sword Emperor cut into my thoughts.

-Definitely a trap. Zombie, don't be fooled.

'I know... Of course, it's a trap. Obviously...'

I murmured to myself.

It was clear that the Demon King's reward was a trap.

Because...

'Flame Emperor would have chosen the Demon King's reward without a second thought.'

The precedent set by the legendary psychopath, Flame Emperor - Yoo Soo-Ha.

'Flame Emperor would have definitely chosen the Demon King's reward. He would have thought nothing of killing other hunters. Yet... he's still lingering around the 40th floor. This means...'

I carefully pondered.

'The Demon King's reward is a trap. Probably the Flame Emperor initially chose it, then realizing it was a trap, he must have returned. I don't know exactly what the trap is but...'

However,

'...Honestly, it's tempting.'

My heart throbbed.

'An opportunity to obtain the skills of the 99th floor boss monster. This.'

Even if the Demon King's reward was just a trap, Flame Emperor and I were fundamentally different. Unlike Yoo Soo-Ha, I didn't need to defeat the boss monster.

Just let the boss kill me and bingo.

'If it's the boss of the 99th floor, it would be the second most powerful after the 100th-floor boss...'

I couldn't deny my greed.

'The 99th floor.'

How much time would it take to reach the 99th floor normally?

One year? Five years? Ten years?

Maybe even more. Even the Flame Emperor, who ruthlessly killed his way up, took ten years to reach just the 40th floor. And now.

To reach that in one go.

-Gong-Ja.

The Sword Emperor stared at me intently.

-Don't do it.

It was a voice I'd never heard him use before.

The Sword Emperor looked at me seriously.

-Look at me. I am the Sword Emperor. I alone climbed to the 99th floor and failed. From my experience, this is a trap. A disgustingly vile trap.

"....."

-It's hard for you to kill the top 10 rankers with your current strength. And even if you manage to kill them, there's a problem. You absolutely cannot break through the wall of the 99th floor, no matter how hard you struggle. Just give up cleanly.

I remained silent.

Was it because he was the only one who had ever breached the 99th floor in this tower? The Sword Emperor's words were filled with steely conviction.

'Is the boss monster of the 99th floor that strong?'

The Sword Emperor grimaced.

-There isn't one.

'What?'

-There's no boss monster on the 99th floor. Instead, something far more malevolent awaits... Ugh, I'm getting flashbacks. Anyway, it's a trap!

The Sword Emperor turned his back and sat down. He seemed like a child sulking for not getting candy. I was a bit taken aback.

'What's waiting on the 99th floor that you react like this? You're scaring me. Is it not a monster but something like a demon god?'

-Hmph. I'm not telling you!

I spoke out of turn.

He really was like a child.

-As much as I hate to admit it, Zombie, you're doing well. Just keep doing what you've been doing. Then you'll be able to clear the 99th floor eventually.

"Hmm."

I sank into thought, fiddling with the hilt of the dagger at my waist. The dagger I relied on for over 4000 suicides. The one I used to kill Yoo Soo-Ha. Just a cheap dagger, but handling it calmed my mind.

'Okay.'

I made a decision.

'I'll abandon this run.'

The Sword Emperor perked up his ears.

-Abandon?

'Yes. I'll only choose the safest routes. Forget about profit and rewards. Just to understand how things play out.'

-You're going to give up on both profit and rewards? What about the [Goddess's Reward]? Why? You don't have to go that

far.

'It's fine. It's a step back for a leap forward.'

Sometimes, you need to take a step back to move forward.

I slowly began to speak.

"Everyone."

The hunters in the audience chamber turned towards me.

"Right now, I have the 11th-floor stage reward before me."

"That's good."

The Witch was the first to respond. Perhaps because she hadn't seen the [Goddess's Reward] and [Demon King's Reward] yet, she was as expressionless as usual.

"I was getting bored waiting for the quest. Once you choose your reward, the rest of us can select in order. Take your time choosing."

"Yes. I've already made up my mind."

In front of the top-ranked hunters, I declared.

"I will not choose any rewards."

Silence fell over the audience chamber. Even the Heretic Inquisitor and Viper, who had been playing with cards, looked at me. After a brief silence, the Witch frowned.

"What?"

It was too late.

[You chose not to select the stage reward.]

[You will not be able to choose a special class.]

[If you forfeit the reward, you can only choose roles from the 13th floor onwards.]

[Are you sure about your decision?]

I answered with firm resolve.

"Yes. I, Hunter Kim Gong-Ja, will not select any reward."

Whoosh!

The selection window before my eyes shattered. But that wasn't all. In my mind, a sacred voice and a gloomy voice echoed one after the other.

[The Goddess of Protection questions your choice.]

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain chuckles softly.]

The hunters looked stunned.

"Kim Gong-Ja? What are you doing...?"

"Hmm."

That's when Sword Saint narrowed his eyes. His experienced gaze swept through the air. In the order of conquering the 11th-floor stage, I was first, and Sword Saint was second. Now, following me, Sword Saint read the [Goddess's Reward] and [Demon King's Reward].

"Indeed. I understand. The safest choice."

Sword Saint looked at me.

"But was it necessary to completely forfeit the reward? Young man. It's just this old man's concern, but by being too cautious, you might end up hesitating."

"Thank you for your concern. But I have no regrets."

"Hmm. As long as you have no regrets..."

The old man sighed. The other hunters watched our conversation with bewildered faces, not understanding what was going on.

"...No."

Sword Saint shook his head.

"Still, giving up the reward entirely seems too cautious. Sorry, young man. I will choose the Goddess's reward. And I will become [Commander of the Knights of the Aegim Empire]."

Creeeak!

The moment Sword Saint made his decision, the grand doors of the audience chamber opened. A group of knights marched in. Dressed in splendid silver armor, the knights reached the old man and kneeled on one knee.

"We swear allegiance to the empire's highest sword!"

"Oho."

Sword Saint looked down at the knights with interest.

"So this is how the roles are assigned."

"Hm? Ah? Really?"

Next was the Heretic Inquisitor, ranked third in the stage conquest. The Heretic Inquisitor scratched his head, then exclaimed, "Ah!" as if he finally understood the situation.

"I see! It's similar to a mafia game."

Of course, except for me, Sword Saint, and the Heretic Inquisitor, the other hunters were still clueless. The Witch furrowed her brows.

"...I don't understand what you're all talking about."

"Don't worry! I'll explain it right away!"

The Heretic Inquisitor spread his arms. Click. Click. Characters began to carve into the smooth marble floor. The

Heretic Inquisitor used his aura to inscribe the text on the stone.

"Everyone, take a look!"

The hunters gathered to look at the floor.

+

[The Goddess of Protection]

Description: The goddess who protects the Aegim Empire is moved by your dedication! She has decided to entrust you with an important position in the empire.

•

•

•

+

The hunters murmured among themselves.

"What?"

"99th floor? Is this real...?"

There was little reaction to the Goddess's reward. But when it came to the Demon King's reward, the guild masters' complexions changed. They were noticeably shaken.

Especially the Witch, her face darkened.

"This is..."

"Yes! It's similar to a mafia game! For convenience, let's call those who choose the Goddess's reward [Heroes] and the one who chooses the Demon King's reward a [Traitor]."

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled.

"But there's a crucial difference. [Traitors] are much more at a disadvantage compared to Mafia! [Heroes] are as many as 9, whereas [Traitors] can be at most 1. Plus, we have the Vice-Captain of the Vigilante Corps with us!"

The Heretic Inquisitor pointed at the Paladin.

The Paladin looked down at the marble floor with an impassive face.

"Think about it! The Vice-Captain has the [Lie Detection] skill. Ahaha. In a Mafia game, it's somewhat like the role of a cop. Even if someone here chooses the Demon King's reward, it's okay! The Vice-Captain can quickly expose who the [Traitor] is!"

"Hmm... That's true."

The Paladin slowly raised her head.

"As long as you all trust my words."

"In any case, this is a game overwhelmingly favorable for the [Heroes]! Hunter Kim Gong-Ja. Your decision to forgo the

reward is a bit of an overreaction!"

The Heretic Inquisitor adjusted his hat.

"To have conquered the 11th floor in the first place and not receive any reward. Hmm! It's a judgment I find hard to comprehend. While I respect your decisiveness, I will choose [The Grand General of the Aegim Empire]!"

Screeech.

The grand doors of the audience chamber opened again. General NPCs, cloaked in red capes, entered majestically. The generals stopped in front of the Heretic Inquisitor and saluted powerfully.

"We pledge our allegiance to the empire's loftiest banner!"

"Ah, excellent. I sincerely appreciate your service!"

The generals lined up behind the Heretic Inquisitor.

This was the deciding factor.

"Tch. I hate using my brain for this kind of stuff. Anyway, choosing a reward is beneficial, right? Then I'll choose [Captain of the Imperial Guards]."

Viper also chose.

"Then, I will choose [Foreign Affairs Minister]. It seems the most unproblematic."

The Paladin also chose.

"...[Prime Minister] is mine. Please, I beg you, don't choose the Demon King's reward. If no one chooses it, the reward will automatically disappear. The smartest thing to do is to just let it vanish. Remember that, everyone."

The Black Witch also chose.

"Don't worry. Hmm. Well, naturally, I'll be [Finance Minister]."

The Countess also chose.

Every single hunter present had chosen their reward.

Before long, the audience chamber was filled with NPCs. Bustling with noise. Behind Sword Saint, who chose the Commander of the Knights, lined up a knight brigade; behind the Witch, who chose the Prime Minister, lined up a series of officials.

-Wow.

In the vast audience chamber, only one place was empty.

Behind me, there was no one, leaving an open space.

-You're really the only one who didn't receive a reward. Are you okay with that, Zombie? Even if you're throwing away this round, isn't this a bit too much?

'No.'

I was certain.

Maybe it was the instinct of a hunter.

'This is the right answer.'

Knowing when to pounce on prey and when to retreat without a fight.

I...

[The reward settlement is now complete.]

Felt that now was the time to step back.

[All top contenders have completed their selections.]

[Kim Gong-Ja, Sword Saint, Heretic Inquisitor, Viper, Paladin, Witch, Countess...]

The voice echoed in the audience chamber.

The hunters exchanged glances as their names were called.

[1 person has forfeited the reward.]

People turned to look at me. I was the only one who had publicly forfeited the reward. The voice was tantamount to testifying that I had not benefited at all.

The hunters momentarily wore expressions of 'really not receiving any reward,' and then...

[8 have received the Goddess's Reward.]

Their faces hardened.

[1 has received the Demon King's Reward.]

The hunters looked at each other.

[Total of 10.]

[All top contenders have completed their selections.]

[Once again, to inform you.]

Silence followed.

[1 person has forfeited the reward.]

[8 have received the Goddess's Reward.]

[1 has received the Demon King's Reward.]

[All top contenders have completed their selections.]

It was a prolonged silence.

[May fortune be with you all.]

Crack.

The first to break the silence was the sound of someone grinding their teeth.

"How foolish...!"

The Guild Master of Black Dragon. The 2nd-ranked hunter. It was the Black Witch.

"I told you! Don't choose the Demon King's reward. Yet... stupidly!"

The Witch radiated murderous intent. Her face was no longer expressionless. Hatred. Contempt. Anger. Her face was twisted with these emotions, glaring at the audience with scorn.

"Fine. As the master of Black Dragon, I declare here. I don't know who dared to betray us, but I'll gift that person the most painful death."

"Hmm. Surprising."

The Heretic Inquisitor stroked his chin.

"A game that's overwhelmingly disadvantageous for the [Traitor]. Yet someone chose the Demon King's reward... As the Witch said, it's a foolish choice indeed! Ahaha. Of course, its foolishness makes it all the more human!"

"Ah... Shit."

Viper scratched the back of his head.

"Ah, I get it. I get the atmosphere. The air. It's the feeling from when we were conquering the early stages of the tower... My back and neck are freaking tense. Looks like a few will die today."

"That's true. Reminds me of the days when the 5 great guilds were actually 10. Many died back then. Killed many too, didn't we?"

The Countess fluttered her fan. Her tone was gentle, but the glare behind her fan was cold as a wild beast.

"Back then, we really died a lot. Killed a lot too. Right?"

"Shut up! Everyone be quiet. Now is not the time to get nostalgic about the past."

The Witch's expression was twisted.

"Paladin!"

"Hmm."

"Start interrogating everyone with [Lie Detection] right now. Don't leave anyone out! If even one person refuses to answer or tries to evade the question, I'll kill them right here and now!"

Everyone knew it wasn't an empty threat. The Witch exuded murderous intent, and her aura rose like mist around her. A dark, ominous aura. A color that cursed all the light in the world.

"I was planning to do that anyway."

The Paladin quietly nodded.

"First, I'll start by clarifying that I am not the traitor."

And the Paladin turned to start the interrogation.

The first person she approached was... none other than me.

The Paladin stood firmly in front of me.

"Hunter Kim Gong-Ja."

"Yes."

"You've forfeited your reward, so you're not under suspicion. You might not even need to be questioned. But I'll ask anyway. Did you, by any chance, choose the Demon King's reward?"

"No."

The audience chamber fell silent.

All the hunters watched us.

After a few seconds of silence, the Paladin nodded.

"It's the truth."

Sighs of relief were heard here and there.

The Paladin continued without rest, moving to the next person.

Step.

The audience chamber was floored with marble. The Paladin's footsteps echoed unusually loudly as she walked. We followed her movements with our eyes.

"Sword Saint."

"Speak."

"Did you choose the Demon King's reward?"

Sword Saint crossed his arms.

"Upon all my honor. Absolutely not."

"It's the truth."

Step.

"Heretic Inquisitor."

"Yes! Ask me anything!"

"Are you the person who chose the Demon King's reward?"

"I'm sorry, but..."

Amidst the silence, the Heretic Inquisitor's laughter flowed. The sound bounced off the marble floor, sliding off the armor

worn by knights and generals.

"I am not! I'm not yet ready to die by the Black Dragon Master's hands!"

"It's the truth."

Step.

"Viper. Did you choose the Demon King's reward?"

"Damn. I did not!"

"...It's the truth."

Step.

"Countess. Did you choose the Demon King's reward?"

"...I did not either."

"It's the truth."

Step.

The atmosphere gradually became heavier. When it was revealed that I wasn't the traitor, sighs of relief were heard. But as each person's truth was declared, instead of sighs, silence overflowed in the audience chamber.

Like a rising water surface.

Soon, the silence reached our throats.

"....."

"....."

The Paladin faced the Witch.

Everyone except the Witch had already been questioned. This was the last interrogation. Facing the hunter who commanded the most powerful guild in the tower and was

considered second only to the Sword Saint, the Paladin took a deep breath.

She spoke.

"Master of the Black Dragon."

"...Yes."

"Did you choose the Demon King's reward?"

Silence followed.

"No... It's not me."

Silence continued.

The Paladin slowly opened her lips.

"...It's the truth."

And finally, complete silence settled.

No.

We were submerged in silence.

"Wait... then, what?"

Viper looked around.

"Who is it then?"

The Sword Saint looked at the Witch. The Witch looked at the Heretic Inquisitor. The Heretic Inquisitor looked at the Countess, and the Countess looked at Viper. Viper threw a pleading glance at the Paladin, and the Paladin silently looked at me.

Everyone was looking at everyone else.

"Why are they all saying it's not them...?"

But no one answered.

"Damn it! Who betrayed us?!"

No one.

Chapter 29:

Autumn Rain of Blood (2)

Nobody spoke.

Amid the silence, a voice not our own echoed.

[The Goddess of Protection laments the foolishness of the heros.]

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain bursts into delighted laughter.]

This voice was not just for me; everyone's faces darkened.

Among them, the Paladin spoke with difficulty, real difficulty.

"...Calm down."

Even after saying to calm down, she remained silent for a while. She carefully considered how to proceed with her words.

"Don't panic. Yes. Maybe the traitor has a skill to hide lies. It sounds absurd, but there's also the possibility of a split personality hiding among us. Everyone has their own trump cards, right? It's not entirely impossible..."

"Or."

Thud.

Sword Saint spoke up.

His cold gaze was fixed on the Paladin.

"Or, it could simply be that you are the filthy traitor."

"....."

The audience chamber turned icy.

Sharp glances, sharper than swords, were exchanged. Until just moments ago, Sword Saint and the guild masters were engaged in a heated debate. The heat and sweat of that had not yet cooled, and yet they had already begun to conflict again.

The Witch frowned.

"Are you doubting us now?"

"That's right."

Sword Saint readily admitted.

"Even if the Paladin isn't the traitor, there's still a chance you all lied to us. You, the leaders of what are called the 5 great guilds, have been close since ancient times. Birds of a feather flock together. Aren't you all just covering for each other?"

"Really, you..."

"No need to argue!"

The Paladin shouted, a desperate voice. Sword Saint and the Witch, who had been arguing, stopped and looked at her. The Paladin tried to regain her composure as she continued.

"Of course, logically, it's possible. Yes, I could be the traitor."

"....."

"But what's important is that we all don't lose our cool and stay calm. It's okay. We have overcome numerous crises and obstacles. Haven't we? We can get through this too if we trust each other..."

"Ahaa."

Laughter flowed.

"The vice-captain is naive. No, pure."

It was the Heretic Inquisitor.

"Trust. Hmm. Trust. Such a beautiful word! But building trust takes a lot of time. It took us nearly 10 years to cooperate as the 5 great guilds. Conversely..."

The Heretic Inquisitor adjusted his clerical hat neatly.

He brushed off his outfit.

"I find it hard to trust anyone outside the 5 great guilds."

"....."

"So, it's highly inefficient to spend another 10 years building trust with other hunters now. Yes, it's a waste of time!"

"Wait."

The Paladin's voice and expression were now desperate. Her composure during the festival on the 1st floor, when she asked me if a woman who graduated from a music college had no charm, was completely gone.

"Now is not the time for efficiency. Heretic Inquisitor, please..."

"Holy Technique."

The Heretic Inquisitor quietly brought his palms together.

"God of Flesh."

A white light enveloped his hands.

"Viper. You take care of the 10th."

The light spread.

"I will take care of the 8th and 9th."

"No, Heretic Inquisitor! Don't!"

"Holy Technique, God of Teleportation."

The Heretic Inquisitor and Viper disappeared. In the blink of an eye, the Heretic Inquisitor was already behind a hunter. The one who had conquered the previous stage in 8th place. Instinctively, that hunter turned around.

"-What?"

An extra, overshadowed by the presence of the large guild masters. Not really an extra, but it's regrettable to downplay him like that. He had performed well in the last stage and thus earned his place here. Compared to my past self, he was a much more promising hunter.

But his future would never come.

"I'm sorry!"

The Heretic Inquisitor laughed gaily, his bare hands without any weapon. However, his long fingers were laced with a pure white aura.

Swoosh!

"Uh, ah...?"

A blood fountain erupted.

The hunter staggered.

Not affiliated with any major guild, not powerful like Sword Saint, nor allied with other guild masters for cooperation like me, just a hunter who had simply graduated a bit higher in the last stage, he died just like that.

Easily.

[A hero has died.]

[He was not a minion of the Demon King.]

The voice echoed in my head.

[The Goddess of Protection expresses sorrow.]

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain lets out a soft sneer.]

It was a murder that happened in the blink of an eye.

"Hi, hiiik!?"

Another hunter, who had conquered the last stage in 10th place, screamed. Fortunately, or unfortunately, he didn't need to scream for long.

Swoosh!

Teleported by the Heretic Inquisitor, Viper swung his sword. With one strike, the hunter's neck was cleanly severed, and his head fell to the floor with a heavy thud.

[A hero has died.]

[He was not a minion of the Demon King.]

Blood flowed over the marble.

[The Goddess of Protection bites her lip.]

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain roars with laughter.]

Swoosh!

The sound of a sword being unsheathed echoed somewhere.
It was Sword Saint.

"So, you finally show your true colors!"

The old man's face was distorted with rage.

"Disgusting brats! Nothing has changed from the old days!
Stop right there. If you don't, I'll personally put you down—"

"Holy Technique, God of Teleportation."

With a flash of light, the Heretic Inquisitor vanished.

The hunter who conquered the last stage in 9th place. As soon as he witnessed the deaths of those in 8th and 10th places, he ran. He didn't scream, he just ran. His caution as a hunter was evident. But as he was about to escape through the

door, the Heretic Inquisitor teleported right in front of him.

"Ah,"

The hunter reached out.

"Just, wait—"

"Yes!"

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled broadly.

"I'm sorry!"

The hunter's head burst.

He fell in the same posture he was in when he stretched out his hand and said, "just a moment." Thud. The headless body fell lightly. Blood and flesh splattered as the head burst.

[A hero has died.]

[He was not a minion of the Demon King.]

The voice flowed quietly.

[The Goddess of Protection is silent.]

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain claps his hands.]

"Hmm."

The Heretic Inquisitor took out a handkerchief from his pocket.

His face was covered in bright red blood. He gently wiped his face with a tender touch. After a few wipes, the handkerchief was quickly soaked in blood.

"All three were not it!"

Silence surrounded us.

"This complicates matters. I was certain one of the three would be the culprit! Ahaha. If it's not one of the three, it really means one of us is the culprit. The trust built over nearly 10 years among the 5 great guilds is about to collapse in an instant!"

The Heretic Inquisitor tossed the bloody handkerchief on the ground.

The handkerchief floated in a pool of blood like a paper boat.

"Wait..."

The Paladin trembled.

"I asked you to wait. I clearly said it... I pleaded for everyone to remain calm. And yet, Heretic Inquisitor, you again, just like before..."

"That's strange, vice-captain! I am calm right now."

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled faintly.

He still wasn't satisfied, as he took out another handkerchief with his right hand.

"I calmly considered that the three were the most likely culprits. It turned out to be the wrong decision, but let's focus on the fact that I eliminated the most suspicious ones first. Ah. If the media had been watching, it would have been a disaster, but fortunately, no one is filming—"

At that moment.

The handkerchief fluttered in the air.

Still unstained and white, it fluttered before falling to the ground. Before it hit the ground, something heavier fell first.

A right arm.

It was the Heretic Inquisitor's arm.

"Ah."

It was a relief that it ended with just an arm.

Had Viper not intervened to block Sword Saint's strike, what fell to the ground wouldn't have been an arm, but a head.

"Damn it...!"

Viper cursed, struggling in a fierce exchange with Sword Saint.

"Hey, religious nut! Next time, give a signal before you try to kill someone!"

"Ah, ah."

The Heretic Inquisitor narrowed his eyes, looking down at his severed arm on the ground. The white handkerchief fell on top of the arm, quickly staining red with blood.

"This is more than troublesome; it's serious. Ahaha. Without

both hands, I can't perform the Holy Technique. I apologize, everyone! I can no longer be of individual assistance!"

"Now, is that the problem...!"

Viper was visibly struggling. Sword Saint's attack was not just with the sword but also through aura, coming from all directions. Viper barely managed to block these relentless attacks.

"Somebody, damn it, help! I'm dying! Really dying!"

"Kim Gong-Ja!"

The Paladin called out.

"I entrust you with full authority! Even my power of life and death!"

It was almost a scream.

"You are the only one who didn't receive any reward! While

there's even a 1% chance that any of us could be the culprit, you're the exception! You are 100% not the traitor!"

"....."

"So, please, I beg you! Stop Sword Saint!"

Sword clashes resonated loudly in the audience chamber. Witch and Countess had joined the fray against Sword Saint. Only the Paladin stood helplessly, shoulders sagged, looking at me.

I watched the fight unfolding before me for a moment.

'Sword Emperor.'

-Yeah? What?

'...Am I destined to be loved by psychopaths?'

I had thought a mess would ensue.

The hunters already seemed to be on bad terms. If a traitor emerged, I expected them to draw their swords without hesitation. That's why I gave up on the reward in the first place.

But...

'This is a total mess...'

I sighed.

"Ah, that's a good idea. Not bad!"

The Heretic Inquisitor interrupted between the Paladin and me. He was single-handedly applying a potion to stop the bleeding from his arm. Surprisingly, he showed no sign of pain or distress.

"In this situation, a majority vote would only be a hindrance. Let's suspend the 5 great guilds' system for now. It's inefficient! It's better to concentrate power on someone who is absolutely not a traitor."

"That means..."

"Yes!"

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled broadly, holding his severed arm.

"I too will entrust all decisions to Hunter Kim Gong-Ja!"

"....."

"Ah, I was confident that one of the three would be the culprit, but I have no shame. However, what's done is done! Until we catch the traitor, I won't trust my own judgment. Hunter Kim Gong-Ja, I will follow whatever you say!"

Back Dragon Witch muttered.

-Yeah. You seem destined to be loved by psychopaths. Rarely have I seen such a lunatic. There was only about one like him when I climbed the tower.

A truly unwanted destiny.

'I've ended up being entrusted with authority by the vice-captain of the Vigilante Corps and the head of the Temple of the Omnipotent God...'

-You've made it big. Congratulations. Did you give up on the reward knowing this would happen? I was secretly admiring you for that.

'I knew it would be a mess, but who knew it would be this disastrous? What about those three who died for nothing? I guess I'll have to return once again later...'

I glanced at the Paladin.

She stood quietly, hand to her face.

"Excuse me. I have a question."

"...Yes."

Did she already know what I was going to ask? A sigh escaped from between the Paladin's fingers.

"He's always been like that."

She was obviously referring to the Heretic Inquisitor.

"When we first entered the tower, there was immense chaos. Especially with religious conflicts. People of different religions, or even the same religion but different sects, split apart and fought. When the Heretic Inquisitor appeared..."

"He appeared and?"

"...He killed them all."

The Paladin sighed again.

"Anyone who caused fights over religion, regardless of nationality or origin, he just killed them all. It was merciless genocide. He's always been that way..."

"Wow."

I had simply thought the religious groups, after repeated

conflicts, had joined hands to form the Temple of the Omnipotent God. That's what the media reported. But behind that, was there a thorough massacre...?

"Save me! Someone!"

In the distance, Viper screamed.

His voice seemed to rise an octave every minute.

"I'm dying! Damn it, I'm really dying! Lord of Celestial Martial Clan is dying, save me!"

"Ahaha."

The Heretic Inquisitor adjusted his hat.

"I admit I made a mistake and caused unnecessary trouble. I'm sorry, but Hunter Kim Gong-Ja! In return for entrusting me with full power, could you please stop Sword Saint!"

"Sigh. You are... No, never mind."

I shook my head.

"Let's talk about you later. Seriously. Right now, Viper really seems to be dying, so let's deal with this first."

"Yes! Please!"

I left the Paladin and Heretic Inquisitor behind and walked forward.

'Well, even if it's just for a moment, taking control of both the Vigilante Corps and the Temple of the Omnipotent God is beneficial. They're both large guilds...'

I convinced myself.

A fierce battle was unfolding in one corner of the audience chamber. It was intense and dazzling. Frankly, at my current level, it was hard even to follow with my eyes. Joining such a fight was tantamount to suicide.

But I knew exactly what to say to stop Sword Saint.

"Sword Saint!"

No response.

"Sword Saint! You bowed to me today! Since you've already bowed, please listen to me! Stop fighting and let's talk among ourselves!"

Still no response.

Ah, no choice then.

I took a deep breath and shouted.

"I will ask your granddaughter out!"

Pause.

"If your granddaughter ever enters the tower, well, let's have a meeting. Whether we end up dating or not, I don't know, but she's a family member of Sword Saint, so she must be charming. So as someone who might become your son-in-law,

please stop fighting!"

Sword Saint turned silently to look at me.

A long, quiet silence followed.

"...I never forgave these bastards."

"Yes."

"I'm not stopping because of your words, young man. But while crossing swords, I thought that I could kill them anytime. Then, it's better to find the traitor first and then wipe them all out. Right?"

Why are you asking me that?

Instead of arguing, I just nodded obediently.

"Ah, that's a really wise decision. Kill them later."

"Hmm."

Sword Saint slowly sheathed his sword.

On the other side, Viper gasped for air.

"Uh...? What? Am I, alive? Is it over...?"

Nothing is over.

We just temporarily stopped the immediate fight.

"Everyone, please calm down."

I addressed the hunters.

"I don't know who the traitor is here. We might not even find the traitor. But that's secondary. We don't need to find and kill the traitor to overcome this crisis."

"...How so?"

The Paladin asked.

"The traitor chose the Demon King's reward, which means he's already targeting our lives. We don't know when we'll be stabbed in the back."

"Look at this."

I pointed to the marble floor.

There lay three corpses, soaked in blood and flesh, but more importantly, the Heretic Inquisitor's inscribed words.

+

[The Goddess of Protection]

Description: The goddess who protects the Aegim Empire is moved by your dedication! She has decided to entrust you with an important position in the empire.

You can become the Prime Minister, the Grand General, or the Commander of the Knights of the empire. Choosing a position will also grant you the abilities and reputation associated with that position!

Warrior of the goddess! Join forces with your fellow warriors.

And destroy the Demon King's core located on the 20th floor!

*However, if you choose the Demon King's reward, you cannot choose the Goddess's reward.

+

"The Demon King's Core is located on the 20th floor."

I looked at each of the hunters' faces.

"Don't focus on how to find and kill the traitor. It's a trap. Don't fall for it. The traitor is probably trembling in fear right now. Maybe the system even automatically designated someone as the traitor. Who knows?"

"....."

"Let's focus on the Demon King first."

The audience quieted down.

"Eliminating the Demon King also eliminates the Demon King's reward. It's a simple solution. No matter how absurd the tests the tower throws at us, or how much it tries to incite internal conflict among us, the solution is always simple."

A voice echoed in my mind.

[The Goddess of Protection's eyes light up.]

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain clicks his tongue.]

I spoke with emphasis.

"Let's ascend the tower."

This was my answer.

"Let's shatter the Demon King's Core on the 20th floor."

An answer not only to the hunters but also a declaration to the tower itself.

In response to my answer, a voice responded.

[You are given the floor 12 quest.]

Chapter 30:

Autumn Rain of Blood (3)

[You are given the floor 12 quest.]

As soon as the voice was heard, something poured down the windows.

Drip, drip.

It was raindrops.

The grand windows of the audience hall were hit by raindrops, sliding down. We were briefly captivated by the rainwater on the windows. It wasn't the sudden downpour that slightly startled us. There was something else.

"Oh, oh..."

"The nightmare rain... the rain of nightmares falls again!"

It was the color of the rainwater.

The rain flowing down the windows was as red as blood. Perhaps it was really blood. NPCs in the audience hall with us, regardless of their status, began groaning, clutching their heads.

"Oh Goddess, do not abandon us!"

"What... what's this? Why are they suddenly acting like this...?"

Exhausted from fighting with the Sword Saint, Viper looked around tiredly.

"It's the Demon King..."

An armored NPC muttered. He was lying face down on the floor of the audience hall, trembling. As if his trembling was contagious, groans spread around.

"The Empire is done for..."

"The Demon King is coming..."

"Our lord, where have you gone..."

There was not a single NPC whose face wasn't shrouded in despair. Despair, resignation, lamentation. Their expressions were indistinguishable from real humans.

Viper swallowed hard.

"Th-these guys are funny. Hey, this is all just a setup, right? What's going on?"

"The quest has started."

I said quietly.

"Looks like they won't let us keep fighting among ourselves. If it's hard to stir more internal conflict, they have no choice but to attack us directly."

"Attack? Who?"

"Who else."

I glared outside the window.

"The one who induced internal strife among us by offering such rewards."

Laughter echoed in my head.

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain affirms your words.]

The rain grew stronger. Initially cautious, like a gentle knock on the window, the sound of rain rapidly became boisterous. Dozens, hundreds, thousands of droplets, all red, bombarded the windows.

"....."

I approached the window. We couldn't see the outside from here. The rain was so intense that the glass windows were

entirely stained red. I shattered the glass with the hilt of my sword.

Crash!

Crimson raindrops poured into the audience hall. Finally, the outside was clearly visible. In the middle of the palace. Outside the audience hall was the imperial palace. Beyond the palace was the city, and beyond that, a massive wall.

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain manifests.]

Beyond the wall, it was there.

-Pitiful creatures.

It whispered softly.

Yes, it was just a whisper.

Just by whispering, its voice crossed barriers, leaped over countless palace walls, and finally flowed inside through the

broken window.

-Do you think summoning humans from other worlds and seating them as your leaders will be your shield? You call them heroes, but are they truly heroes for you?

The rain kept falling.

-Call them. Call as many as you can. There's no reason not to. Summon thousands of warriors and tens of thousands of knights. They are merely humans like you. Your foolishness knows no bounds, pitiable indeed.

The voice resonated everywhere. Against the city walls. Along the palace walls. Against the walls of the audience hall. It laughed. A loud laughter. The echo of laughter reverberated through our skulls.

"Uh, ahh..."

The NPCs buried their heads even lower. In pain, they clawed at their heads.

Unlike them, we hunters were better off. Unlike the NPCs,

this was our first time hearing the Demon King's laughter. It was bearable. Of course, if we had to listen to that laughter for a year, it would be a different story.

-You who do not see humans as humans.

That's when it happened.

A map only visible to me. The mini-map. Lit up by the Goddess of War's blessing, red dots started to appear on the map. One. Two. Three. The red dots slowly appearing on the mini-map suddenly multiplied rapidly.

Hundreds.

Thousands.

Tens of thousands.

Soon, the horizon beyond was painted entirely red.

-Be consumed by your own evil.

Lightning struck.

For a moment, heaven and earth turned pale, revealing everything in between starkly.

The red dots on the map were all monsters.

"....."

"....."

The hunters fell silent. A monstrous horde of a scale incomparable to the 11th-floor stage. Countless armies were approaching from beyond the horizon.

-Kirr.

-Kek, kek!

The monsters howled. Bared their teeth. Twisted their necks. Raindrops flowed down the twisted faces of the goblins. To them, the rain of blood seemed more like holy water. Like

knights embarking on a great crusade, the monsters looked up to the sky and worshipped the red rain.

"...I told you."

I gripped the hilt of my sword tightly.

"It's not the time for us to fight each other."

Then, letters appeared before my eyes.

+

[Defend the Empire's Capital]

Difficulty: A~SSS

Description: Heroes, you have bravely resisted the Demon King's army and defended the port. Sensing the crisis, the Demon King has personally joined the battle. The Demon King can summon monster armies anytime, anywhere. The target of the Demon King is the heart of the Aegim Empire, the

capital Hacamonia.

Fortunately, the Demon King's power has weakened due to manifesting from afar.

Stop the Demon King!

*However, if you fail in battle, the 13th floor will not open.

+

Silence lingered for a moment.

"...Weakened?"

Viper muttered absentmindedly.

"That thing?"

It was a sentiment shared by everyone.

"This is... unfair. How are we supposed to clear this? This isn't a quest made to be cleared. Even if the first 10 floors were just tutorials... This is a completely different level of difficulty."

"Enough. Let's stay calm."

I turned and looked at the audience hall.

There were hunters. Behind them, NPCs were in despair.

"We can do this. The tower does not give quests that can't be cleared."

"But how are we supposed to fend off that many monsters with just us...?"

"That's why I'm telling you to calm down."

I pointed at the NPCs.

"Here, we're not just hunters. Have you forgotten what you

chose yourself? Viper, you're [the Captain of the Imperial Guards of the Aegim Empire]. As the captain, you should lead your guard."

"....."

"We can't clear this stage with just us hunters."

Exactly.

"Convince the NPCs. Rally them. Command them. Treat them as real people and somehow lead them into battle."

That's how we cleared the 11th-floor stage.

"We shouldn't fight each other. Sword Saint, you are the commander of the empire's knights. It's absurd for the knight commander and the captain of the guard to duel each other. How can a country facing foreign invasion defend itself properly?"

"....."

"If you accepted the reward of the knight commander, think of it as a benefit. But with rights come responsibilities. Whether you like it or not, we have inherited the [roles] of the empire's leadership, and now it's time to play those roles."

I looked at the Paladin.

She was looking at me with a serious expression.

"Foreign Minister."

"Um."

In the audience hall, where the emperor should be, he was nowhere to be seen. The emperor must be somewhere in the palace. "Paladin, please take the foreign ministry NPC staff and find the emperor. Without a leader, the NPCs won't follow us properly."

The Paladin nodded.

"Understood."

"Grand General."

I turned to the Heretic Inquisitor. Despite losing his right arm, he was still smiling brightly, looking at me with an expression of genuine interest.

"Yes! As the Grand General, that would be me!"

"I really don't like hunters like you. Honestly, I dislike you. After watching what you did earlier, I felt we need to settle our differences someday. However, we can't afford to lose someone as important as the Grand General right now."

"Ahaha. I'm finding you more and more likable, Hunter Kim Gong-Ja!"

"Since you've entrusted me with full authority, just shut up and listen to me."

I examined the map as I spoke.

There wasn't much time. The red tide was increasingly approaching the capital.

"There should be many soldiers on the walls. With monsters rushing in like a tidal wave, they must be in no state to think straight. As the Grand General, you must go up on the walls and console the soldiers."

"Hmm! Noblesse oblige!"

"Defend the walls at all costs. If the walls are breached, this stage is over."

"Don't worry."

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled.

"I've never broken a promise in my life. I'll stake my life on it and defend it!"

"Okay."

I looked at the crowd.

"Then I'll go ahead."

It was time for war.

Whoosh! Pop!

As I left the palace, other hunters were being summoned one after another.

"Wow, where is this place?"

"It's nice that it's not a shabby port."

Like tourists on a trip, the hunters looked around the streets of the capital.

"Ew, is this acid rain? What's with the color of the rain...?"

"Get under the roofs! Quick!"

"Hey, it says to choose a role for the reward?"

"Role? What role?"

The later arrivals were completely clueless. Perhaps because they arrived after us.

'Even the top rankers who arrived on the 12th floor first doubted and fought each other.'

They even killed three people on mere suspicion. What would these latecomers be like? It was too much to expect much from hunters who had just entered a new stage.

'I don't have time to persuade the hunters now.'

The Demon King's legion was approaching every moment.

'I'll first try to block the attack with NPCs!'

Ignoring the hunters, I ran into the streets. It was terribly crowded, but luckily I had the mini-map. I diligently followed the shortest route to the walls.

"Kim Gong-Ja."

It was just as I was leaving the palace. Someone appeared beside me.

"Witch?"

"Call me Black Dragon Witch. I don't like my alias."

The Black Dragon Witch, the second-ranked hunter, suddenly appeared and ran alongside me. Was she using aura in her steps? She seemed to glide across the streets.

"How did you suddenly appear here?"

"...It's my skill. Teleportation. I can move anywhere within my line of sight."

That was an overpowered skill.

-Zombie, die once to her! Teleportation is too good! I'll admit it if you die to her. Hurry up and die!

Ignoring the Guardian Spirit's words, I asked.

"Then why didn't you go to the walls first instead of coming to me?"

"That's obvious."

She replied expressionlessly, unfazed by the running.

"I saw you in the 11th floor. You have a sword that the NPCs respond to. I don't know what kind of sword it is, but with it, you can boost the morale of the NPCs. Right now, the soldiers on the walls need you, not me."

The Black Dragon Witch looked at me.

"Agree."

"Excuse me?"

"Agree to come with me for Teleportation. If you don't verbally agree, I can't move you. It's a limitation of my skill."

I was slightly flustered.

"Wait. Teleportation must be at least an S-rank skill, right? Are you sure it's okay to tell me about its restrictions? It's your trump card."

"That's a strange thing to say."

She wiped her forehead. The rain of blood kept pouring down on us. Her white forehead was matted with hair due to the rain.

The Black Dragon Witch's black eyes looked at me.

"According to you, I'm the empire's prime minister, right? Isn't it natural for a prime minister to use their trump card to protect their country?"

"....."

"We don't have time. Just agree quickly, no matter how roughly."

I nodded.

"I agree with the Black Dragon Witch's use of her skill."

That instant, she reached out with her left hand and grabbed my right. Tightly. Her long fingers interlocked with mine, ensuring we wouldn't slip in the rain.

"Huh?"

"-There's one more condition."

She whispered, holding my hand.

"Teleport."

Whoosh!

In the blink of an eye, we were on the walls.

As expected, the walls were in chaos. Despite the approaching monster army, the empire's soldiers didn't react. Rather, they couldn't. The soldiers hid behind the walls, trembling or praying to the gods.

"It's over..."

"God, please show us mercy..."

"Hic, hu... huhuh..."

NPCs. Yet indistinguishable from living humans.

Even if they were mere illusions, their fear wasn't. Their expressions of despair weren't illusions either.

"Black Dragon Witch, thanks for bringing me here. From here, I'll..."

"Wait."

She sighed.

"I can't just show my junior a poor image and leave."

"What?"

"I didn't become a guild master by just sitting around."

She took a deep breath.

Then she spoke.

"Soldiers of the Aegim Empire!"

Black aura flowed from her body.

The black was even darker than the red.

"Stand up! What are you doing on top of these stone walls? Do you think these walls will automatically protect you? Don't you realize that the real barrier protecting our empire isn't these stones, but you, the soldiers of the empire?"

One by one, the soldiers hiding behind the walls began to raise their heads.

"The Prime Minister...?"

"It's the Prime Minister."

Murmurs spread among the soldiers. To them, the Black Dragon Witch appeared as their prime minister. One person recognized her, and his words spread like a contagion through the rain.

The Black Dragon Witch nodded.

"Stand up! I command you to stand! One day, these walls may crumble, and our homeland may be destroyed. But as long as you stand, our empire, our Aegim Empire, will not fall! Because you are the empire!"

It was completely unlike her usual demeanor.

"Stand up!"

Her face, usually cold and expressionless, was now filled with fervor. As she looked down at the soldiers from the walls, they seemed to be caught in her gaze, unable to look away.

"Stand up, soldiers of the empire! Defenders of Aegim! Warriors who are the empire itself! Take up your spears! Grab your swords! Until there is nothing left to grab, until there are no hands left to hold weapons! Stand up for the empire, for yourselves!"

She clenched her hand.

My hand.

"The Goddess protects us!"

The Black Dragon Witch raised my right hand high.

I realized what I had to do.

Swoosh!

The holy sword was drawn from its sheath.

I held the hilt and raised it high. Amidst the red downpour on the walls, the blade of the holy sword shone brilliantly. The white light pierced the rain and illuminated the faces of the soldiers.

"The Founder's Sword..."

"The holy sword. The sword blessed by the Goddess!"

Then.

[The Goddess of Protection expresses her gratitude for your choice.]

[The Goddess of Protection squeezes out her last power.]

Light emerged.

Chapter 31:

Bloodied Sword (1)

"The Goddess..."

That was all it took.

The red raindrops ceased.

Not all the rain had stopped.

It was just where the light of the holy sword shone that the rain halted.

A small pause. A faint light.

"The Goddess..."

"God protects our empire!"

Sometimes, small things were enough.

Especially for humans who had little left.

To the people of the empire, their territory was but a handful of land left. History was nothing but the last unfilled page. This was known to the kingdom's citizens, the soldiers, the officials, and the nobility.

That's why there was not a single NPC in the audience hall.

Because the Prime Minister abandoned governance.

Because the Grand General gave up on the military.

Because the Imperial Guards no longer protected the emperor.

Because the Knights did not uphold their duties.

An empire abandoned by all.

Therefore, the tower had chosen the empire as its stage.

Like the children abandoned in a mansion on the 10th floor.

"Stand up!"

The Black Dragon Witch cried out.

One by one, soldiers began to rise to their feet. Some leaned on the walls to stand, others on their spears, and some were helped up by their comrades.

"Stand up!"

The Witch commanded them to become the last walls of the empire. Yes, they were to be the walls. Her cry echoed off the walls, reaching every soldier of the empire.

"Stand up!"

"The Prime Minister is here! She stands with us!"

"The Founder's Sword protects us!"

Thus, the walls became walls, the spears became spears, and the soldiers became soldiers.

"Stand up, quickly!"

"Such disgrace in front of the Prime Minister!"

Lieutenants ran around, slapping the backs of the soldiers. The soldiers snapped back to reality and adjusted their helmets.

Red raindrops rolled off the tips of their helmets. But the rain no longer blinded the soldiers. They looked straight ahead.

"Huh..."

The Black Dragon Witch let out a small sigh.

The black aura that had been emanating from her gradually subsided. Perhaps she had overexerted herself using the aura. Not only red raindrops but also clear beads of sweat were visible on her forehead.

"...Why?"

The Witch turned to me.

"Have you never seen a Ukrainian giving a speech?"

"Uh..."

"There are a lot of commies in our country."

The Witch slightly raised the corners of her mouth.

I belatedly realized she was smiling.

"I don't like communists, but they do give good speeches. There's something to learn from them."

"Yes?"

"...It's nothing."

Her expression returned to being emotionless. The corners of her mouth dropped. What did the Black Dragon Witch mean?

-No.

The Sword Emperor chimed in.

-It seems like she's just embarrassed because her dad joke didn't land.

'Eh? Was that a joke earlier?'

-Don't know. It seems like it from the context. But if you react like you just did... Never mind. Zombie, you should never join a group and mingle with superiors. Just keep walking the hunter path like now, okay?

I didn't understand.

But one thing was clear.

"Kim Gong-Ja, what will you do now?"

The recent speech by the Witch had somewhat reversed the situation.

"For now, we need to hold out on the walls."

"That's right."

I gazed at the red horizon.

Countless monsters surrounded the Demon King. The Witch's S-rank skill was Teleportation. Even if I used it to fly there, there was no guarantee I wouldn't be killed by the Demon King. I would probably be surrounded and killed by monsters in the blink of an eye.

First, I needed to create a one-on-one situation with the

Demon King.

"We need to bring the hunters here while the NPC soldiers hold the line. Then we won't be pushed back in the fight. If the Demon King deploys more monsters to force a breach in the wall..."

"If he does?"

"Then, teleport me in front of the Demon King."

The Witch stared into my face.

"A suicide squad, huh."

"Yes."

"Are you prepared to die?"

A natural suspicion.

I was still just an E-rank hunter. No matter how powerful the Demon King was, if a mere E-ranker could threaten him, the continent wouldn't have been safe to begin with.

No matter what adjectives were used, it was difficult to fully describe my disadvantage.

But to me, death did not signify defeat.

"I intend to win."

My death was a stairway leading to victory.

"I have a trump card too. Trust me."

The Witch sighed.

"Alright. Every hunter has their secrets. I hope your sword is sharp enough to kill that boss monster."

Of course, that was my intention.

-The Goddess amusingly plots.

Then, it happened.

-Such a pitiful last struggle. Light, huh? What use is light to those who cannot harvest tomorrow's grains? Have you too become pitiful, comforting these wretched beings?

The Demon King's voice sliced through the battlefield.

-Then let me show you the light as well.

Suddenly, a loud noise erupted.

The Witch and I remained alert, keeping an eye on the Demon King. That's how we knew what the loud noise was.

It was a sword.

Slowly.

From the distant horizon, the Demon King slowly swung his sword. Time seemed to slow down. It was as if a different time flowed from the Demon King's sword, as if the sword was trying to cut through time itself.

But the Demon King's sword didn't slice time, it cleaved the sky.

As it cleaved the sky, the sword strike was already a beam of red light.

The beam targeted the city gate precisely and pierced it.

A massive explosion followed, and a dust storm surged.

The Witch and I instinctively closed our eyes. As we did, the surroundings were engulfed in dust, and screams echoed from beyond. The soldiers were screaming. Sounds of collapse followed.

Shortly after.

"Cough... Cough..."

When the dust storm subsided a bit, we turned towards the direction of the screams. Despite the pain from the dust in our eyes, shock overcame the pain.

The Witch coughed and muttered.

"...Is that power really weakened?"

The city gate had crumbled.

The Demon King sneered.

-Pitiful beings.

Red rain poured from the dusty sky.

The laughter mixed with the dust in the sky and the rain on the ground.

From heaven to earth, scorn echoed.

-Are you still an empire?

But it wasn't just the gate that had fallen.

The red beam continued beyond the shattered gate. The streets were crushed, buildings on both sides of the avenue crumbled. Finally, even the towering Imperial Palace was caught in the beam.

Boom!

Part of the palace collapsed. Like a ship colliding with an iceberg and sinking, the splendid palace leaned and slowly sank.

From afar, the sound of the empire's palace being destroyed echoed.

[A hero has died.]

Nearby, a voice echoed.

[He was not a minion of the Demon King.]

A voice announcing someone's death.

"....."

My ears were ringing.

The Witch and I glanced at each other for a moment.

"...That was where the audience hall was."

The Witch spoke first.

"The Sword Emperor, the Heretic Inquisitor, and Viper would already be out of the audience hall, leading their knights and guards here. The Paladin is busy searching for the emperor on your order. That leaves..."

The Countess.

"...To die first."

The Countess was not the traitor.

"That bitch."

The Witch muttered quietly.

That was all.

She didn't send off her fallen comrade with many words. Instead, she shook her head a few times, perhaps her own way of saying goodbye.

"Black Dragon Witch. If the Countess really perished, then the outside world and..."

"Now is not the time."

The Witch spoke softly.

"Let's focus on what's in front of us now."

The second strongest hunter in the tower was just staring.

Staring at her prey beyond the horizon.

"Even the Demon King can't keep firing attacks like that. Kim Gong-Ja. Help me defend the fallen city gate."

The red dots on the mini-map were changing.

The monster army approached like a wide wave, but now they sharpened like awls.

Were they attempting a breakthrough?

"Yes."

The awl pointed to the city gate.

The opening created by the red beam.

"That's what I was thinking too."

I grasped the Witch's hand.

She nodded.

"Teleport."

We teleported to the fallen city gate.

-Chirp chirp!

-Keck! Ki! Kiik!

-Grooooar!

Monsters had already rushed up close. Arrows flew about. Archers on the walls fired, but it was insufficient against the

red tide. Goblins, orcs, skeletons, all sorts of monsters howled like beasts as they charged.

Only about two minutes remained until the first wave reached us.

-Zombie.

The Sword Emperor's voice came.

-Even if it's just for a minute, or 30 seconds, it doesn't matter.

Dozens, hundreds of monsters broke through the dust cloud and charged.

Then, dozens and hundreds more stirred up dust as they approached.

-Hold the line alone.

There was no ally blocking my path.

-To win this war, you need to become a beacon of hope for everyone.

Thus, I stood alone at the front line.

-Hold the line. Even if it's just for 30 seconds. Showing that you alone can hold back these monsters is what's important. It's not the person who survives for 30 years who is called a hero. It's the person who gives a desperately needed 30 seconds to everyone. That person is the true hero.

I dropped my backpack to the ground.

-Become a hero.

I pulled out a glass bottle from the backpack.

The future Master Alchemist's elixir in the bottle.

-I'll help you.

One gulp. Two gulps. Three gulps.

I swallowed all the elixir in the glass bottle.

-I promised to teach you swordsmanship until the 20th floor, didn't I? It's a bit early, but it's practice time.

Thump.

My heart pounded.

-Place your back foot at an angle.

The intervals of my heartbeats started to slow down.

-Keep your front foot firmly on the ground.

My heart beat faster and faster.

-Now, look straight ahead.

I looked.

-Two goblins are at the front. They normally have poor eyesight, but now they are squinting because of the dust cloud. Instinctively, they'll swing their swords widely, trying to hit anything. Stab them before they can swing.

My heart rate increased, and my 1 second felt longer.

-Your holy sword only shines, but it's perfect for blinding your opponents. In a fight, an absolute 1 second isn't important. Only a relative 1 second matters. Blind your opponents with your sword and take that 1 second from them.

Thus, my 1 second was a bit faster than my heartbeat.

-Here they come.

My sword would be a bit faster than my 1 second.

-Let's go, partner.

The Sword Emperor stood beside me.

-It's time to become a hero.

I swung my sword.

Chapter 32:

Bloodied Sword (2)

A storm of blood surged.

-Kiiieeeee!

A goblin screamed long and loud.

In my time, the scream was unending.

-That's the first one down.

Blood spurted into the air. Red. The blood mixed with the rain, both sharing the same color. As blood droplets still floated and raindrops hadn't yet fallen, the world between them was dyed red.

I readjusted my grip on the sword.

-Next, deal with the one on your left.

And I swung my sword.

-Kreeeeeeeee!

The second one down.

Before the first goblin had fully perished, the second goblin was cut down. It all happened in an instant. Blood spurted from both sides.

The monsters couldn't even see my sword as they screamed in unison.

One perished, then another followed.

Another one died, and then another.

-Eeeeeeee!

-Eee, eeeeeee!

-Kiiiiii!

As one monster's scream was about to end, another freshly started.

Thus, around me, the screams never ceased.

A concert of the sword.

My sword was like a conductor's baton orchestrating a chorus of screams.

-One second has passed.

The Sword Emperor spoke.

-When you swing your sword, don't cut off the motion. Gong-Ja, don't separate each strike; connect them. Continue slicing.

I swung my sword.

-Slice from top to bottom. Just because your sword moved downwards, doesn't mean your attack has ended. Think of it like music. If a note descends, it's only to rise again.

A scream resounded.

-Connect them! If your sword goes down, continue the motion upwards. Then your sword will keep moving continuously.

Another second passed.

-A sword fight is a battle against time! An amateur can only dominate for a mere second. Swing once, and that's it. They're blinded. They don't know how to connect their next strike. But a more skilled fighter can control for five seconds.

Blood flowed from the enemy.

My body exhaled breath.

-Don't waste time!

Before all the blood could spill.

Before my breath could fully escape.

-Don't waste it! Slaying one enemy doesn't mean it's over. Nothing's over yet. Know where to swing your sword next! People usually let time slip by, but a swordsman can't afford that! Live every second to the fullest.

Between the enemy's blood and my breath, my blade flowed.

-A swordsman lives by the sword.

I swung my sword.

-Did you think living a second was easy? Are you really alive?

I swung my sword again.

-People aren't truly living when time just passes. They live when they dedicate time to something. Gong-Ja, you are a swordsman. So you must live by the sword.

I swung my sword once more.

-Burn brighter!

A goblin clawed at my arm, blood spurted. Ah. My head spun. My heart throbbed. Despite the excruciating pain, I kept swinging my sword, focusing straight ahead.

-Kieeee!

-Groooo, grr...

-Kooaaoo!

Countless monsters.

From beyond the red dust cloud, monsters poured in. Numerous enemies. Numerous evils. Monsters seeking to

devour my flesh and drink my blood. They charged at me, drenched in red rain.

-Ten seconds now.

This was ten seconds.

Just ten seconds.

-Burn more fiercely. Gong-Ja. Don't just live; set your life ablaze.

I gripped the hilt of my sword as tightly as I could.

-Show them who you are.

And I roared.

Uoooooooooh!

In the midst of the battlefield, right at the front line of this war, my roar echoed. Soldiers shooting arrows from the walls flinched. Monsters rushing through the dust cloud hesitated.

-Yes. Damn it, that's right.

The Sword Emperor chuckled.

-You're finally shedding that zombie face. Kid!

I ran straight ahead.

-Guh...?

I targeted a momentarily stalled goblin first. Swish! Before it could react, I severed its head. The goblin's head soared into the air, mouth agape.

I swung my sword again.

-Krrur, rur.

Next, I targeted an orc standing idly by. Swish! Before it could lift its club, I chopped off the orc's head. A fountain of blood erupted.

I swung my sword again.

‘Just a little more.’

Skewering a skeleton.

‘A little more.’

Another goblin.

‘Just a bit more.’

Many orcs.

‘More! Just a bit more!’

Towards countless monsters.

‘Look!’

I swung my sword.

‘Look at me!’

I was alive.

I was alive when I swung my sword.

-Koooaoo!

An ogre.

From the red dust cloud, a giant ogre appeared, waving a massive club.

One swing. Two swings. Each swing generated a whirlwind.

The dust cloud that had settled thickly over the ruined gate was blown away.

The ogre's swings caught the smaller goblins. Thud! A goblin was flung straight into the wall, smashing to mush on impact.

That's right. The creature had no camaraderie, not even among its own kind. No empathy, compassion, or mercy.

Therefore, it was a mere beast.

An ugly beast.

-Uooooo!

The beast roared savagely.

Baring its teeth, aiming solely at me.

'Come.'

And here stood a lone hunter.

A hunter eyeing its prey.

‘I’ll show you.’

Thud!

The ogre stepped forward.

A corner of the wall, barely holding up, collapsed pathetically.

Thud!

The hideous beast had massive feet. Each step shook the ground. The walls protecting the empire fell. Shaking the ground and crumbling barriers, the ogre charged towards this spot.

-Plant your feet firmly on the ground.

But...

-Look straight ahead.

My mission remained unchanged.

-Slash the enemy with your sword.

I charged at the monster.

Thud!

The giant beast stomped down. That's when I seized the moment. As the ogre raised its club to smash me, I twisted my blade right in front of it.

White light.

The light of the Holy Sword penetrated the ogre's eyes.

-Groooo!

But it was too late for the ogre. Its swing had already begun, and changing its path was difficult.

'Why.'

In this elongated moment that felt infinite, I charged at the ogre, pondering a thought.

'Why did they give an EX-rank skill to such a psychopath like Yoo Soo-Ha?'

Thinking about Yoo Soo-Ha, the Flame Emperor, and this tower that had granted him the returner skill.

'There was no need for him to be a great saint. Just a bit more rational, a bit more sane would have sufficed to receive the skill. But why, why did it have to be given to such a psychopath?'

Whooooosh!

The ogre's club swished past, just missing me, blinded momentarily by the light of the Holy Sword.

This created a brief opportunity.

'Could it be... Is that the reason?'

I sprinted forward.

'Is it because no one but Yoo Soo-Ha can conquer the tower? To reign at the top, must one be like him?'

I soared into the air, the ogre's widened eyes focused on me.

The monster tried to swing its club again.

But it was too late.

'Don't make me laugh!'

I'll show them.

'I'll break through the 20th floor in place of the Flame Emperor.'

Not just the twentieth stage.

'The 30th too.'

'The 40th, the 50th.'

'The 60th, 70th, 80th, 90th.'

Even the 99th floor.

'Till the 100th!'

Until I finally stand at the summit.

'I'll show them!'

Thus.

[Your existence becomes more defined.]

I swung my sword.

[Hunter Kim Gong-Ja is leveling up.]

The blade precisely severed the ogre's neck.

A torrent of blood erupted.

The monster's skin was tough, but not sharper than my sword. Its life force was strong, but not denser than my aura.

The ogre, even in its dying moment, swung its arm in a futile attempt. Refusing to perish gracefully? There was no need to be taken aback. I simply delivered another blow.

[Your skill slots have expanded.]

[You are now a D-Rank hunter.]

The ogre's head fell.

Thud!

A moment later, the monster's body collapsed.

[May fortune be with you.]

Gradually, the red dust settled.

-Kirrrr...

-Kii, ki! Kiii.

The monsters were visible. The horde pouring through the shattered gate. The seemingly endless wave of creatures that had appeared eternal, now hesitated. Seeing the fall of the giant beast, they were struck with fear.

Silence.

Nothing but the sound of rain could be heard. Soldiers on the walls stared at me, and the monsters kept stumbling. The quiet surrounded me. I stood alone amidst the looks and the retreat.

-Congratulations.

The Sword Emperor chuckled.

-Thirty seconds have passed.

Then, someone passed by me.

I knew who it was just by seeing their back. A black suit. White hair. The Sword Saint dashed, stepping on puddles.

Swish!

With one swing, dozens of goblins and orcs were decapitated and bisected. Blood fountains erupted in unison.

One second. Two seconds. Three seconds.

In that brief moment, I saw it. The sky filled with more blood spurts than raindrops.

“.....”

The Sword Saint slowly turned to me.

With the blood storm he created behind him.

The old man spoke.

“-----.”

I couldn't quite hear him.

My sense of time was still slow.

“Hmm.”

Realizing my unusual state, the Sword Saint smiled slightly.

He then spoke with aura.

“---You did well.”

He raised his sword's hilt.

Rain fell.

Since the rain was red, the sword remained bloodied even after the water flowed.

“My name is Marcus Callenbury. Young man.”

I realized it was his way of showing respect.

“.....”

I remained silent.

The second time.

This was the second time a top-ranked hunter had revealed their name to me.

The first time was when I was still wandering on the 1st floor.

In a secluded alley, the Flame Emperor had grabbed my head and whispered his name.

-My name is Yoo Soo-Ha.

-Farewell.

That day, I was killed.

Today, for the second time, I heard a different name from a different person.

I sensed that I, too, had changed.

And what I couldn't do in my first experience,

what I never did, I could do now.

“My name is Kim Gong-Ja, sir.”

Today.

I said my name.

Chapter 33:

Bloodied Sword (3)

Rain poured down.

A blaze may engulf a vast plain, but it must start from a single ember; a river may overflow to the brim of heaven, but it must begin from a single droplet.

I might not claim to be a blaze, but I was an ember; I might not call myself a river, but I was a droplet.

"Hmm."

Amidst the falling rain, the old man stood in the center of the flowing water.

He nodded lightly towards me.

"Let's fight together, young man."

The top-ranked hunter.

The Sword Saint.

Commander of the Imperial Knights.

Joined the battle.

"Ahaha!"

The rain continued.

"Sorry I'm late!"

Splashing through puddles, a voice approached with laughter.

"I could have been here sooner. Leading an entire troop isn't

as simple as it seems!"

The owner of the voice was one-armed. In the street swept by the red beam, where only puddles remained, the one-armed priest stood tall.

"Thank you, Hunter Kim Gong-Ja."

The Heretic Inquisitor adjusted his hat with his remaining hand.

Rain fell.

Through the blurry rain, something rushed from behind the Heretic Inquisitor. It cleaved through the rainwater, surging forward.

"We'll take over the time you've bought for us."

Thousands of soldiers.

Avoiding the collapsed buildings, leaping over sunken pits,

parting the puddles, soldiers of the Empire were rushing in. Not just soldiers – there were others too. Citizens without armor, people of the Empire without helmets. With almost bare bodies, they flooded in.

"By the order of the Grand General, everyone."

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled broadly.

Thousands of soldiers and tens of thousands of civilians screamed.

"Slaughter the bastards who bared their fangs at the Empire."

The fourth-ranked hunter.

Master of the Temple of Omnipotent God, the Heretic Inquisitor.

The Grand General of the Empire.

Brought reinforcements.

"Oooooo!"

Rain fell.

Droplets merged into a river.

The monstrous army, once a fearsome tide, had now halted. Like a high tide frozen in place, the monsters hesitated at the gate. The tide had turned, the flood became an ebb, and at the broken gate, the current flowed backward.

"The gods are with us!"

Rain fell.

"Long live the Aegim Empire!"

Rain fell.

'Ah.'

Swept away by the rainwater, I couldn't tell when it had begun. Was it because time had slowed? Suddenly, I became the first droplet of the overflowing stream, running along.

A refugee from a border kingdom brandished a spear beside me. A farmer from a now-destroyed Imperial village wielded a hoe on my right. Looking back, a hunter, indistinguishable from me, raised his sword.

They kept saying something,

"----."

"-----!"

But I couldn't understand.

Was it the sound of rain? The shouts of people? The screams of the monsters? Was it because time had slowed? Or was it because I had already become a mere droplet, swept away with them?

Or was it because I was swinging my sword?

"-----!"

Forward.

"-----."

Even more.

Until the fire burns every field and the water floods every corner.

Just a bit more, a little further forward.

"Hey."

Tap.

Something touched me. It tapped my shoulder. Cutting

through the noise of millions of raindrops and the voices of thousands, it spoke to me. It was a one-eyed figure, wearing an eyepatch.

"Well done. I should have been here sooner. Ugh! It took time to gather not just my royal guard but also our guild members. But don't worry. We'll show you why we are called the Chun-Moon Guild."

The figure paused abruptly.

"....."

Suddenly, it stopped talking and just stared at my face with its one eye.

"You're not listening. Engrossed, huh? You've got cojones. I like it."

The figure chuckled softly.

"Hey, my name is Liǎofàn. You probably can't hear, but that's fine. You saved my life back in the audience hall. What good is being the Chun-Moon Guild Master if I let a debt go unpaid?"

Just focus ahead. I'll take care of the left side. Consider it a huge privilege."

He drew his sword.

"No one has ever died on my right side."

Rain fell.

"Go on, rising star."

I swung my sword.

"I'll protect you."

The current grew fiercer.

Flowing more violently.

"Sorry I'm late! I was busy looking for the Emperor of the

Empire. Found him, but he had already taken poison and committed suicide. It seems difficult to gather forces using the Emperor's authority. My apologies."

"It's alright. No need to gather more forces here. Rather, Lady Paladin, join the fight."

"Of course. Hm? Why is Hunter Kim Gong-Ja...?"

"Don't bother him now."

Rain fell.

"That guy. He's savoring his golden time."

Rain fell.

"Pitiful beings."

"Given time, do you really believe it belongs to you?"

"The power of the goddess who cared for you is waning. Now, there is no god in the Empire. What will you rely on? Will you prove yourselves? Then so be it."

The mocking laughter flowed with the rain.

"Show me."

A red glow.

But there were things blocking my way.

A lot of them.

"Hey, Witch! Get the mirror up quick!"

"I know. I missed it once, but I won't give it a second chance."

"Old man! When the Witch scatters the beam, let's cut it together!"

"I alone am enough."

"It's coming, everyone!"

Rain fell.

"-Scatter."

Six beams of light flashed. The light of mirrors. The red beam hit the first mirror and slid off. Smash! The first, second, and third mirrors shattered. But the fourth one didn't break and completely deflected the red beam.

"Sword Saint! Viper!"

Someone shouted.

"Inhale."

A breath was drawn.

"Yaaaaa!"

And exhaled.

The sky split.

In the moment between taking and releasing breath, the sky split open. Even the red beam was cleaved in half. It was like a vast sea parting on both sides.

The wide-open waterway.

Five voices chattered in their own way.

"Look! Look! I'm far from done!"

"Pretending without any dignity."

"Now's our chance!"

A voice whispered.

"I'll instantly teleport us right in front of the Demon King. Everyone, stick with me!"

"Hurry up! If the Demon King summons more monsters, it'll all be for naught!"

Five voices overlapped one after another.

Gathered in one place.

And then.

"Kim Gong-Ja!"

Someone reached out their hand.

Rain streamed down that person's face.

"Catch this!"

"....."

"We don't have time, hurry!"

Suddenly.

The eternal-like moment unfurled.

I could see the people around me.

I could hear the sounds nearby.

Not just that. Where I was, how I ended up here, everything came flooding back all at once.

I was in the middle of a battlefield.

The Empire's army and citizens were now clearly pushing

the monsters back. An endless stream of hunters poured from the collapsed gate. The follow-up participants. Finally, hunters who realized the situation of the 12th floor stage had plunged into battle.

"Hunter Kim Gong-Ja!"

Amid countless humans, we were at the forefront.

The direct path to the Demon King was empty, as the red strike of the Demon King had swept away even the monsters. Monsters would soon swarm, but not yet.

"Hurry!"

There, the hunters gathered in one place.

It looked somewhat comical.

The Heretic Inquisitor was piggybacked by the Viper. The Viper grimaced fiercely, clutching the Sword Saint's forearm. The Sword Saint, even more furrowed in brows, placed his hand on the Paladin's shoulder. The Paladin emotionlessly held the Witch's left hand.

'...This would go viral if it were a photo on the internet.'

Such was the terrifyingly magnificent scene that I was lost in absurd fantasies when the Witch shouted.

"You! If you don't grab on now, I'll leave you here!"

The Witch extended her right hand towards me.

'Ah.'

And then I realized.

This scene was about to disappear.

The sharp exchange I had with the Sword Saint.

How the Sword Saint reluctantly drew his sword, persuaded by the Paladin.

The apology the Sword Saint offered me.

The brutal murder of three hunters by the Heretic Inquisitor.

The fights we had.

The ceasefire.

Our united battle.

'All will vanish.'

Everything.

Like the rainwater that flows away to nowhere.

'They won't remember.'

But...

-What are you doing, partner?

That was enough.

-Now it's time to hunt the boss mob, kiddo.

Even if it's not remembered, it doesn't vanish.

I have my sword.

There is one human here who died on the 1st floor. There is one ghost who died on the 99th floor. No one knows of their deaths, yet we two have come this far.

"Understood."

When I return, nothing will have changed.

The Sword Saint will still doubt me, and when the time to select rewards comes again, the hunters will doubt or kill each other again.

"Let's go."

But I have grown stronger.

I won't let innocent people die anymore. I won't stand by as Sang-Ryun, the Countess, dies and the outside world loses contact with the Tower. I have a pretty good idea of who the traitor is. I was certain.

I will do better.

"Alright!"

The Witch firmly grabbed my hand.

"Transport!"

In the next moment, we leaped from the sky. Five of us landed simultaneously. In front of us stood the majestic Demon King, holding his sword.

-Interesting.

The Demon King was like a shadow taking on a human form.

-The heroes of the goddess, is it?

He had a face but no expression. Arms but no hands. Legs but no feet. It was as if the Demon King wasn't really standing on the ground but about to sink into it.

No. He was actually sinking. The Demon King's body continuously flowed downwards. His skin was murky like dirty water, flowing and surging up anew.

The master of nightmares.

A moving shadow.

An endlessly flowing darkness.

-Heroes, do you know there is a traitor among you? Surely you must. Yet you desperately trust each other, trying to piece together the torn fragments. Do you think those rags will cover you?

Was there a need to listen further?

At least in my view, there wasn't.

I, holding a sword, charged.

"Kim Gong-Ja!?"

The Paladin's alarmed voice came from behind.

"No! Wait! Don't attack alone! We need to cooperate and launch a joint attack-."

I'm sorry.

See you in the next life.

You won't remember today.

-Ho.

The Demon King chuckled as he watched me charge alone.

-Fool.

It was a strange laugh. The Demon King's face had no eyes or mouth, so the laughter seemed to flow from his skin. The shadowy, murky substance flowed and surged, bursting into laughter.

-Are you here to kill me, hero?

The Demon King swung his sword.

An attack I absolutely couldn't stop at that moment.

Just before the blade reached me to sever my neck.

"No."

I didn't try to block with the holy sword.

It was unnecessary.

Instead, I just respectfully raised my middle finger.

"I came to die to you, bastard."

Let's settle this in the next life.

I clearly saw the Demon King's laughter freeze for a moment.

"-----!"

"---Ja, ---!?"

Soon, nothing was audible.

Consciousness faded.

Vision, hearing, touch, various senses shut down instantly.

Only the rain falling on my face was felt until the very end.

And then.

[You have died.]

A voice rang out.

[The condition for your skill has been fulfilled by your death.]

[Randomly copying the monster Demon King of the Autumn Rain's skills.]

Here we go.

[Creating skill cards.]

It's time for Round 2.

Chapter 34: My Death (1)

Yes, I've returned.

Now I can say that I have 'returned' to this place.

[Randomly copying the monster Demon King of the Autumn Rain's skills.]

A pit of fallen consciousness. The Netherworld.

My hell.

People called me a loser. I was indeed a loser. It was this place that gave me a chance. When I was engulfed and burnt to death by the flames named Flame Emperor Yoo Soo-Ha, I did not miss the last opportunity given by the tower.

Why?

[Creating skill cards.]

Why did the tower give me such an opportunity?

It's the same question as 'why did it allow a psychopath like Yoo Soo-Ha such power?' Why? To me, an insignificant person who lurked in the community, burning with envy, why did it gift such an opportunity?

-Checked all the skills.

The Sword Emperor spoke.

-Do you want me to read them out now?

"Yes, please."

Perhaps the tower felt regret.

Listening to the skills recited by the Sword Emperor, I pondered.

Maybe the tower was disappointed with the attitude of the hunters.

+

[Resentment Flows Like Rain]

Rank: S-

Effect: You do not see. It becomes invisible. People believe that if something is not visible before their eyes, it does not exist. 'They are blind.' Yes, 'they are ignorant.'

Then, show them.

Show them vividly how many lives have died in their ignorance. As much as the innocent blood that flowed in this world, the sky will willingly pour down red rain.

*However, only the blood you have witnessed yourself will become rain.

+

Flame Emperor Yoo Soo-Ha must have literally shattered the 10th floor stage.

Not in the sense of clearing it, but literally breaking it. The resentment, grudges, and hatred of the dolls – he must have ignored all of it and shattered everything.

Didn't the tower find this regrettable?

Was it disappointed, perhaps?

"What's the next skill?"

-Here it is.

The Sword Emperor replied.

+

[Echoes of a Crying Heart]

Rank: A+

Effect: Your emotions fuel and strengthen your aura. The stronger the emotion, the more your aura responds. Vengeance. Hatred. Sorrow. All emotions, regardless of their nature, will ignite the flames.

*However, you will increasingly become addicted to that emotion.

+

‘.....’

I took time to ponder.

Yes, the tower must have been disappointed.

‘There’s a hidden quest on every floor.’

Just like the quest to comfort the dolls in the hellish mansion.

Maybe... there was also a hidden quest on the 12th floor.

Wanting to discover it, I focused intently on what the Sword Emperor was saying.

+

[Ghoul Summoning]

Rank: SS

Effect: You summon as monsters those whom you have personally killed. The deceased do not inherit their abilities or memories from life. They are merely summoned as monsters like goblins, orcs, zombies, skeletons, etc.

* However, you can only summon once a week.

+

There were many other minor skills.

But the three that struck a chord with me were these.

‘...Alright.’

I nodded.

‘I’ve decided.’

Which skill to choose.

How to clear not just the 12th floor, but up to the 20th.

‘I’ll go with this one.’

-Huh?

Surprised by my choice, the Sword Emperor tilted his head.

-You're choosing that one? Hm? I don't quite get it, but well, do as you please. I don't know what you're thinking, but you'll probably come up with some scheme anyway.

‘Look forward to it.’

I reached out towards the card, then paused and said,

‘Sword Emperor, sir. You're well-informed about the Sword Saint's schedule, right?’

-Huh? Well, yes. Marcus wakes up at dawn and his schedule is tightly packed until he goes to bed at night. Totally like an old man.

‘Please tell me about his evening schedule. I need it for something.’

-Sure thing.

I grasped the card.

A voice echoed in the dark space.

[Selection complete. Copying skill.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

And so, I returned to a day earlier.

[Your current Hunter Rank is D.]

[A penalty for the skill occurs.]

[Re-enacting the trauma of the enemy who killed you.]

Of course, there was a penalty.

I had to witness the trauma of the so-called Demon King of the Autumn Rain...

But we have to deal with the 12th floor first.

[The level of penalty is moderate.]

[Hungry Ghosts Realm.]

Let's talk about that nightmare a bit later.

The Sword Emperor taught me the value of living every second.

Indeed, it's incredibly hard for a person to truly live even a moment.

"---Leaving already?"

At the café.

The Witch looked up at me, sitting in her chair.

It wasn't just her. Leaders of huge guilds looked at me with various expressions. The Countess, who had died at the hands of the Demon King on the 12th floor, also gently smiled, sending off her regards.

1st Floor City Café.

The place where I made agreements with the guild leaders.

I had returned there.

‘A day.’

I realized how vast 24 hours could be.

It was dizzying.

In a day, we ushered in a new era, cleared the 11th floor, and fought the Demon King on the 12th. But, goodness gracious, all of this happened in less than a day.

“...Yes. The 11th floor is about to open.”

I felt a lump in my throat.

Clearing it with a cough, I continued.

“We need to prepare from now to not fall behind others.”

“How do you prepare when you don’t even know what the 11th floor will be like?”

“.....”

The 11th floor is not a problem.

The problem starts with the 12th floor, where the Demon King intervenes.

There, you all will be divided.

Someone will betray, and due to that betrayal, you'll be split.

Even deaths will occur.

“...Kim Gong-Ja?”

The Witch furrowed her brows.

“Are you okay? You suddenly look strange. Are you sick?”

“Hmm. I’m fine. Just overwhelmed being among such remarkable people in this gathering. It’s a bit emotional, you know.”

I smoothly continued.

In the meantime, the Sword Emperor watched me silently.

“Anyway, yes. I know what the 11th floor will be like. Not just that, I even know the contents of the quest.”

“.....!”

The guild leaders' eyes changed.

Information was as vital as life itself. I had effectively told them that I held the key to a life-threatening issue. Naturally, their expressions changed.

“I got the information as a reward for clearing the 10th floor.”

“...And you're choosing to reveal this here because...?”

The Witch asked.

“You're willing to share the information with us?”

“Of course.”

I raised my index finger.

“But there's a condition.”

“Speak. I’ll listen gladly.”

“If I ask for a [favor] someday, please grant it just once.”

I looked at each hunter seated around the table. They pondered my words. A favor. Simple yet heavy.

“What kind of favor?”

“I can’t say right now.”

“.....”

“But I swear here that it won't be anything that threatens your lives. It's not about asking for money either. Nor will it be about taking someone else's life. If you find it impossible, you can simply refuse at that time.”

“Hmm.”

The Heretic Inquisitor stroked his chin.

His right hand.

The hand that was lost to the Sword Saint's sword in the previous round.

“It sounds quite reasonable to me! Ahaha. With information, we can prepare in advance, and if we can prepare, there's hardly any problem we can't solve. I agree!”

“Hmm. If we have the right to refuse... Yes, I concur.”

The Inquisitor agreed, and the Countess joined in.

The rest of the hunters pondered for a while and then promised to comply with my condition.

"Okay."

First step cleared.

"Now, let me tell you. From the 11th to the 20th floor, the stage is set in a different world called the Aegim Empire. It is

under invasion by the Demon King, and the 11th floor is a battlefield focused on the port..."

My voice softly filled the café.

After hearing about the 11th floor, the guild leaders murmured among themselves.

"...Indeed. The tutorial was up to the 10th floor. From the 11th, we are getting into large-scale battles."

"Information worth its weight in gold."

"Yes! The nature of the fight will completely change!"

"Our guild members need to be informed to some extent. Oh dear. But our Sang-Ryun members aren't cut out for fighting..."

The hunters actively exchanged opinions.

I nodded.

'This will make clearing the 11th floor stage much easier.'

Already things are changing.

Different from the previous round, just this alone has caused many changes.

But it still wasn't enough.

"Then, I'll be leaving now... Ah, Paladin."

"Hmm?"

The Paladin turned her head. She was sipping her third Americano.

"What do you want?"

"Would you mind taking a walk outside with me? I need to discuss something with you."

"Hmm."

The Paladin looked around and shrugged.

"I was about to get up anyway. As long as the walk isn't too long..."

"It won't take much time. About 30 minutes."

"Then it's fine with me."

The Paladin put down her coffee cup.

"Happy to accept your date offer."

The bustling city was alive with people.

In the square, beside the fountain benches, and at outdoor restaurants, hunters discussed the 10th floor.

"Since there's no announcement yet, it must be some unknown rookie who cleared it!"

"Really? It's probably just the top guilds arranging something."

"Who really conquered it...?"

"I want to clear a floor too."

Buzzing noises filled the air.

For those whose tomorrow had been erased, the 10th floor clearance was a very recent event.

It felt like I was the only one walking through time without being deleted.

-Hey, zombie.

No, to be precise, I wasn't alone.

-He's following you.

I had the Guardian Spirit with me.

‘Are you sure?’

-Yes. But don't turn around.

To clear the 12th floor safely, two conditions were necessary.

One was the cooperation of the leaders of the major guilds.

The other was... for the Sword Saint not to view me as an enemy.

‘It's too late to clear up misunderstandings with the Sword Saint on the 12th floor.’

I learned this painfully in the last round.

‘I need to clear things up before climbing the tower.’

The Sword Saint has a very bad relationship with the guild leaders.

If he draws his sword against me, it automatically makes him an enemy of the guild leaders too. They are already at each other's throats, and adding a traitor to the mix?

A shortcut to disaster.

-Wow, he's stealthy. You wouldn't notice him even if you turned around. The old man has stealth skills.

‘Just make sure he's following properly.’

So, I was currently [fishing] for the Sword Saint.

I asked the Sword Emperor about his schedule and deliberately caught his attention according to that schedule. He spotted me while having dinner at his regular outdoor restaurant. He immediately stopped eating and started following me.

Of course.

"Kim Gong-Ja, where are we going?"

The Paladin walking beside me didn't know this.

"This alley leads to a rather gloomy neighborhood..."

"I want to introduce you to a shop. It's run by an unnamed Alchemist. The skills are really good here. If only it was more well-known, it would be a big hit, but it's struggling because it's not. If you think it's good, why not help the business?"

"Hmmm..."

The Paladin walked beside me, observing my face.

She was checking if I was lying.

"The Paladin activated the [Lie Detection] skill."

The Paladin spoke.

"Is what you just said true?"

"Yes, of course. Why would I lie to you, Paladin?"

It wasn't a lie since I did plan to introduce her to the Alchemist's shop.

"Sorry to ask, but are you planning something suspicious?"

"I'm seeking your help, Paladin. Even if something dangerous happens, it will endanger my life, not yours. Trust me."

"Hmm."

The Paladin slowly nodded.

Everything must have been verified as the truth.

"I apologize."

The Paladin smiled.

"I'm often told that I'm too suspicious. Let's continue."

Okay. Passed.

We passed through the alley and safely arrived at the Alchemist's shop. The Alchemist was moving heavy luggage, possibly a new machine. She first looked puzzled at our approach but recognized me and beamed brightly.

"Ah! Customer!"

"Are you still open?"

"Ahaha. Business hours are over, but I always open the shop for customers! Especially for my first regular customer!"

The Alchemist put down the luggage.

A few days ago, she looked disheveled, but now he had completely transformed. she had visited a barber and bought new clothes, finally resembling a proper shop owner.

"Whew. Ah, sorry. Customer. And this lady is...?"

"This hunter is the Vice-Captain of the Vigilante Corps. You've heard, right? Known as the Paladin."

"...Yes?"

The Alchemist's eyes wavered behind her glasses.

"Vice Guild Leader of the Vigilante Corps!?"

"Yep."

"That's a high-ranking person!"

As expected, a normal hunter would react like this.

"Into this humble shop... Eek! Drugs!? Are you here for drug inspection!? I, I haven't manufactured drugs! Even though I operate in this alley, I never, no, not just drugs, I never produced even 1 gram of harmful medicine!"

"....."

"I've lived conscientiously! I will continue to do so! Please, spare me from the investigation!"

The Alchemist fell flat on the floor.

This wasn't a normal reaction.

"Hmm..."

The Paladin looked troubled. According to [Lie Detection], her words were true, so she seemed to be pondering whether to consider her a quirky lunatic or an honest merchant.

"Alright, alright. Let's not worry."

Thump thump.

I tapped the Alchemist's shoulder.

"I didn't come here to report you to the Vigilante Corps. You have such good skills and a pure heart."

"Is that so...?"

"I feel sorry that your shop isn't doing well despite your skills. I came here to introduce you to the Vice-Captain."

The Alchemist lifted his head, his mouth agape.

"Introduction?"

"Literally. Give the Vice-Captain some potions to try. Who knows? If she likes them, she might make an exclusive contract with you."

"....."

"Wouldn't it be easier for you if you supplied potions to the Vigilante Corps?"

The Alchemist blinked.

It took her a moment to grasp what I said.

Soon after, she grabbed my hand tightly.

"An angel...!"

I'm Gong-Ja, not an angel.

"When the shop was almost closed, you helped, you even placed a huge order, and now... you're even providing me with connections... Are you an angel...? How can I repay this kindness...?"

At that moment, when the Alchemist who would later be known as the Master Alchemist shone brightly...

Thud.

Someone stepped into the quiet alley. The footsteps were unusually heavy, making me, the Paladin, and the Alchemist all turn our heads.

“Stop there.”

The footsteps' owner was dressed in a black suit.

"Leave the man there and clear the area."

He coldly glared at me.

The Sword Saint.

The old man of this round who still didn't trust me.

The low voice of the seasoned Swordsman echoed quietly in the alley.

"This old man would like to have a quiet word alone with that man."

Fine.

Time to clear the second condition.

Chapter 35: My Death (2)

"Sir Sword Saint...?"

The Paladin narrowed her eyes.

"What business do you have here?"

She probably never expected to meet the Sword Saint in such an alley. It was an unexpected location and an unexpected person. The Sword Saint's demeanor was too serious to simply dismiss as coincidence.

"Young lady, your ears seem to be failing you."

The old man was radiating hostility towards me.

"I said to clear the path. I have business with that man

there."

"Such harsh words. Do you have something to discuss privately with Hunter Kim Gong-Ja?"

"Ha! I have no interest in what that guy's name is."

"....."

The atmosphere in the alley changed dramatically.

The Paladin no longer narrowed her eyes but just stared coldly at the Sword Saint. Clear wariness. As the number two of a major guild, she must have concluded that the aged swordsman didn't approach with friendly intentions.

"Make way."

The Sword Saint spoke again.

"I have already asked you to move three times."

"A matter that cannot be resolved by saying once won't be resolved by saying thrice or even thirty times. Have you forgotten such a simple truth of life in your old age, Sword Saint?"

The Paladin slowly reached for her sword hilt.

"Hunter Kim Gong-Ja has formally joined the Five Great Guilds. Attacking him is tantamount to declaring war on the Five Great Guilds. I don't know what you're thinking, but don't expect the Vigilante Corps to stand idly by."

"Ha!"

The Sword Saint let out a scoff.

"As expected. All the guilds are in this together, eh? I knew it."

" 'In this together'? I'm increasingly unable to follow your train of thought."

As time passed, the air in the alley grew tenser.

"Sword Saint. I'm aware that you sometimes go on [human hunts], having received several reports. Of course, the Vigilante Corps is not idle enough to interfere with your personal beliefs. But if you try to hunt in front of me, that's a different story."

"Is it different?"

"If it happens, I will fight you with my life on the line."

"Do you believe you can stop me?"

"No."

The Paladin stared unemotionally at the old man.

"I will fight you with all my might and die. And the moment I die, you will become a lowlife murderer who killed an innocent person. Sword Saint, if you wish to spend the rest of your life as a murderer, feel free to attack."

"....."

"If there's not much left of your life anyway, I'll be the one to throw you into the gutter."

The old face of the Sword Saint twisted in anger.

It was already evening. The sun was setting quickly in the alley. The sounds of people walking in the distant alley reached us, but no one else was here besides us. The Sword Saint and the Paladin faced each other in a standoff, with silence enveloping the scene.

This silence...

'Yes.'

This was why I brought the Paladin here.

'The Sword Saint has a weakness for innocent people.'

And the Paladin is probably the only high-ranking official in a major guild who is truly innocent.

Last round, on the 12th floor stage, when the Sword Saint tried to kill me, it was the Paladin who stepped forward and mediated between us. The Sword Saint cryptically agreed to let her mediate.

-...Paladin girl. You are the only one here who hasn't harmed a single person. Very well. I will trust you too.

An ordinary-sounding statement.

But I didn't miss it.

Meaning...

'The Paladin's kill count is [0].'

No matter how ruthless the Sword Saint's ethical views were... or rather, precisely because of his extreme views, he couldn't help but see the Paladin as a good person in his eyes.

'The Sword Saint can never harm the Paladin.'

A sort of compatibility.

To the wicked, the Sword Saint is a fearsome killer.

But to the righteous, the Sword Saint is just a harmless old man.

And moreover...

'It's not just the Paladin.'

Thud.

Someone stepped forward. It was the Alchemist. Startled by the successive appearances of the Paladin and the Sword Saint, the Alchemist had been frozen but finally stepped forward, arms spread wide.

"Excuse me!"

The Alchemist spoke, his jaw trembling. Despite the risk of being beheaded by the Sword Saint in less than a second, he

protested.

"Whatever the matter, this customer here is my benefactor!"

The future Guild Master of the Alchemy Guild.

Master Alchemist.

A hunter destined for success shouted with all his might.

"Though Babylon doesn't have laws like the outside world... protecting a customer is a natural duty for a shop owner... Even if it's the Sword Saint! You cannot mess with my shop's customer!"

"....."

"I'm sorry, but please leave the front of my shop! This is a formal request to leave!"

The Alchemist yelled. The Sword Saint, for the same reason, became less intimidating.

'Saintess. Paladin. Master Alchemist.'

These three were known to be kind-hearted hunters in the future.

'Even when the Flame Emperor set fire to the slum, the Paladin and the Master Alchemist were among the first to arrive at the scene.'

Good people.

People who live a bit more at a loss, suffer a bit more stress, and thus are often treated as fools by others.

But the only people who can stop the Sword Saint, the number one hunter in the ranking, were these good people.

No one else could.

"What will you do?"

The Paladin asked.

"If you want to plunge into the gutter, I'm more than willing to accompany you."

"....."

The Sword Saint hesitated for a while. If I was right, the outcome was already determined.

And I was right.

It didn't take long for the aged swordsman to retract his hand from the sword hilt.

"...It just wasn't my day today."

The Sword Saint withdrew his hostility.

Even as he turned away, the old man glared at me until the end.

"Pray that you don't cross paths with me. If it weren't for the Paladin and the shop owner here, your head would already be

rolling on the ground."

Good.

Condition for stage two cleared.

This meant the Sword Saint wouldn't immediately start swinging his sword upon seeing me. Even if he decided to kill me, at least we could exchange a few words first.

What I needed was just that brief moment.

"Sword Saint!"

Before the old man completely turned away, I called out.

"I will be waiting for you tomorrow at noon in the northern plaza of the city!"

"....."

"If you wish to know what kind of person I am, please come tomorrow at noon!"

The old man briefly turned his head to glare at me. His blue eyes scrutinized my face. But that was it. Without any further response, the Sword Saint quietly left the alley.

Thud. Thud.

Only after his footsteps had completely faded did the Paladin finally breathe a sigh of relief.

"Phew! I aged ten years in a night, meeting a murderer like that."

Murderer.

"...Is the Sword Saint famous for being a murderer?"

"Not famous. But at least the heads of the Five Great Guilds know about it."

The Paladin shook her head.

"I don't know the details, but he lost his daughter and son-in-law to a serial killer in the outside world. Since then, he has been merciless to murderers. His hands are lethal. Well, but there's no evidence, so we just watch... Um, of course, this story is a secret."

The Sword Emperor chimed in.

-Right. Marcus told me about it. His daughter and son-in-law were killed by a serial killer. Only his granddaughter and grandson barely survived.

'Why are you telling me this now?'

-Huh? What do you mean? You didn't ask.

The Sword Emperor shamelessly replied.

Of course, that's what he was like.

"I can understand the Sword Saint's feelings to some extent."

The Paladin muttered, looking around.

The shabby alley.

The Harlem-like area of the city spread out like a shadow behind the sunset.

"Working with the Vigilante Corps, you encounter various criminals. Talking to them, you often wonder if such people deserve to live. Killing those who deserve death in advance... Even I am sometimes tempted by that thought."

The Paladin mumbled.

"All the heads of the major guilds have their own deep stories. Hunter Kim Gong-Ja, now that you've joined us, you'll gradually come to understand... Really, there are many places so rotten they stink. I wonder how you'll react... Hmm."

The Paladin shook her head, perhaps thinking she had shared too much with an outsider.

"I've strayed off topic."

She deliberately brightened her voice.

"So, how much for the potions? The Vigilante Corps is always tight on budget, so it's a problem if it's too expensive..."

The next day.

I stood alone in the desolate field, looking at my smartphone.

Unsurprisingly, not a single person was in the usually quiet plain. Of course, the hunters of Babylon were gathered in the square, celebrating a festival.

It was similar to the last round.

'But there are differences.'

I glanced at the news headlines on my phone screen.

-[Breaking] 11th Floor a Mass Battle? Black Dragon Executives Gather.

-As the festival approaches, major guilds hastily organize teams for the raid...

-Inquisitor's exclusive interview! "To conquer the 11th floor, you must form a team."

-Another secret pact among major guilds?

-The source of information remains a mystery...

Indeed.

The world had changed a bit.

Precisely because of me.

"....."

And it will change a bit more.

"Hmm."

From the other side of the field, the Sword Saint slowly walked towards me. Perhaps it was because of his black suit, but the sky behind the old man seemed unusually blue. Faint cheers from the city in the distance could be heard.

[00:01:31]

Above us, a clock of light floated gently in the sky.

The blue sky, the voices of the people, the clock of light.

With everything behind him, the Sword Saint approached me.

"You're really alone."

The Sword Saint stopped.

"Do you have confidence that you can face me alone? Well, for an assassin who has committed such slaughter, you must be confident in your abilities."

His gaze.

The way the old man looked at me felt quite unfamiliar. It was completely different from the last cycle. Last time, our eyes conveyed mutual trust and recognition.

But now, there was neither trust nor recognition.

Distrust. Hostility.

Just the look of someone seeing a murderer.

-Zombie?

'.....'

-Are you okay?

I nodded inwardly.

'Yes. I'm fine.'

It just hurt my heart a little.

"Sword Saint."

I gathered my thoughts.

"There's something important I want to tell you."

"Speak. If it's your last words, I'll listen."

"I know why you want to kill me."

The Sword Saint's lips curled.

"Indeed. It's like a thief feeling their own foot. You know your own sins."

"It's because of a skill called [Eyes of a Detective]."

"....."

The Sword Saint's expression hardened for a moment.

"How did you...?"

"Please believe what I'm about to say."

I began to speak, thinking.

How difficult it is to gain someone's trust.

Everyone has their own stubbornness. For the Sword Saint, [Eyes of a Detective] was his stubbornness. A skill that shows the kill count of others. The fact that this skill could be wrong, that it could make errors, the Sword Saint just ignored it.

That's why it's stubbornness.

The man before me had lived his life according to this stubbornness.

People who have lived with stubbornness can't separate it from their lives. It's intertwined. Giving up their stubbornness is like giving up their life.

'I have to convince such a person.'

Even more, I have to gain his trust.

To persuade the man before me to deny his own life.

Thinking about it again, how difficult is this task?

'But... I can do it.'

I clenched my fist.

'If it's about putting my life on the line, that's all.'

I began to speak.

"Sword Saint. I'm a prophet."

"What?"

"To be exact, I have a skill like prophecy. Thanks to this skill, I know that you have [Eyes of a Detective]. If things continue as they are, you'll kill me, and I'll ask why I must die."

"....."

"When that time comes, you'll say you have [Eyes of a Detective] and this skill shows the number [4093] above my head."

A little lie.

But right now, I had to use a lie to convince the old man.

That I know the future.

Only if the Sword Saint trusts this fact can we safely clear the 12th floor.

[00:00:00]

The clock in the sky pointed to zero. Fireworks burst in the distant city. Cheers celebrating the opening of a new era echoed faintly.

The old man and I.

The only two people away from the celebration, looking at each other.

After a long silence, the Sword Saint spoke.

"Guess."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm hiding my left hand behind my back and holding up some fingers. Guess how many fingers I'm holding. If you're

truly a prophet, it should be easy to figure out."

Okay.

As expected, he went this way.

As I predicted.

"If you fail to guess, I'll consider it as you daring to lie..."

Probably, the Sword Saint was fully prepared for any attack from me. Whether it was a surprise attack, using an item, or employing a skill, the Sword Saint would easily block it.

But 'this' he wouldn't have expected.

Before the Sword Saint could finish speaking, I drew a dagger. The Sword Saint flinched. And when he prepared to defend against an attack, I didn't hesitate to stab myself in the neck.

"What!?"

The Sword Saint's eyes widened.

The aged swordsman had only prepared for an attack from me. He never expected I would stab myself. A moment of carelessness. A second of time. Thanks to that, I was able to end my life.

And then.

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

I only needed a second.

And so, I started the day again.

I descended from the 10th floor stage, met with the heads of the major guilds, played poker, won, asked the Paladin to join me in the alley, encountered the Sword Saint, and was defended by the Paladin and the Apothecary. The Sword Saint backed off, and I shouted to meet him tomorrow at noon.

[00:00:00]

And once again, I stood in this moment.

Chapter 35 Part 3:

The Sword Saint spoke the same as yesterday.

"Guess."

The same test as the last cycle.

However, my reaction was not the same as last time. When the Sword Saint said to guess, I didn't respond dumbfoundedly with 'Yes?'. Instead, as if I had anticipated it, I answered promptly.

"Right now, you're hiding your left hand behind your back."

"....."

"You're going to lift some fingers and then challenge me to guess how many. You're thinking that if I'm truly a prophet, it wouldn't be difficult to figure out."

The Sword Saint's face became even more rigid.

"Sword Saint. Please believe me. I have attained a skill similar to prophecy. It's simple for you to kill me here, but if you do, safely clearing the 12th floor stage will become impossible. Many people will lose their lives."

"...Wait. Hold on."

The Sword Saint spoke.

"This alone is insufficient proof. It might not be prophecy, but [Clairvoyance] or [Mind Reading]. Where's the guarantee that you're really a prophet...?"

Right.

Once isn't enough.

I was prepared for this.

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

Convincing one person isn't easy, especially if that person has reached the pinnacle in their field.

"This alone is insufficient proof. It might not be prophecy..."

"You suspect that instead of prophecy, it could be [Clairvoyance] or [Mind Reading]. You're wondering where's the guarantee that I'm truly a prophet."

But that's okay.

Test me as much as you want.

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

Doubt all you want.

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

Whether it takes a week or a fortnight, it doesn't matter.

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

I am confident I can convince you.

My death is longer than your life.

"....."

Finally, the Sword Saint closed his lips.

All his suspicions and doubts were pre-empted and overturned by me.

I spoke calmly.

"Sword Saint. Please believe me."

"....."

"If you kill me here, it will be disastrous. Numerous casualties will occur on the 12th floor stage. I'm not trying to say I'm innocent, nor am I begging to be spared forever."

"...Then what?"

"Five days."

I held up five fingers.

"Just don't kill me for the next five days. Follow me around, and decide for yourself whether I truly deserve to die or if I'm actually a prophet who approached you."

The Sword Saint was silent.

I didn't need to stab myself with the dagger again; I knew the old man was conflicted internally. It was the moment for the final blow.

And I knew what would serve as the 'final blow.'

"You still don't believe my words."

"....."

"Sword Saint. Later, much later, you'll tell me a phrase. You said if I say this one phrase, you'll believe I'm truly a prophet."

"...What is it?"

I answered.

"Sword Emperor."

The old man's eyes widened.

Regardless, I continued.

"I don't know whose alias it is, but you said you'd believe me if I said this."

"....."

Silence settled.

Far in the city, cheers still resounded. The figure of the Goddess giving a long speech during her descent was faintly visible.

As the Goddess disappeared, the aged swordsman finally spoke.

"Five days, you say. Young man."

"Yes."

"Fine."

The Sword Saint looked into my eyes and said.

"For the next five days, I'll follow you. I'll watch every word, action, attitude, and posture you have. Then I'll judge whether you deserve to die or if you really are a prophet who approached me."

"....."

"Is that all?"

Good.

"...Yes. That's enough."

I bowed deeply.

"Sincerely, thank you."

I had cleared all the conditions.

First, to get a promise from the guild leaders.

Second, to ensure the Sword Saint wouldn't kill me on sight.

Third, to gain the Sword Saint's trust, at least for now.

'Finally.'

Finally, I can ascend to the 12th floor without the guild leaders and the Sword Saint being at odds.

The needless suspicion and fighting between them will be gone.

The needless deaths of innocent hunters too.

"Then, Sword Saint. I'll see you at the next stage."

I spoke, holding back the lump in my throat.

The Sword Saint looked at me with a strange gaze, but I had no time to care about that. I had to do what was necessary.

"Transfer."

Whoosh!

White light enveloped me.

Feeling my heart pounding, I thought.

'Now, only the hunt for the Demon King remains.'

The world has changed.

'Wait for me, Demon King.'

And it will change a bit more.

Chapter 36: My Death (3)

As the white light faded, I found myself back in the midst of a battlefield.

A familiar scene unfolded before my eyes.

-Kirrr, Kieeek!

Strange monsters howling.

Soldiers fighting and bleeding against them.

Thousands of monsters from the monster legion were rushing to take over the harbor.

11th floor stage. The Supply Route Defense Battle.

The first battle to protect the Aegim Empire was unfolding.

"Thank you! You've come to help our empire, brave warriors!"

The welcoming figure of the general NPC was no different from the last cycle. Wearing the same armor, with the same expression, he recited the same lines.

"Brave warriors! Please help us save the empire..."

But that was it.

Everything changed from that point on, compared to the last cycle.

"Black Dragon, assemble!"

A harsh voice cut through the battlefield. The Black Dragon's master, the Witch. As she had done in the battle at a certain city gate, which only I remembered, the Witch shouted with aura-filled voice. Something about her voice instinctively captured people's attention.

"From now on, Black Dragon takes command of this battle!"

The Witch commanded the battlefield.

"Celestial Martial Guild! Vigilante Corps! Take the left wing and break through! Temple of the Omnipotent God and Sang-Ryun, take the right wing! We, the Black Dragon, will break through the center. If anyone has a problem with my command, speak up after the battle! If you have the luxury to chatter now, catch one more orc!"

The world had changed.

"Uoooh!"

The shouts of the hunters were evidence of change.

The giant guilds moved in unison. Was it because they shared information about the 11th floor stage being a mass battle from me? Unlike the last cycle, where hunters were dumbfounded, there were no such hunters this time.

"Follow me, lads! If any of you die before me, you're dead meat!"

The Celestial Martial Guild, led by Viper.

"What the heck... No, never mind. Everyone, back up Celestial Martial! Make sure those boars don't get isolated!"

The Vigilante Corps, led by the Paladin.

"Ahaha! Independent actions are punishable by death, everyone! Strictly move in teams!"

The Temple of the Omnipotent God, led by the Heretic Inquisitor.

"Everyone's so full of energy. Let's move slowly, don't rush."

Sang-Ryun, led by the Countess.

There was no weakness in any guild. Everyone played their part efficiently in the battlefield. Hunters specialized in combat led the charge with their swords, while those specialized in support chanted magic skills from behind. Like a mighty river, the hunters pushed and pushed against the monster legion.

"Ooh...!"

The general NPC exclaimed in admiration. Perhaps moved by the sight before him.

"Indeed, the gods have not abandoned our empire yet! Look! The heroes from another world are pushing the monsters back relentlessly! Soldiers of the empire! Can we just stand by and watch? All troops, follow me!"

The soldiers roared and charged together.

I stepped back and observed the scene.

"....."

Right.

People only need a small hint.

With just a little change from me, with a bit more covert action, the landscape unfolding on the stage changes so

drastically.

At that moment, Bae Hu-Reong, the Sword Emperor, whispered softly.

-Zombie, are you okay?

'Yes? What do you mean?'

-Aren't you the type who likes to stand out in front of others? You're crazy for people's attention. Doesn't this decrease the attention you get compared to the last round?

'Well, I suppose so.'

I shrugged.

'But this doesn't feel bad either.'

-Ho? Look at you. Have you grown a bit?

'Grown? I still plan to grab what I can take care of.'

Suddenly, I felt a gaze on the back of my neck.

Turning around, I saw the aged swordsman silently staring at me.

The Sword Saint.

"Oh."

I asked, a bit startled.

"What are you doing there... sir?"

"I'm watching you."

The Sword Saint replied matter-of-factly.

"Didn't I say that earlier? I'll decide whether to kill you or

not after following you for 5 days. So, I'm observing."

"...Eh. Um. You're not seriously planning to follow me around 24/7 for 5 days, are you?"

"Strange question. Of course, that's my intention."

Oh my.

What's this? A stalker?

"No, sir, you should fight monsters too! The quest rewards are given based on contributions to the battle!"

"Hmm."

The Sword Saint glanced away and casually swung his sword.

Swoosh!

A blue aura swiftly swept forward. About twenty goblins, unable to even scream properly, had their heads flown off. A fountain of blood bloomed in the middle of the battlefield.

The Sword Saint turned back to me leisurely.

"I'll take care of the swordplay intermittently, so don't worry."

"....."

"Focus on your own tasks without concern for me."

Indeed, a true old-timer.

The senior was on a different level.

"Phew, this is something."

Shaking my head, I approached the Witch of Black Dragon. The Black Dragon guild members tried to block me, but upon seeing the Sword Saint following me, they hesitated.

Eventually, the Witch noticed our approach and gestured to allow us through.

"What's up? Hunter Kim Gong-Ja. And the old man too."

The Witch frowned and got irritated.

"I'm busy commanding the guilds right now. I'm not in the right mind to talk. If it's not something important, please leave soon. Ah, there! Team 4!"

While rebuking the Sword Saint, she hurriedly issued orders to her guild members.

"Don't foolishly charge forward, stay in your positions! If you don't want a spear in your butt, stay put and don't move! What are you doing, Team 12! Are we here for a stroll!? Hunt properly!"

"Sorry, Black Dragon Witch!"

"Sorry my foot! If you have time to apologize, swing your sword once more!"

She seemed really busy.

I quickly stated my business.

"Black Dragon Witch. I have a reward from clearing the 10th floor."

"So what about it? What's the reward?"

"It's a mini-map reward. I can see the entire battlefield as if it's a mini-map. Enemies and allies are marked as dots. Naturally, I can also see where the enemy commanders are."

"....."

Finally, the Witch turned to look me in the eye.

"Really?"

"Why would I lie? It's true."

"Then why didn't you come to me sooner instead of now!"

Abruptly, the Witch grabbed my right hand.

"Speak! Where is the boss monster!?"

Her true nature seemed to emerge when she was out of her mind.

"Um, right over there."

I pointed in the direction indicated on the mini-map.

"Surrounded by monsters, it's not clearly visible, but over there-"

"Consent to use my skill! Hurry!"

"Ah, I consent to the use of Black Dragon Witch's skill."

"Teleport!"

Whoosh!

The next moment, the Witch and I were floating in mid-air, plummeting towards the ground. In the midst of the battlefield's sky. Far below, a swarm of monsters and human armies were clashing fiercely.

The Witch, with her black hair fluttering in the wind, shouted.

"Where!?"

"There!"

I had to shout loudly to be heard over the roaring wind.

"I'm pointing in the direction of-"

"Teleport!"

With each call of the Witch's Teleport skill, we rapidly approached the location of the boss monster.

I held the Witch a bit tighter. There was no particular intention, just a thought that I might fall from the sky if I only held her hand.

She seemed to understand my intention and cooperatively stayed still, continuing to shout with a frown.

"Do you have some confidence in using your sword!?"

"I can handle the boss here!"

"Then I'll Teleport you above the monster! Finish it in one blow! Got it!?"

"Yess!"

I understood very well what she meant.

"Teleport!"

As the last Teleport concluded, we flew right above the boss monster.

Just ten meters below.

A great goblin wielding a luxurious golden staff was squawking orders at surrounding monsters, seemingly commanding the legion.

"Kim Gong-Ja!"

"Iyaaaaaa!"

I wrapped my body in aura and yelled. Hearing our voices, the great goblin commanding the monsters looked up, puzzled.

-Gurk?

The great goblin's gaze met mine.

But it was already too late.

Swoosh!

My blade precisely penetrated the great goblin's skull. The body split in half.

Despite being a boss monster, the great goblin couldn't even resist. It just looked at me pitifully till the end. Well, considering it's the second time I've killed it, its frustration was understandable.

-Gurk...

-Kurrk...?

The monsters, having suddenly lost their leader, stared at me in confusion. The swift turn of events seemed too much for them to comprehend.

I smirked at them.

"Why?"

Trampling over the great goblin's corpse.

"Do you all want to be sliced in half too?"

Only then did the monsters belatedly scream in terror.

-Kieeeee!

-Kurk! Kur?

Goblins and orcs, mere pawns, scattered in utter panic. One fleeing led to six, and six led to thirty. Like dominoes falling, monsters started fleeing in all directions.

"Ajaa!"

The Witch clenched her little fist beside me.

"Well done, Kim Gong-Ja! Amazing! We might even clear the 20th floor soon at this rate! I thought at least five thousand would be sacrificed... A great start, indeed."

This excited demeanor of the Witch was new to me.

Was she emotionless in the last cycle because too many hunters died early on? Now, with fewer casualties, she's happier?

'She's simpler than I thought.'

Someone who's sad or happy depending on the number of casualties.

I smiled.

"Easy there, let's calm down a bit."

"People should get excited when they're excited! I'll praise you again. Really well done, Kim Gong-Ja! It's unprecedented to clear a stage with so few sacrifices since the tower's beginning. You should be proud!"

The Witch smiled brightly.

Not just the slight curl of her lips as when she spoke from the ramparts, but a genuinely broad smile.

"Even though you could have hoarded the clear reward for yourself... really... I'm glad to have a new hero like you. What a relief."

"....."

"From today, all the media and reporters in the tower will rush to you, so be prepared!"

Pure goodwill.

'Right.'

The Witch extended her hand for a handshake.

'That's it.'

Grasping her hand firmly, I thought.

'To receive recognition from ordinary people... to be adored, envied, antagonized, and treated as a hero by them. It all feels incredibly good.'

But...

'It's not the same as being acknowledged by these people.'

People who have lived diligently.

Even if they can't say they've achieved the best in life, they can definitely say they lived their best.

The Sword Saint, who reached the pinnacle with a single sword.

The Witch, who built the largest force in the world of the tower.

And many others living their lives earnestly.

'I...'

Holding the Witch's hand tightly.

'I want to live a life recognized by these people.'

Not just that.

'I want to protect them.'

So they won't be manipulated by the Demon King.

So they won't be insulted or denigrated like the Flame Emperor, not ridiculed or met with cruel laughter, nor involved in petty schemes, but purely recognized... and to be recognized by them.

No.

To be admired by them.

Even if it seems an impossible dream.

'I want to live that way.'

In a slightly changed world.

I, too, wanted to change a bit more.

That was my deepest desire.

-Darn kid.

The Guardian Spirit muttered.

-Watching you is actually worthwhile.

Soon after, the announcement for clearing the 11th floor echoed.

Huge letters floated in the sky.

[Contribution Ranking]

1st. Kim Gong-Ja

2nd. Black Witch

3rd. Heretic Inquisitor

4th. Viper

5th. Paladin

6th. Countess

7th. Sword Saint

...

...

...

+

As the world changed, the clear rankings subtly shifted.

The Sword Saint, who was 2nd last cycle, slid down to 7th.

Meanwhile, the Witch, previously at 6th, jumped to 2nd.

[The top contributors will be given early entry into floor 12.]

[Until the top contributors receive their rewards, the remaining participants cannot enter floor 12.]

[Once again announcing to everyone. The top contributors...]

Finally, the voice opening the 12th floor, the floor of the Demon, echoed.

"With this momentum, we might even clear the 20th floor soon."

The Witch spoke with a slightly flushed face.

"I expected at least five thousand sacrifices... A great start."

No.

If left alone, the 12th floor will result in horrific sacrifices.

Notably, the loss of the Countess, crucial for external trade, will collapse the tower's economy. Chaos will ensue. Not just five thousand, but fifty thousand, or even five hundred thousand could perish.

'That's why...'

Therefore,

'I'll carry.'

Blinding light enveloped us.

When I opened my eyes again, I was there.

The imperial audience hall.

The marble floor, not yet stained with blood like last cycle, was still white.

"Oh?"

"Hmm."

Hunters were summoned one after another. Their expressions upon seeing me varied. Some smiled, 'I knew you'd be here first,' and others resented, 'Even this time, you're first.'

Just like last round.

"Hunter Kim Gong-Ja! You were amazing!"

The Heretic Inquisitor, rushing to praise me, was also the same.

"Cooperating with the Black Dragon Witch like that! Is pinpointing the boss monster your reward from the last stage? Probably..."

"Wait a moment."

But unlike last round, the Heretic Inquisitor couldn't continue praising me. I raised my hand to stop his words. He looked puzzled.

"Yes?"

"I have something to say to everyone first."

The hunters looked at me.

The Witch still slightly excited, the Viper with a stern face, the Paladin indifferent, and the Countess fanning herself.

As everyone watched with various expressions-.

'Where's the Sword Saint?'

I first checked the old man's whereabouts.

"....."

The Sword Saint stood alone in a corner of the audience hall. Quiet. Despite our eyes meeting, he showed no particular reaction, just silently observing me with crossed arms.

'Good enough!'

Far different from the last round when he immediately attacked with his sword.

'It's done now!'

The frustrating conflicts that erupted at the beginning of the 12th floor are now gone.

I made them disappear.

Feeling my heart pounding, I spoke.

"Yesterday. I told you something."

"Yesterday? What was it?"

"My favor."

The Heretic Inquisitor's question was met with my response.

"I asked if I ever asked for a favor, to please listen just once. I said that."

"Ah, yes! Of course, I remember!"

"Now, I want you to fulfill that promise."

I looked at the hunters slowly.

The guild leaders perked up their ears at the mention of a favor.

"For the next five days. Just stay here without doing anything."

"....."

"And then..."

I took a deep breath.

And began to speak.

"I will clear up to the 20th floor within these five days."

Chapter 37: The Alias of the Hero (1)

In the last round.

It was when the tutorial of the tower had ended.

-Warriors.

-The ones who chose to climb the tower.

The hunters shouted the countdown energetically in the square. The Goddess descended above the square. She recited solemnly, like a priest offering a prayer.

-From the eleventh to the twentieth floor.

-You will face a trial.

-A trial of faith.

The hunters didn't pay attention to the Goddess's words.

A new era. A new floor.

Excited about the long-awaited floor finally opening, everyone rushed to the 11th floor. Some hunters even tested whether they would be cut by a sword.

-You will find the answer.

But...

-The answer you find will reveal who you truly are.

I didn't do that.

I stayed till the end, listening.

-Thus, you will come to know yourselves.

Looking back now.

We had already received a revelation.

About what would happen from the 12th floor.

-The ones who chose to climb the tower.

It wasn't about what rewards we would receive. It wasn't about who to suspect. The tower hinted that only the answer we found mattered.

-May fortune be with you.

The Goddess was just quietly offering her prayers.

Now, once again arriving at the 12th floor.

I nodded, my mind colored by that scene.

And I declared.

"I will clear up to the 20th floor within five days."

The answer I had decided on.

The atmosphere was silent.

The first to break the silence was the master of the Black Dragon.

"Wait a moment. 5 days...?"

The Witch looked bewildered.

"Did I hear that wrong? It sounded like you said you'd conquer up to the 20th floor in 5 days. If it's a joke, it's not funny. Drop it."

"No, you heard right. It's not a joke."

"....."

The Witch closed her lips.

The hush that settled in the audience hall gradually turned into a murmur. The expressions of the hunters changed. Some looked incredulous, others disbelieving, and some didn't know how to react...

'Such a reaction is natural.'

I calmly faced the gaze of all the hunters.

It was a declaration that made no sense by any conventional logic.

"...It's impossible, Kim Gong-Ja."

After a while, the Witch spoke.

"You know it. It took us years just to clear up to the 10th floor. Sure, you might be confident after clearing the 11th floor in less than an hour, but... it's too much. Isn't that overconfidence? Aren't you a bit too excited?"

"Black Dragon Witch."

I bowed my head.

"Please."

"....."

"Remember, I cleared the 10th floor. Not for you, but for myself. I wanted to succeed. But the rewards and achievements I gained from clearing the 10th floor, I shared with you all."

Including the information that wide-scale battles would occur from now on.

And the mini-map showing the boss monster's location.

I shared the information, and the guilds minimized their losses.

"It wasn't just me but all of us who benefited from it."

Therefore, I could say with confidence.

"I have the right to ask you for a favor."

"....."

"Please just wait for 5 days. Not until I clear the 20th floor, but just wait for 5 days, regardless of success or failure. That's my request."

Silence swirled in the audience hall.

It didn't feel disadvantageous to me.

Maybe that's why.

[Welcome, Hunter Kim Gong-Ja.]

[You have conquered the 11th floor in 1st place.]

[You will receive the 11th floor's clear reward.]

The reason why the notification came much earlier than the last round.

In the previous round, rewards were only given after the Sword Saint's swordplay was over. It took a considerable amount of time. But this time, it was different. As soon as I started speaking, the topic of rewards surged to the surface.

'Alright.'

As if desperately trying to catch my attention and interest.

[The Goddess of Protection offers you a reward.]

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain proposes a reward for you.]

The notifications sounded one after another.

I didn't choose any reward.

Just smiling inwardly.

'Getting impatient, Demon King?'

Soon the Goddess's and the Demon King's rewards appeared. I briefly glanced at them. Beyond that, I showed no further interest or curiosity.

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain suggests you choose a reward.]

A voice echoed in my head.

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain hints that you could even refuse the reward.]

Several times. Continuously.

My attitude didn't change.

'Whether you rush or not.'

Firm as a rock, I ignored the rewards proposed by both the Goddess and the Demon King.

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain is puzzled.]

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain fails to understand your intentions.]

Fine. Don't be hasty.

Keep burning up, and I'll come to you directly.

"Hmm..."

The silence continued in the audience hall. The Heretic Inquisitor looked around and burst into laughter. He seemed to have decided to be the first to speak.

"The issue is simple! Hunter Kim Gong-Ja shared the strategy for the 11th floor with us. In return, he asked us to fulfill one request, and we promised to do so as long as it wasn't impossible!"

The Heretic Inquisitor grinned broadly.

"Do nothing and wait here for 5 days. It's not exactly a simple request considering the media frenzy for these 5 days... but it's certainly not impossible! Therefore, I agree!"

"It's certainly not an impossible request, but..."

"A promise is a promise! Black Dragon Witch!"

The Witch's complexion darkened.

She hesitated, her lips quivering several times before finally sighing.

"Alright. A promise is a promise."

Essentially agreeing to my request.

The other hunters, one by one, also agreed to my request. The Black Dragon Witch and the Heretic Inquisitor, the most cultured and the most cunning hunters here, supported me side by side. Hunters who were not guild leaders were swayed by the atmosphere and promised silence for 5 days.

"I never agreed to such a promise."

Except for the hunter with the highest level of stubbornness here.

"The only promise I've made is to watch over the young man for the next five days. There's no reason for me to entertain any other requests."

"....."

"If you plan to leave for the 20th floor, I will simply follow you, as I promised."

"Hm."

I nodded in agreement.

"Yes, that's fine."

From now on, I will be confronting the Demon King alone.

Although I'm confident in winning alone... having the Sword Saint behind me is like gaining a thousand allies. There's no need to refuse his offer to follow.

I looked around the audience hall.

"Thank you for listening to my favor, everyone."

Then, I slowly turned to leave.

"See you in five days."

Creaking, I opened the grand doors of the audience hall and stepped out.

Beyond the doors lay the vast palace. Exiting the palace, a high wall stretched out, and beyond that, the capital of the Aegim Empire spread out.

A scene I had already passed in the last cycle.

-What?

But it was different.

-Why are the NPCs all frozen?

Guardian Spirit commented while strolling with me, looking around.

He was right.

The knight NPC guarding the palace, the street vendor NPC selling fruits, the patrol guard NPC with a bored expression – all NPCs from the palace to the city were motionlessly frozen.

'It's because the quest hasn't started yet.'

It was like time had been paused.

I trudged through the still streets.

Far behind me, the Sword Saint followed.

-Quest?

"Yes. No one has chosen a [Role] yet."

Currently, there's no prime minister or knight commander in the empire.

Important figures that should exist in a nation.

This is what the quests from the 12th to 20th floors were about.

'In the 11th floor stage, we were given a quest as soon as we entered. That's probably the correct order. But we hesitated a lot on the 12th floor, didn't we? It took ages for a quest to be given.'

Only after a role was chosen did the quest start.

Meaning...

'If you don't choose a role, the quest doesn't start. The Demon King's invasion won't happen, and the empire's army won't fight.'

That's why NPCs are frozen.

And will remain so.

'As long as we don't choose a role.'

A kind of trigger.

The choice of a role by the top hunters itself triggers the start of the quest.

'But you know, Sword Emperor.'

I crossed the street. I had to zigzag through the gaps between the motionless people, like walking through a maze made of human bodies.

Even as I navigated this labyrinth, notifications kept ringing in my mind.

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain advises you to choose a reward.]

I ignored it.

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain suggests that if you don't choose a reward, you should give up on it entirely. In that case, the right to select a reward will pass to the next hunter.]

I kept walking, ignoring it.

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain urges you to make a choice!]

Finally, I left the city gate behind.

Crossing the city of the empire, a vast plain unfolded before me.

'What if, hypothetically, the Demon King dies in this state?'

-What?

I saw it.

The mini-map revealed by the Warhorse of the Eternal Plains.

A single red dot was unmistakably twinkling on the translucent map.

At this moment, when no monster has been summoned yet, the red dot meant only one thing.

'What do you think will happen if the boss monster dies before the quest starts?'

The Demon King.

'It's simple. No one can choose the Demon King's reward.'

-.....

'Of course, there won't be any traitors either. It's just an instant out, even before any scheming could begin.'

I walked across the plain, straight towards the red dot. In no time, I reached the exact location of the boss monster.

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain is furious with you!]

Realizing my intentions at last.

A different voice reached my mind now that I was here.

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain manifests!]

The sky in front of me undulated darkly. A black hole-like abyss opened, spilling out a murky liquid.

A drop. A stream. A mass.

The liquids joined to form a larger shape, from which a voice leaked.

-How dare you....

The Demon King was enraged.

-Challenge me alone, without the empire's aid, Hero of the Goddess. Only those who inherit the empire's mantle have the right to point their sword at me.

"What nonsense."

I gripped my sword's hilt tightly.

"I've made the proper choice."

-What...?

"See. This is the best choice."

A time not yet started by a quest.

A city of the empire yet to be invaded by the Demon King's army.

A world where not a single human has died.

"Demon King. I will kill you before the quest begins. Then, not a single hunter will die, not a single citizen of the empire. Of course, there won't be any traitors either."

-.....

"This is a happy ending without any sacrifices."

I smiled wryly.

"I've always disliked bad endings. Maybe it's my nature? I prefer happy endings whenever possible. Since you're making it hard to see one, sorry, but you'll have to die."

-How dare...

The Demon King's form writhed.

-You dare to stop me alone! Without the empire's help!

"Yes."

I drew my sword.

Aiming it precisely at the dark figure.

A vast plain.

In the middle of a frozen time and a halted world.

My sword became a minute hand, targeting the enemy.

I spoke out.

"Heroes are supposed to fight alone."

The eternal five days began.

Chapter 38: The Alias of the Hero (2)

On a rainy day, it awoke.

It had no name. No form. It was more like a shadow. On a rainy day, a shadow opened its eyes and immediately saw the first living creature before it.

-Croak.

It didn't know what this creature was. There was much it didn't know. Only the sound... the sound of rain. The croaking from all around was thick in the air.

The rainwater carried a sweet scent.

Like a snake, though it did not yet know what a snake was, it instinctively crawled towards the creature in front of it. Squirring. The creature didn't realize something was approaching. Unaware, it continued to bark up at the rain.

The creature, too, emitted a sweet scent.

It opened its mouth. In an instant, the beautifully chirping creature was swallowed up by its maw. Croak! It had no teeth, so the creature's body was not torn apart. It just dissolved. Falling into its stomach, pooling in its belly, slowly melting away.

The rain fell.

When the creature in its stomach had fully dissolved into a mush, it realized it had grown forelegs. Hindlegs too. What its legs touched was the earth, and what they couldn't touch was the sky. The rain connected the earth and the sky. The world became a little clearer.

Ah.

The feeling of raindrops falling on its green, slippery skin and shattering into pieces. The sensation. The anticipation of life.

-Croak.

It opened its mouth and let out a joyous croak.

-Croak.

The rain continued.

It wanted to live a little longer.

The first was a strike.

Whoosh!

My eyes couldn't even follow the attack properly, despite having consumed a time-stretching elixir. I had stretched one second into an eternity, but the Demon King's strike was faster than my elongated second.

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

A day.

I marked the number one (—) on my palm with a black marker. To never forget how many days had passed, even far in the future, like a prisoner marking the days of lost freedom.

-Zombie, listen..

Yes.

-Its swordsmanship itself isn't extraordinary.

This was a prison. A prison of time.

-It's more about brutally overpowering with sheer strength. Of course, that's terrifying in its own right. If you're strong enough, you can destroy anything. But...

"If I can tell which direction he's attacking from, I can avoid it."

-Exactly.

What if we normally progressed through the quest?

In the last round, at that fiercely tumultuous battlefield, how many soldiers had died?

For every soldier that died, at least 20 years of life was lost. A human who could have lived 20 more years died in vain.

Ten dead equals 200 years.

A hundred dead equals 2000 years.

I chose not to take any role to save that time.

I just stood in front of the Demon King with a sword in hand.

Then, this body.

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

Should be prepared to be exiled to eternity.

-But even if you know the direction, can you actually avoid it? You weakling! A corpse of a zombie!

"Ah, shut up. It's noisy."

-Hahaha.

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

Each day returned to the start, and I repeated that day.

Not just repeating but also reviewing and revising the battles.

-You're still clumsy with handling aura. That's your problem. If you concentrate your aura on your feet to evade, that's all you need.

"If I focus on my feet, my posture collapses."

-That's why you need to flow aura to your thighs, waist, and shoulders too. Balance it out.

"No, easier said than done..."

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

-If you can't do it, then just die.

"Damn it."

A day passed.

Another day.

-How dare...

I faced the Demon King's enraged voice countless times.

-Follow the proper order, Hero of the Goddess. It's presumptuous to come here without making any choices. Only those who have inherited the empire's mantle...

"Let's go for a one-shot today."

-What?

Tired of the back and forth, I didn't bother to answer and drank the elixir first. In the slowly stretching time, I rushed towards the Demon King and swung my sword. Clang! Alas, my strike was easily blocked by the Demon King's sword.

-You...

"A Hero slays the Demon King."

[You have died.]

"The Demon King slays the hero."

[You have died.]

"What more is there to say?"

-.....

"Come, Demon King."

[You have died.]

"I am the sword of the empire."

-So be it!

[You have died.]

-Prove it before me!

[You have died.]

-Show me your proof!

"Alright."

[You have died.]

"I'll show you."

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

The world stood still.

And in this frozen world, my sword alone proved the passing of time.

My sword, the only minute hand.

For this world to breathe another breath, my sword first needed to continue for one more second.

I was just a sword living for a second.

But the world took another breath on my second.

Like a drop of water needed to start an overflow, even to flood the roots of the sky.

Even if I wanted to live forever, I had to live in seconds.

I kept living my life that way.

"Good job, Kim Gong-Ja!"

One day.

"Unbelievable! We might clear the stage in less than an hour!"

Another day.

"Maybe less than 40 hunters died!"

And then, gradually.

"Maybe even less than 30 died! Oh, this is perfect!"

The face of the Black Dragon Witch began to change.

11th floor stage.

The quest to teleport with the Black Dragon Witch and smash the boss monster. It became like a rite of passage that I had to go through every day to repeat a day. After facing the Demon King day after day, dying and living, the situation on the 11th floor also gradually changed.

Slowly but surely.

"Faster, more efficiently, more lethally."

Each repetition brought a brighter smile and a happier face to the Black Dragon Witch. Her words changed from "maybe 50 didn't die" a year ago to "maybe less than 20 didn't die" yesterday.

"Ah..."

A day died.

"Impossible... Great job, Kim Gong-Ja! Just by healing that knight Jeshua and dealing with the golems as you said... Ah, maybe less than 10 hunters died... It's possible. It was possible. In such a battlefield... Yes, it was possible..."

A day lived.

-You.

One day, the Demon King asked.

-Why?

"What?"

-Why are you smiling?

I smiled.

"Because I'm happy."

My heart pounded.

The Demon King raised his sword.

-Even those about to die can feel happiness?

"You wouldn't understand. No one will."

-Presumptuous, Hero of the Goddess.

"I'm just humble."

I swung my sword.

-Pathetic.

The sword struck me.

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

But I didn't give up.

There was no reason to.

My sword is faster today than it was yesterday.

And it will be faster tomorrow.

I'm alive.

I'm living.

"..."

That day came silently.

The Black Dragon Witch grasped my hand tightly. She probably didn't realize, but my palm was etched with numerous black 'one hundred' markings. To me, those numbers were like invisible wrinkles, marking the days spent imprisoned in this temporal cell.

"Just now..."

The Black Dragon Witch's voice trembled.

"Just now, I checked. Kim Gong-Ja. Not one person..."

Her hand in mine was shaking too.

"Not a single person died."

Her shaking turned into a sob.

"I checked with the Temple of the Omnipotent God. There were fools who stupidly got shot in the arm with arrows, but... but still. There were no deaths."

The Black Dragon Guild.

A guild that had been at the top since the Tower opened.

The Black Dragon Witch, the second-ranked hunter, had attempted the 10th floor dozens of times. Despite failing each time, she managed to bring all the participating hunters back alive.

That's who she was.

"Thank you..."

She leaned her head against mine.

"Really, thank you..."

The Black Dragon Witch was crying and also smiling.

I wanted to live a little longer.

Yes.

Time flowed.

It flowed in my heart.

-How dare!

As long as my heart beats, I will swing my sword.

-How dare you face me alone! Without the empire's help!

"Sure."

The vast plain.

In the middle of a stopped world, a halted time.

With an unstoppable heart and an unyielding sword, I targeted my enemy.

"Heroes are supposed to fight alone."

-Foolish!

The Demon King roared in fury.

Those who cannot laugh with others become Demon Kings.

"Sorry, pal."

I swung my sword.

"I meant to face you alone, but you know, I think it's tradition for a hero to gang up on the Demon King. It's an accepted practice, right?"

-You dare try to cloud the sky with your petty tricks!

The Demon King's body seethed.

-No more swordplay!

The murky liquid spilled onto the ground.

The endless flow from the Demon King's body turned the plains dark, like a vast shadow cast upon the earth.

-Demons, answer my call.

Bubbles. Bubbling.

The shadow bubbled up and burst.

-Keek!

-Croak!

Each bubble was a monster. The black liquid took form.

Some bubbles became goblins. Others, orcs.

An orc shook off the liquid, and then, the plain was surrounded by thousands of monsters.

-Roar!

The beasts howled savagely.

"This is..."

The Black Dragon Witch surveyed the surroundings, her brows furrowed.

"We can't handle this alone. Sword Saint! What are you doing standing there? Help us, don't just stand there."

"I was watching for a bit. The young lad and the sludge just started fighting not even 30 seconds ago. Who would've guessed the sludge would summon monsters?"

The Sword Saint, who had been watching me for over 30 rounds, drew his sword and spoke.

"Indeed. I was planning to endure for a minute before asking for help."

Having been under his gaze for so long, I responded with a smile.

"Men..."

"That's enough. Kim Gong-Ja, take my hand. We'll get out of here. Sword Saint! Come here too. Don't you see the numbers we're up against?"

The Black Dragon Witch, irritated, reached out her hand.

"No, it's fine."

But I didn't take her hand.

The Black Dragon Witch frowned in confusion.

Instead of answering her question.

I softly chanted.

"Ghoul Summoning."

The Demon King momentarily panicked.

-You... what did you just...?

Before the Demon King could react, another voice reached me first.

[Activating skill.]

A voice proving my qualifications.

Soon, the plains turned upside down.

Chapter 39: The Alias of the Hero (3)

It grew larger and larger.

A frog... Yes, the first creature it had devoured was a frog, which it now understood. It had come to know much more than before. It knew frogs, snakes, and even eagles.

The joy of feeling raindrops directly on its skin as a frog.

The pleasure of slithering smoothly over the soft earth as a snake.

The delight of entrusting its weight to the sky as an eagle.

It had come to know the joys of rain, earth, and sky.

-Grrrr.

Finally, it became a lion and even realized the joy of slaughter.

The meat of the deer was delicious. How fragrant! The moment it sank its teeth into the deer's neck and became intoxicated by the blood, ah, it felt as if it could close its eyes in satisfaction.

It should have become a spirit or a divine being, following the natural order.

-Ah...

But by chance.

-Gasp!

It encountered a noisy creature.

-Aaaah!

The creature ran away, showing its back.

Instinctively, it chased after the creature.

-Save me... Daddy! Daddy, please save me!

The creature was slow despite being noisy. It even stumbled onto the ground itself.

What was it doing?

It didn't understand the creature's 'fall'. It had swallowed countless creatures while traversing land and sky, but this was the first time it saw one so foolish to trip while running.

-I don't want to die! Daddy, help...

Before the noisy creature could get louder, it bit down. Crunch! Gulp. Blood flowed between its teeth. When it filled its mouth with blood, it paused momentarily. A lightning-like shock struck its mind.

Fragrant!

What was this aroma?

It was mesmerized, addicted, intoxicated by blood. It devoured everything about the creature in a frenzy – blood, flesh, bones, entrails! Everything was so fragrant.

From blood to flesh. From flesh to bones. From bones to entrails.

As its teeth sunk deeper, its hindlegs became thinner. Its forelegs grew longer.

The hindlegs became legs.

The forelegs became arms.

The lion's mane turned into hair.

It all happened in an instant. It quietly consumed the remains of the creature. As it licked up the last remnants, memories of the creature slowly seeped in.

-.....

Human.

The creature was called a human.

The human was born in a remote village, loved and raised by family. There was no lack of love. But perhaps life always lacks something. This human was deprived of health.

Disease.

There was no way to cure an incurable disease in the poor countryside. Even if there were, they lacked the money. In a home overflowing with love, the human was dying day by day. Bravely, this young human refused to die in bed.

-I want to walk before I can no longer!

-I want to breathe more of the outside air.

It was a mistake.

The human went too far. It was a test to see how far it could go before dying.

The human's final destination was death. Inside its stomach.

-Hey! Ester!

No.

-You were here!

It was no longer that thing.

-Dad! Why did you go out alone! The forest is dangerous. You never know when a beast might appear. Don't ever wander alone again... Wait, why are you dressed like that!

-.....

The girl spoke.

-Dad.

She smiled.

-I think I'm healthy now.

Ester.

The first name the Demon King ever had.

A voice echoed in my mind.

[Activating skill.]

The plains started to flip over.

The change began right under my feet. Shadow. My own shadow began to expand endlessly. Over the plains already covered by the Demon King's murky liquid, my shadow overlaid.

-Grooo...

Squirm!

Something emerged from the shade.

-Grooo!

They were bones.

White human bones emerged from the shadow.

Like demons escaping hell, they appeared.

'Sword Emperor.'

I thought to myself as I surveyed the scene created by my shadow.

'You wondered why I chose [Ghoul Summoning], didn't you?'

-Yeah, I did.

'At first, I was drawn to other skills.'

Like those enhancing Aura.

The red beams shot by the Demon King were terrifyingly powerful. Imagine how cool it would be if I could use such attacks someday.

But after some more thought, I changed my mind.

'Skill card open.'

+

[Ghoul Summoning]

Rank: SS

Effect: You summon as monsters those whom you have personally killed. The deceased do not inherit their abilities or memories from life. They are merely summoned as monsters like goblins, orcs, zombies, skeletons, etc.

*However, you can only summon once a week.

+

A card shining brilliantly in gold.

'I can summon all those I've personally killed as monsters...'

I muttered as I glanced over the card.

'But here's the problem. How many people have I actually killed?'

-Oh.

The Guardian Spirit frowned.

-Wasn't it two, including that guy named Flame Retard or something?

'That's right. Seems likely.'

I smiled.

'But then, why does [Eyes of a Detective] show my kill count as over 4000?'

-What?

'It's excessive and strange. I've been killing myself like it's a meal, but why would my kill count reach 4000? Logically, it should only be two.'

-.....

'So, here's the thing.'

I looked ahead.

'The Tower has its own way of calculating death.'

I gazed at the shadow-covered plains before me.

"Even if you kill the same person twice, it is treated as [2 deaths] instead of [1]."

And then I saw the monsters crawling out of the shadows.

A legion of skeletons emerging from my hell.

"Let's ask again."

It was an army.

Countless skeletal soldiers covered the wilderness.

"How many deaths do you think I've caused?"

4097 suicides.

The first hunt of Yoo Soo-Ha and the second hunt which had to be repeated due to being killed by the Sword Saint before 24 hours were up.

Therefore, 4099 deaths.

My trace of deaths spread across the vast plains.

"Wow..."

I nodded, contentedly observing the hellish scene I created.

"I really died a lot."

It was then.

-The skeletons roared.

They bared their teeth, all looking identical. Similar in size and height to me. It made sense since these monsters were evidence of my own deaths.

"Even the weapons are all the same."

Daggers.

Every skeleton wielded the same dagger I used for my suicides and during the hunt of Yoo Soo-Ha.

"This is unbelievable!"

However, the only one leisurely admiring the skeletons' weapons on this vast plain was me. Both the Witch and the Sword Saint looked around in dismay.

"Is this your skill, Kim Gong-Ja?"

"Yes."

The Witch was astonished.

"Unbelievable! A skill to summon thousands of monsters! No wonder you cleared the 10th floor alone!"

"Well..."

The Witch seemed to misunderstand my method of clearing the floor. Before I could correct her, she marveled by herself.

"No, that's not it..."

Hmm.

Let it be.

"Yeah, that's right."

"Exactly!"

"Let's talk about this later."

There was no immediate need to correct the misunderstanding.

Nor the time for idle chat with the Demon King in sight.

-How dare vermin like you use the same skill as me?

The Demon King stood still. Though his face showed no expression, the tone of his voice revealed his dismay.

"Curious?"

I brushed off the lingering regret and smiled slyly.

"But what to do? I have no intention of telling you."

-.....

"Keep wondering. Or, want to trade your life for the knowledge? How about it?"

-Unforgivable...! This is not permitted!

The Demon King roared like a wounded lion.

-How long will you mock me! Goddess! You promised to accept my anguish, my resentment, all my grudges! How could you let this happen!

"Sword Saint Sir!"

I didn't pay attention to the Demon King's lament. The Demon King had his reasons, and I had my role. The Demon King was my enemy. If the enemy was distracted, it was an opportunity for me.

"Please fight alongside the skeletons! With you joining, we won't be pushed back!"

"Hmm."

The Sword Saint replied with a reluctant face.

"Alright. I'm not keen on fighting alongside monsters... but it's more tolerable than helping you."

"Thank you! Black Dragon Witch, please help me! Together, let's take down the Demon King!"

"I know. Just don't hold me back!"

The Sword Saint swung his sword, and the Witch spread her aura. Both seemed determined to follow my command until the Demon King was defeated. I nodded once and then shouted to my deaths.

"Ghouls!"

A quiet roar from thousands of bones.

"Show me what you do best!"

I commanded.

"Kill and be killed!"

The legion obeyed my command.

-The skeletons charged in all directions. They were lightweight, being only bones. Jumping high, they landed on the heads of orcs. Despite broken arms, they thrust their daggers.

-The Skeletons frenziedly swung their daggers, ripping through the orcs' eyes, mouths, necks. The orc collapsed, and the skeleton, though losing its left arm, didn't stop. It just rushed towards the next prey.

-In another scene, a skeleton, reduced to a skull and spine, bit off a goblin's forearm.

-The goblin screamed as other skeletons joined. All of them were damaged in some way - missing an arm, a leg, a head - but each held a dagger. They surrounded the goblin, stabbing it relentlessly, causing a fountain of blood.

-Damn, look at those skeletons.

The Sword Emperor exclaimed.

-They're relentless, not fearing death. What the hell, a monster legion like that is terrifying!

A massacre occurred all over the plain.

The Demon King trembled in rage.

-Unacceptable!

The Demon King's shadow continuously spilled a black liquid. If the liquid had been red, I would have thought it was the Demon King's blood. The Demon King wailed as if vomiting blood.

-You have no right!

The Demon King's outcry echoed between heaven and earth.

-A mere being from another world!

"Does it matter where I come from?"

I said, facing the echo.

"I stand here now. But if you still think I lack the qualification..."

Before the echo could fade, a familiar voice resounded in my mind.

[The Tower bestows upon you an alias.]

As if someone who had been watching me for a long time was blessing me.

As if celebrating my liberation from the prison of time.

[Your alias is the King of Death.]

The voice echoed long.

[The Tower shows its respect to the King who harvests Death.]

Yes.

Someone remembers me.

Even if I die day after day.

Someone knows why I'm here.

That's enough for me.

"Don't interfere."

I raised my sword.

And spoke to my enemy.

"The Tower proves my worth."

King of Death.

That was my second name.

Chapter 40: His Time (1)

It did not age.

It was perpetually youthful.

-Ester.

It grew more beautiful day by day, with the scent of freshly-picked apples wafting from its fingertips and the rich aroma of grapes from its feet. As it walked, people felt intoxicated as if by wine. Its hair was like a field of golden wheat ripe for harvest, enchanting the village with the scent of autumn whenever it fluttered in the wind.

-Ester, the Saintess of the Outskirts.

Eventually, people began to say so.

-Saintess.

A poor woman, burdened by poverty, came with a sick newborn in her arms. She had followed the rumors from afar.

-Please, I beg you. This poor child is ill. Please bestow your blessings...

-Do you know the rule?

-Yes, yes, I do...!

Ester nodded.

-Leave the child here. Come back at dawn tomorrow.

The woman bowed and left.

After the mother departed, only a small child remained, wrapped in a worn but soft swaddle. The woman had chosen only the softest rags she owned, wrung them out, and wrapped the child in them. The old swaddle, smelling of fresh milk...

Ester buried her nose in it for a moment.

So fragrant.

Humans are so desperately in love.

-Goo?

The child reached out and touched Ester's hair.

Ester smiled. Even wrapped in rags, life shone brilliantly. Ester considered it a happiness to know such a humble miracle existed in the world.

-It's okay.

Ester's shadow writhed.

-You won't suffer anymore.

-Gaga...

The shadow's maw yawned open.

-Poor thing.

Ester quietly devoured the newborn.

The child's death was gentle. It did not struggle. It simply sank into the shadow without resistance.

As the flesh and bones of the newborn melted, memories flowed into Ester. Memories clinging to the child's flesh and bones – the pain of birth, the swollen feeling of the breast, the mother's smile...

-Yes.

Short memories for a brief life. After skimming through the ephemeral life, Ester gestured towards her shadow. The shadow bubbled and boiled.

-Let's give it a little more life.

At that moment, the shadow solidified into the shape of a baby. The black shadow gained flesh tones. The flesh wriggled slightly, innocently smiling like a young animal.

-Gaa!

Ester smiled.

-Poor thing.

The mother returned at the crack of dawn the next day. Had she stayed up all night? Her complexion was haggard. Ester, who had been waiting by the door, handed over the baby wrapped in the swaddle.

-Your child should be healthy now.

-Ah...

-It won't fall ill again. Please continue to cherish it as you

have.

The mother's face crumbled with gratitude.

-Thank you...

The rumor started spreading from the outskirts of the continent.

-Saintess...

The rumor from the outskirts consumed the small nations.

-Thank you, Saintess...

The small nations on the outskirts were the first to stir.

-Ester.

Then the great nations that encompassed the small ones

followed.

-Saintess Ester.

Other small nations, shielded by the great nations, clamored loudly. The continent was vast, and wherever it was vast, there were countless unfortunate humans.

Those gripped by dreadful diseases, rotting away.

Those limping, lamenting their fate.

Those born disabled.

Those who had lost their sight.

-Saintess of salvation!

All those blind eyes, disabled arms, limping legs, and rotting flesh increasingly gravitated towards Ester. With each occurrence, Ester's shadow grew a little more.

-Savior of all the sick!

As Ester's shadow expanded, human territories shrank. In abandoned villages, officials could no longer govern, and in cities deserted by their citizens, kings could no longer reign.

-Ester.

The kings realized that this new name was a plague.

And they knew exactly what was needed to eradicate a disease.

-Burn it!

Fire.

-Burn the witch's nest to the ground!

Ester heard screams.

People were being burned by fire demons.

No.

That wasn't it.

-Show no mercy. They are all cursed monsters! Don't spare a single one!

Humans were burning humans.

-Those who do not see humans as humans.

It sounded like a groan.

Almost like a scream.

Groans amalgamated into shadows, and screams congealed into blades.

-Be swallowed by your own malice!

The Demon King swung his sword.

The sword trembled as if emitting groans.

“Kim Gong-Ja!”

The Witch shouted.

“I’m okay!”

I faced the Demon King. The air churned like rapids. The Demon King’s sword seemed ready to unleash a red beam at any moment.

‘Right?’

I concentrated aura on my feet.

‘Or is it left?’

A 50-50 chance.

The Demon King's sword screamed.

The sword, hotter than fire and redder than blood, engulfed me.

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

‘Left, then.’

I died.

When I die, I go back 24 hours.

[6 days 23 hours 53 minutes 27 seconds left until you can

reuse Ghoul Summoning.]

‘Returner’s Winding Clock’ states that the user retains ‘memories and stats.’

That retention includes skills.

[You have died.]

[You have 5 days 23 hours 51 minutes 42 seconds left till you can reuse Ghoul Summoning.]

And as Sword Emperor's Sword Emperor and I share memories of the regressions, it's clear that skills continue in the state they were at the time of death.

Abilities. Power. Cause and effect. Memories.

Even cooldowns.

[You have died.]

A day went by.

[You have 4 days 23 hours 49 minutes 33 seconds left till you can reuse Ghoul Summoning.]

I conquered the 11th floor.

No one died.

I climbed to the 12th floor and cross swords with the Demon King.

The Witch of the Black Dragon assisted me.

The enraged Demon King summons ghosts.

I charged at the Demon King and died.

[You have died.]

[You have 3 days 23 hours 47 minutes 15 seconds left till you can reuse Ghoul Summoning.]

I died.

[You have died.]

[2 days 23 hours 45 minutes 28 seconds...]

I died.

[You have died.]

[You have 1 day 23 hours 43 minutes 13 seconds left till you can reuse Ghoul Summoning.]

A day went by.

[You have died.]

[You have 23 hours 41 minutes 53 seconds left till you can reuse Ghoul Summoning.]

And then...

The day returned.

[You are now able to use Ghoul Summoning again.]

With each repetition of the seven sword battles.

I could engage in one final showdown.

"---Kim Gong-Ja!"

The Witch shouted.

I nodded.

"I'm okay."

In this life, I leaped to the right without even seeing the beam.

Swoosh!

The red beam uselessly pierced the empty space. Dozens of skeletons were ensnared in the beam and perished screaming. But ten times more goblins and orcs were set ablaze.

-You!

The Demon King's voice was twisted with rage.

-A mere mortal! Do you possess the Eyes of Prophecy?

"Sort of."

Minus the fact that my price for prophecy is a week of my life.

-Harsh.

The Sword Emperor clicked his tongue.

-Really harsh, this guy.

The Sword Emperor demonstrated tirelessly in front of me, where to swing the sword and how to move my feet.

-But this is a complete jackpot. Hey, Zombie! Try duplicating the summoning later. Get trapped somewhere and after a week, try summoning again.

I frowned.

'Let's talk about it later! Please!'

-My guess is that the previous summon will be canceled and only the latter will be recognized, but who knows? 4,000 could become 8,000, and 8,000 could turn into 80,000. A miraculous jackpot time. Then you'll evolve from a zombie to a Zombie King! Zombie King Kim Gong-Ja! How cool is that!

'Ah, stop talking nonsense! I can't concentrate with this...'

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

‘Damn it!’

-You've died and died a thousand times, turned from a zombie to a skeleton. Whether you have a soul or not, the patheticness of Kim Zombie is endless.

‘It's your fault I died! Now I have to repeat a week again!’

-It's because you're weak. Not my fault. Definitely not.

The Sword Emperor laughed.

‘I swear, someday, I will definitely get you!’

-Oh, I'm already dead. How will you get a dead ghost? Meh. Our zombie is getting angry, peekaboo.

‘This damn...’

-As angry as you are, go and defeat the Demon King. Even without skills like yours, I conquered up to the 20th floor alone. Oh, the shame, Kim Zombie.

‘Damn it!’

Though we joked, we steadily cornered the Demon King.

Skeletons held back the Demon King's forces. Any monsters approaching us were slaughtered by the Sword Emperor. I predicted the Demon King's attacks through my week-long deaths, and with those predictions, the Witch delivered effective blows to the Demon King.

“Black Dragon Witch! Next, he'll attack from the right!”

“Got it!”

The Witch scattered dark aura. The mirrors reflected the aura. Once, twice, thrice, four times, the aura doubled with each reflection in the mirrors. Swoosh! The dark strike, amplified dozens of times in an instant, ripped through the

Demon King's waist.

-Kyaaa!

In the center of the frozen world, the Demon King's scream tore through the sky.

“Hahaha! Nice shot, Lady!”

I laughed, swinging my sword.

“Who are you calling Lady! I'm not even married yet!”

“And you're still unmarried at your age!”

“I'm still, quite, young!”

“Yeah, right. Youthful thanks to the Elixir of Immortality! I know.”

“You... first, let’s finish the Demon King, then come see me.”

We crossed countless lines of death.

Sometimes the red beam ensnared the Witch. The Sword Emperor was swept away too. One second. Another second. We fought desperately, entrusting our lives. The Demon King’s strikes were lethal, so even a second of carelessness was fatal.

[You have died.]

But that didn’t matter.

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

My determination was stronger than the Demon King’s lethality.

-You, you...

Twelve times.

-How dare you defy my resentment... my hatred...

The Witch's aura pierced the Demon King's body twelve times. Only then did the Demon King's movements slow down slightly. Black sludge bubbled from the attacked areas.

‘Huh?’

Was it my imagination?

For a brief moment, before the sludge boiled over... it seemed like flesh-colored skin was visible, not black. It was a fleeting moment. When I turned to look again, the Demon King's body was already covered in sludge.

-Kuh!

The Demon King retracted his sword.

Even without a face, I could feel him glaring at us.

[The Demon King of Autumn Rain decides to retreat.]

What?

[The Demon King of Autumn Rain retreats to the 13th floor!]

That's overkill!

I felt a surge of heat from my heart to my head.

“Wait! Who ever heard of a boss running away when nearly caught!”

-Do not be mistaken! I will return again!

“That bastard!?”

I swung my sword, but before it could hit, the Demon King's body crumbled. Like a hidden drainpipe beneath the ground, the black sludge rapidly flowed downward.

“Hey! You black sesame shake!”

Not just the Demon King. The monsters born from his shadow also bubbled and collapsed. Gurgling! Like water draining from a toilet. The monsters turned into dark currents and disappeared into the ground.

“Wow.”

Suddenly, only me, the Witch, the Sword Emperor, and thousands of skull-and-bones were left on the field.

“What is this...”

As I stood bewildered, wondering if my countless deaths were in vain.

[The Tower acknowledges your choice.]

A voice echoed in my head.

[Creating Hidden Quest.]

[The 12th floor quest has been amended!]

“...What?”

And one after another.

[The 13th floor quest has been amended!]

[The 14th floor quest has been amended!]

[The 15th floor quest has been amended!]

[The 16th floor quest has been amended!]

[The 17th floor quest has been amended!]

[The 18th floor quest has been amended!]

[The 19th floor quest has been amended!]

I was speechless at this unprecedented phenomenon.

Can quests be amended?

“.....”

As I stood with my mouth open, text appeared before me.

Text meant for me.

+

[The Hero of a Time-Frozen World]

Difficulty: Unknown

Objective: You have made up your mind. You will not tolerate even a single sacrifice.

It is called justice to not expect anything back from those you have saved. It is called devotion to not expect recognition from those you have saved. And they call those who are dedicated to justice a hero.

Hero!

The people of the Empire will not know your justice. They will not realize your devotion. But still, justice remains justice, and devotion remains devotion. Will you continue to choose to be a hero in this frozen world?

The Demon King has escaped after being injured. He hasn't gone far. If you wish, you can still pursue him.

Now only your choice remains.

+

A quest just for me.

“.....”

The voice rang out.

[Will you accept this quest?]

My heart pounded.

It was an answer that needed no hesitation.

“Yes.”

The voice responded to me.

[Hidden quest activated!]

[Quest :Hero of the Time-Frozen World.]

[May fortune be with you.]

I was enveloped in white light.

Chapter 41: His Time (2)

The light did not only envelop me.

[Searching for the Demon King's presence on the 12th floor...
Not found.]

[The Demon King's retreat has been confirmed.]

Whoosh!

[Timeline Alteration.]

The white light spread in all directions, like a faintly sparkling mist. The cluster of light rapidly unfolded across the vast plains and soon covered the capital of the Aegim Empire.

Light droplets.

They were innumerable, floating like dandelion seeds in the wind.

“What's this...?”

The Witch looked around in confusion.

“Kim Gong-Ja. What’s happening?”

“Well, I... This is new to me too...”

I was just as perplexed.

As the world was engulfed in light, I asked myself:

‘Sword Emperor, do you have any idea what's going on?’

-No, this is new to me too. What is this? It's scary.

‘.....’

Apart from when learning swordsmanship, this guy is really no help.

How such an ignorant gorilla conquered up to the 99th floor is beyond me.

-Huh? Hey, Kim Zombie. You just cursed me in your mind, didn't you? Right?

‘No, Sword Emperor. I was just thinking that someone as great as you is beyond my understanding.’

-Strange. That's not it. Your face looked like you were cursing me...

The Sword Emperor grimaced and grumbled.

While we were chatting, the light droplets continued to float endlessly.

“Huh?”

That's when I felt a noticeable change.

I pointed towards the empire's majestic city walls.

“Black Dragon Witch, look over there.”

“Hmm?”

“The city walls. The number of flags seems to have drastically decreased.”

The military banners on the city walls, fluttering in the wind.

The red and gold flags were rapidly disappearing. From what was hundreds, only dozens remained, and even then, they were still diminishing.

“...You're right.”

The Witch narrowed her eyes.

“Hold on, let me check. Just hold me. I need to see this.”

“Agreed.”

“Teleport!”

The Witch held my hand and used her skill. In the next moment, we were no longer in the middle of the desolate plains but atop the empire's battlements. The splendid cityscape was visible at a glance.

“My goodness...”

The Witch murmured softly.

“Everything is changing.”

Indeed, it was.

The world was transforming.

There were no refugee camps. The slums had disappeared. The refugees who had fled from all over the continent due to the Demon King's destruction. Their settlement in the slums was surrounded by white light... and then vanished.

As if the refugee camps never existed.

“.....”

The attire of the pedestrians in the streets changed. Worn-out rags transformed into decent clothes and garments.

Even the fruits on the market stalls changed. The rotten apples slowly started glistening with freshness.

I murmured unconsciously.

“Timeline Alteration...”

“What?”

“The history has changed.”

The number of patrolling guards on the city walls had significantly decreased.

Not just in number, but their expressions were different too.

The soldiers' faces were no longer filled with despair from the fear of the Demon King. They showed the boredom of duty, the tedium of patrol – the expressions of ordinary human beings.

“Originally, the Aegim Empire was invaded by the Demon King. It had to face either victory after battle or complete annihilation... Regardless, it faced the invasion of the Demon King's army. But now...”

I swallowed hard.

“In this world, the invasion by the Demon King itself has become [nonexistent].”

Unknown to everyone.

Unnoticed by all, the Demon King's invasion was erased.

Yes.

I erased it.

“...History has been rewritten.”

The result unfolded before my eyes.

[Altering the 11th floor.]

[Altering the 12th floor.]

The white light enveloped the city.

A street child who was wandering around as a beggar,
touched by the light.

A man worrying about his next meal, his coat brushed by a
light droplet.

Shhh...

The light droplets fluttered like dandelion seeds.

In the city streets. At intersections. In a shop with a crumbling pillar. In the house of someone returning home from work.

The fingertips of light gently caressed the world,

[Alteration complete.]

And soon drifted away.

Disappearing somewhere.

“.....”

I closed my mouth.

The Witch did the same.

In the frozen world where no sound was heard, even though it was just our silence, it felt as if the world itself had held its breath.

But...

"---Come on, they're cheap! Very cheap!"

The silence soon broke.

"Apples freshly brought in from Eilbrandt! Fresh apples! My lords, even elves can't resist these seasonal fruits! Take a look at these fresh apples!"

Sounds.

"These days, the baths are not clean. I can see the dirt. Really, these bureaucrats can't even manage water properly. What do they expect us to believe..."

Sounds were heard.

"I'm telling you, the crown princes are up to no good! The walls of the palace resound with the Emperor's crying every night. It might just be a rumor, but I think..."

"Let's have a drink tonight, just us, what do you say?"

"Please spare a coin. Just one coin! The Goddess loves you all."

"Eilbrandt apples that even elves crave for taste! They're cheap!"

The world resumed breathing.

"Hey!"

Among them was a breath directed at us.

"What are you people doing here!"

The Witch and I turned our heads towards the voice. From the direction of the city wall, a general was brandishing his sword.

The general's face contorted angrily.

"How audacious! Who dares to trample upon the battlements of the Empire! Come down immediately!"

Somehow, his face looked familiar.

I murmured.

"Sarbast Aegim..."

The NPC general's eyes widened.

As if seeing someone like me for the first time.

"Ha! Insolent thieves. How do you know my name?"

I pressed my lips together tightly.

‘...I see.’

The general, who should have been on the 11th floor, not the 12th.

The first to kindly welcome hunters in the empire.

The NPC from whom I deliberately received death to copy his skill.

"Come down at once! Can't you hear me?"

The man who should have recognized me as a familiar face was shouting as if I were a complete stranger.

The alteration was not limited to the 12th floor; it had also changed the history of the 11th floor.

Thump.

‘Ah.’

Suddenly, my heart pounded against my chest.

An unknown emotion wrapped around my heart, chest, and then my entire body, even seeming to clog my throat, making it hard to speak. Why? While the world had regained its sounds, it felt like my voice was taken away by something.

“.....”

I looked down at the general, my lips twitching slightly.

Memories that had already become stories of the past.

I reminisced about the words the NPC general had said to me.

-‘I cannot take the life of a hero.’

-‘We thank you on behalf of the empire.’

-I was skeptical. I wondered whether heroes from other worlds would truly fight earnestly for us. But it was just needless worry. I thank you again.'

The last smile of the general crossed my mind.

-Please take good care of our empire.'

“.....”

Ah. Yes.

This is what it feels like.

“Huh.”

For some reason, a smile broke out on my lips.

“Ahaha, uhah! Haha, ahahahahat!”

I laughed, holding my stomach.

The general looked up at me with wide eyes, soldiers focused their attention on us, and the Witch gave me a weird look. The Sword Emperor stared at me as if I were insane.

But I didn't care.

There was sorrow that the people of the empire had forgotten me.

But a much more immense emotion had seized my entire being.

“Ah.”

I took a deep breath and opened my mouth even wider.

“---I kept my promise!”

A roar burst from my mouth.

The general's shoulders flinched.

“I protected your empire!”

The soldiers on the walls were startled.

“I kept my promise to you all!”

Yet, I did not stop.

I made sure my roar was amplified with my red aura to reach far and wide.

“I am proud! I fulfilled my promise!”

For the first time in my life.

I felt this emotion for the first time.

I lived like trash.

Jealous of others, mocking them, wasting my days just drinking. Freezing my heart under the guise of being rational, giving up on life, on myself.

But not today.

[Stage Cleared.]

At least today, I was proud.

[Today, the 12th floor stage has been cleared.]

Proud in front of people.

In front of the Witch and Sword Emperor.

Towards the world.

Most importantly, proud of myself.

[Announcing once again.]

I could be proud of myself.

[Today, the 12th floor stage has been cleared.]

That I could be such a person.

[Raid participant assessment in progress...]

[Assessment complete.]

I was overjoyed.

[Announcing the 3 raid participants.]

The sky of the empire was etched with light.

[Raid Contribution Ranking]

1. King of Death

2. Witch

3. Sword Saint

+

It was probably invisible to NPCs.

The general was frozen by my roar.

“What... what are you talking about...”

“Sarbast Aegim!”

The general flinched.

I looked down at him from the battlement.

“Take good care of the empire!”

“.....”

“I'm sorry, but this is where the role of the hero ends! I've hunted down the Demon King for you! Your empire might be rotten in unseen places, and there will be many problems! It's obvious!”

I smiled broadly.

“From now on, you figure it out yourselves!”

“.....”

“Fighting for this existence of ours! You can do it! Woohoo!”

The general opened and closed his mouth like a goldfish.

“Ah, I don't understand what you've been saying since just now... I can't comprehend it at all...”

-Hahaha!

The Sword Emperor rolled around in the air, clutching his stomach.

-Heheheh! Wow, you lunatic! You're insane! I thought you might be drowning in regret, but no, you just brazenly boast about yourself! I'm curious about your thought process, Kim Zombie! I acknowledge it! You're a real case study!

‘Ah.’

I brushed back my hair.

‘So what? I'm too adorable today.’

-Crazy... Kim Lunatic! Heh, okay! At least you don't whine pathetically! Heheheh!

Despite his laughter, the ghost continued to roll in the air, as if it wasn't enough.

I turned to the Witch.

“Come on, Black Dragon Witch! What are you waiting for? Let's go to the 13th floor!”

“.....”

The Witch sighed enigmatically.

“Alright... It's common for high-ranking hunters to be abnormal. It's okay. I understand. At least you're better than the Heretic Inquisitor.”

“Huh?”

“Teleport.”

The Witch grabbed my hand and activated her skill. In the next moment, we were back in the wilderness. Without

warning, she grabbed the Sword Saint's arm.

The Black Dragon Witch looked into my face.

“The entry priority is always given to the first rank.”

She said.

“You represent us and announce the transfer. King of Death.”

It was the first time I was called by my alias.

Today was a day full of new experiences.

“Yes.”

I smiled.

“-Transfer.”

And thus...

We moved on to the next stage.

Chapter 42: His Time (3)

The countless decisive battles had been crossed, and endless duels endured. Finally, the thirteenth stage had been reached.

‘A stage comprised of the ominous number 13.’

Was it because of this number? From the moment of entry, this place exuded a unique aura. As soon as we were transported to the stage, two completely different kinds of voices welcomed me.

One was a voice of joy, and the other, a voice of terror.

[Welcome, King of Death.]

First, there was the familiar voice.

The Tower no longer called me 'Hunter Kim Gong-Ja.' Instead, it used my alias, my second name, King of Death. I had been duly recognized as a resident of this place and welcomed as a legitimate member of the Tower.

Was I too modest to find such a fact mildly pleasing?

-Kaaaah!

Then there was the other voice.

-I will not forgive you!

Like a tearing scream.

-How dare you! How dare you take my children!

No, the owner of the voice was literally being torn apart.

-You dare to take away the children I nurtured and raised! Are you mocking me? Trying to deceive me? Taking my flesh, my blood, my soul!

The Demon King.

The ruler of the red nightmare was bleeding black fluids all over.

-I curse you! You and the world! If the world wishes to erase me, I shall devour it! Your seas will become my gastric acid, and your lands, my flesh! I will chew up your flesh, bones, heart, and even your last entrails!

"Uh..."

The Witch next to me held her breath.

The Demon King's howling screams were ominous and filled with deadly intent.

Even the Sword Saint stepped back, gripping his sword handle tighter.

“This is a dreadful outcry.”

The Sword Saint muttered.

“I’ve never heard such a voice before. It’s like it has thousands of mouths.”

“Really, why is it screaming like that...?”

Both the Witch and the Sword Saint raised their auras, perhaps to avoid being engulfed by the murderous aura. It was clear that, even if only momentarily, they were overwhelmed by the Demon King's presence.

Only one person remained unfazed.

-Eh?

As always, Sword Emperor was nonchalant.

-What's with that guy?

Then, unexpectedly, Sword Emperor dropped a surprising remark.

-It's gotten weaker, hasn't it?

‘What?’

- It's much weaker than when we fought on the lower floor.

Much weaker?

I looked at the Demon King again, examining him closely.

‘That?’

-Yeah.

The Sword Emperor frowned.

-Well, it's understandable that it's damaged from the Witch's aura assault. But it's not just an injury... Its [rank] seems to have dropped.

‘Rank dropped?’

- Let's say... compare his combat strength to a Great Goblin King. On the 12th floor, he was like an SSS-tier Great Goblin King formed by a fusion of Alexander and Arthur with a goblin.

‘Your comparisons are getting more creative. When did you learn about Alexander and Arthur?’

-An Emperor always diligently pursues knowledge. That's why one becomes an emperor and remains so.

‘Ah, yes. Let's assume that, Sword Emperor.’

I said inwardly.

‘So, the Demon King was like that SSS-tier Great Goblin King on the 12th floor...’

-Right. Now, it's like he's just a Great Goblin King without the SSS-tier. Not even the one leading the army on the 11th floor, but rather the weakened version you barely defeated with your underhanded tactics, remember?

I recalled the event from the Tower's timeline, not long ago, but a distant memory in my time. Sword Emperor continued, tilting his head in confusion.

-Strange. Normally, as you go up the Tower, the bosses get stronger, right? But why has he become like this? Does that aura burn from the Witch have a level-down effect or something?

"....."

I looked around, pondering the Sword Emperor's words.

The temple had turned into ruins.

In the middle of it all, the Demon King was still howling at the sky. Like a lion struck by an unexpected blow. The Nightmare of the Autumn Rain was lamenting, above all, furious.

‘Perhaps.’

This sight gave me a certain conviction.

‘Is there an unexpected change in the stage?’

It was then.

[Tabulating 12th floor rewards...]

[Unable to tabulate!]

[You are currently undertaking a hidden quest.]

[All rewards will be tabulated upon clearing the 19th floor.]

[Only a simplified reward will be given for now.]

Swoosh!

A translucent something unfolded before me.

[The Goddess of War’s Blessing has been buffed!]

It was a map.

But unlike any map I had seen before.

[Maps from the 11th to the 20th floor are now open to you!]

A world map.

The maps I had received as a special privilege were just 'minimaps.' They were limited to the range of a single floor, no matter how wide. However, what unfolded before me now was on a different level.

This was a map of this world and the otherworld, the so-called 'world map.'

".....!"

And upon seeing the map, I realized.

“I got it!”

“Huh?”

The Witch and the Sword Saint both turned to me. The Witch with a puzzled look and the Sword Saint with a stoic expression.

“What do you mean, you got it?”

“I know why the Demon King is like that. Black Dragon Witch, think back to the previous stage.”

I spoke quickly, explaining my realization.

"The history of the Demon King invading the capital has disappeared. The city has completely changed. The refugee camps are entirely gone."

"And how does that matter...?"

"Think about it logically! Where would these refugees have fled from? Not just from all over the empire, but from across the continent. But now, even the refugee camps have completely vanished."

"...Ah."

Finally, the Black Dragon Witch seemed to catch on.

"I see."

The owner of the Black Dragon narrowed her eyes.

"Not only the history of the empire being invaded but also refugees who fled from all over the continent have disappeared..."

"Yes."

I nodded.

"It's not just the empire; the entire continent has changed. We've returned to a time [before the Demon King officially invaded the continent]!"

Exactly.

"And now!"

That was it.

"This temple is under attack at this very moment!"

Upon seeing the world map, it became clear to me.

The continent of this world was divided by a vast mountain range. So high and wide that even birds dared not cross it. But in the middle of this expansive mountain range, there was a narrow pass. East and West of the continent were connected through this pass.

This temple was built right at that location.

A temple bridging the East and West of the continent. It must have been built with a grand history and many legends unknown to me. Due to such reasons, it resembled a fortress and a wall, functioning as a temple.

This temple was a shield of the goddess, blocking the mid-mountain range.

Inside the shield, to the East, lay plains. Small nations were located on these plains, and beyond them lay the empire. Since only the sea existed beyond the empire, its borders started at the horizon and ended at the sea.

A realm of humans, vividly blue.

On the other hand, beyond the temple, the West was entirely red.

All the lands beyond the goddess's shield were stained blood-red. That was the realm of the Demon King.

The Demon King had broken this shield and surged eastward. He had engulfed the small nations and the empire. Finally, he even pushed to the ports.

In the original history, it must have been so.

'History alteration means this!'

I realized.

The time of this otherworld was regressing into the past.

A historical regression.

Maybe [historical return] would be a more appropriate term.

-Kaaaah!

That's why the Demon King was crying out so desperately.

Why the Sword Emperor was talking about the Demon King's rank.

I could now perfectly understand.

I murmured inwardly.

‘That's it, he's lost levels.’

-Huh?

Sword Emperor narrowed his brows.

-Lost levels?

‘You know, Sword Emperor. The voice we hunters hear when our levels rise.’

Yes.

The voice heard when a hunter grows stronger is always the same.

「Your existence becomes more defined.」

「You are leveling up.」

Sword Emperor also seemed to recall the same phrase quickly.

-Are you talking about that 'Your existence' thing?

'Yes, exactly that!'

What did it mean when it said [your existence becomes more defined]? I had thought it was just a fancy expression but looking at the Demon King now, it all made sense.

“Maybe that boss monster grew by killing countless imperial citizens and refugees. But now that slaughter and hunt have become [nonexistent]. So...”

Therefore...

“That's why his growth has been deleted.”

His existence is becoming fainter.

"The Demon King's path... The history of his continuous slaughters has been erased because..."

I had completely altered the history of the 12th floor.

Enduring endless duels and countless decisive battles, my

time, woven stitch by stitch.

-Kaaaah!

The Demon King's time had regressed by that same stitch.

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain is enraged.]

[The existence of the Demon King of the Autumn Rain is becoming faint.]

The timely voice proved my thoughts were correct.

-You...!

The red nightmare growled.

The murderous intent, just as strong as before, but no longer could it overpower any hunter.

Not me, not the Witch, nor the Sword Saint. We all looked straight at the Demon King.

“Let’s go.”

I said.

"Let's ignite the beacon of counterattack."

-Ghoul Summoning!

Rumble!

The Demon King's body boiled.

-My children!

A voice that sounded like a scream.

-Rise, my children!

In response, monsters all over the stage slowly rose. It wasn't a summoning spell. Probably the monsters that were originally prepared for the 13th floor.

From the temple pillars, from the ruins that had become rubble, monsters began to rise.

-Uuuuh.

Thousands of zombies.

Were these the people who were in this temple, the [Shield of the Goddess]? There were zombies wearing priest hats, some dressed in paladin uniforms, and others in merchant clothes. They moved their lifeless eyes around aimlessly, moaning as they shifted their bodies.

The Demon King commanded.

-Kill them!

The horde of zombies charged towards us.

Beside me, the Witch sighed.

“Ah, I’ve always hated zombie movies...”

“Me too, not a fan.”

"Can we win, King of Death?"

“It’s not about whether we can win or not.”

I drew my sword.

“We will win.”

Chapter 43: His Time (4)

I spoke rapidly, sharing my insight.

"To break through the 12th floor, nearly a thousand deaths were needed. The 13th floor will require fewer deaths."

‘Sword Emperor.’

-What?

‘Let's make a bet.’

As I beheaded the first zombie that charged at us, I proposed. The zombie's neck, already rotting, was sliced effortlessly by my blade. Facing the onslaught of dozens, hundreds, thousands of zombies, I continued.

‘Let’s bet on how many times I’ll die before reaching the 19th floor.’

-Hmm.

Sword Emperor stroked his chin thoughtfully.

-Okay, I bet on less than 100 times!

I grinned.

‘Then I bet on less than 99 times.’

-You sneaky brat. Trying to one-up me, huh?

‘Yes, that’s exactly what I’m doing.’

Sword Emperor chuckled.

-Alright then. Let's see how you, a zombie, handle your kind.

But remember, a bet is a bet, so I won't help you this time.
Deal?

'Deal.'

I laughed amidst the endless surge of zombies.

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

Laughing, I died.

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[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

"Ah, first, I need to handle this horde... Black Dragon Witch, any ideas?"

"I'm already giving it my all. I'm the only one here with an area-of-effect skill, but it's tough. Besides, King of Death, can't you counter with your skill?"

"Ah, of course I will. But right now, it's on cooldown... I can use it after about 3 coins."

"What's a coin?"

"It's a thing. Uh, anyway... Oh, is that... on the minimap? Hey, Sword Saint! Can you smash that big lid over there? It looks like a sarcophagus! I need to check something!"

"What do you mean to check?"

"I'll explain later, just please! I'm the prophet! Okay!?"

"Hmm..."

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

"Okay! Sword Saint! That sarcophagus is actually a secret passage. There's a hammer underneath that's super effective against undead! Please go with the Witch and retrieve it for me!"

"I have been walking the path of a sword my entire life..."

"That hammer has an area-effect! If you slam it to the ground, it'll create a field that sweeps away the zombies! Okay!?"

"How do you know all this?"

"I'm a prophet! Okay!?"

"Ah, this guy..."

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

"Now that the zombies are taken care of, it's time for the Demon King... What's that now?"

"That is a giant. And it's a zombie. So, it's a giant zombie, I presume."

"Hmm. Given the deep history of this temple... Perhaps it was a guardian giant who fell under the Demon King's control... If the Heretic Inquisitor were here, we might know more..."

"Wow. Do you even know about otherworldly religions? That's some SSS-Class Clergyman skill."

"It's all skill."

"That's what makes one SSS-Class, I suppose."

"So unpleasant. Why bring up that deplorable man? Anyway, I'll handle the giant."

"No, Sword Saint. Please continue to control the zombies with your area-effect skill."

"Now, listen here. That giant seems like the perfect test for my sword..."

"I'm the prophet! Okay!?"

"Really now..."

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

"Anyway, I'll take on that giant."

"Ghoul Summoning!"

"My goodness. King of Death, does your skill even have a cooldown?"

"It does... Anyway, there's just one thing I need from you, Black Dragon Witch."

"What is it?"

"Don't aim for its eye."

"Why not?"

"It'll cause big trouble."

"But King of Death, look at that one-eyed giant. If you were in my shoes, able to use beams, and you saw such an eye..."

"I get it... Black Dragon Witch, I'd probably argue like mad if I were you. I don't have time to explain why, but please. Don't."

"Ugh..."

"Just follow the young man's advice for now, Witch."

"Sword Saint, you too..."

"Let's see how it goes. After all, he claims to be a prophet."

".....Alright. I'll do my best not to aim for the eye."

"Thank you!!"

We ran. We fought. We saved each other.

We acted.

We spoke a lot.

-My children...!

We shattered the zombies lingering in the temple.

-My generals...!

We defeated the one-eyed giant that must have been a legend guarding this temple.

-Aaaah...!

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain decides to retreat.]

And,

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain retreats to the 14th floor!]

Once again, we pushed the Demon King to the next level.

Light particles fluttered around.

The temple, the boundary line dividing the continent, shone brightly like a newly polished shield.

Bells rang, and hymns resonated. Traders from the east rode horses, those from the west rode strange two-legged birds, exchanging greetings as they passed. Paladins practiced against each other with hammers, and orphans, once under the temple's care, sneaked glances at the traders with longing and at the paladins with admiration, before being dragged back to the chapel by the priests.

And at a spot overlooking the temple, a one-eyed giant, using the mountaintop as a chair, sat bored. Occasionally, cloud-like sheep's wool brushed over his head, making him blink and sneeze.

"The mountain god is sneezing!"

The chattering orphans showed fearlessness rather than fear. The priest scolded them, then bowed deeply to the one-eyed giant.

The giant grinned and waved back at the priest.

"King of Death."

"Yeah?"

“Are you ready? Witch, Sword Saint, are we set?”

“Wait a moment. That trader over there is selling a good whetstone.”

Sword Saint bought the whetstone and began sharpening his sword. During this time, I turned my gaze from the giant and looked at the world map.

The red lands that had fallen away still seemed ready to surge back at any moment.

But there was enough time for the Sword Saint to sharpen his sword.

"That's all we need."

"King of Death."

The Witch took my hand. Sword Saint, having finished sharpening his blade, promptly took Witch's hand.

“Transfer.”

Light enveloped us again.

“Hmm, the 14th floor is a forest. The Demon King... seems to have hidden.”

“Be careful. Hostility is coming from all directions.”

“Let's proceed slowly, very slowly.”

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

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Thus, we defeated the Demon King, who had marshaled a fallen elven lord in the cursed forest.

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain decides to retreat.]

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain retreats to the 15th floor!]

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Thus, we vanquished the Demon King, commanding the mermaid queen at the reversed waterfall.

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain decides to retreat.]

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain retreats to the 16th floor!]

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And thus, we repelled the Demon King, leading wyverns atop the erupted volcano.

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain decides to retreat.]

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain retreats to the 17th floor...]

History regresses.

Back to before the Demon King's army invaded the empire.

Before invading multiple countries.

Before the breaking of the temple, known as the Shield of the Goddess.

Before the curse of the elven forest, the reversal of the waterfall, and the eruption of the volcano.

Further and further behind.

To a time before the Demon King reigned as the absolute lord of evil.

Fleeting.

Like waves engulfed by other waves, turning into a mere bubble, disappearing.

Like a falling petal.

With each floor we ascended, the Demon King's domain shrank, and his power weakened.

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain's existence becomes

fainter.]

Just as the Demon King on the 12th floor was weaker than on the 13th,

And the one on the 13th was weaker than on the 14th.

The one on the 14th weaker than on the 15th,

And so on, little by little.

[You have died.]

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain decides to retreat.]

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain's existence becomes fainter.]

[You have died.]

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain decides to retreat.]

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain's existence becomes faint.]

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-You!

After the 97th death, on the 19th floor, in a nondescript

outskirts of a nameless small country.

-You!

The Demon King howled in that desolate land.

Not at Sword Saint or Witch.

His grinding teeth and furious gaze were directed at me.

-If it weren't for you!

His eyes, bloodshot with rage.

-It's all your fault! Everything! If you hadn't interfered... Yes! If you weren't here, none of this would have happened! How dare you, a swordsman from another world...

I drew my sword.

"Ah, finally I can see your eyes."

-What?

"Exactly what I said. I've finally seen what your eyes look like."

Originally, the Demon King of the Autumn Rain had no eyes.

He was a writhing shadow. A face without expression. Arms without hands. Covered in black liquid, continuously bubbling.

That had been the case.

"Does that make sense?"

Finally, the Demon King's mask shattered.

"A Demon King and a hero, never even making eye contact. That would've been a real tragedy."

A part untouched by the black liquid, at last, appeared. Red, bloodshot eyes. Though they seethed with deadly intent... I wasn't afraid. Rather, I was relieved.

I pointed my sword at the Demon King.

"Attack with all your might."

-You...

"Or run away again. Aren't you curious? How much weaker you'll become if you flee again."

-...

"If you don't attack with your full strength now, you won't stand a chance."

Even without the rewards from clearing the 19th floor, the Demon King on the 20th floor would inevitably be even weaker.

-You dare to speak... You, a mere hyena feeding on my flesh, what do you know...

His growling voice, lost and wandering in the shadows.

I slowly opened my mouth.

“Ester.”

Hesitation.

The Demon King’s red eyes widened.

“I warned you to attack with full force.”

-...

“Otherwise...”

I lunged forward.

A scream erupted.

Black liquid splashed.

“My time will surpass your history.”

I glared at the Demon King, Ester, amidst his screams.

Straight ahead.

Towards the path I must follow.

Chapter 44: The Demon King's Name (1)

It was a long journey.

After a lengthy passage of time, I arrived here.

[You are penalized by the skill.]

[Re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

It seems about time to talk about a particular nightmare.

The battle on the 12th floor.

A moment when I was swept away in the torrent, reduced to

a mere droplet of water.

[The level of penalty is medium.]

It was after being killed by the Demon King that I saw it.

[Welcome to the Hungry Ghost Realm.]

Trauma.

The nightmare of the one known as the master of nightmares.

[Initializing the penalty.]

[Recreating the trauma of the Monster - The Demon King of Autumn Rain.]

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A village engulfed in flames.

Before I knew it, I stood alone amidst a sea of fire.

No.

-Burn it down!

Perhaps it wasn't me who was standing alone.

At least, I was accompanied by my Guardian Spirit.

The one truly alone, plunged into the hellfire, was on the other side of the fire.

-Burn down the witch's nest!

Ester.

Saintess of the Outskirts.

The savior of the sick.

-Show no mercy. They are all monsters cursed by a spell!

-Don't let a single one escape!

Ester couldn't comprehend.

She was at a loss for words.

Unable to understand, her mouth merely quivered slightly.

Why?

How can humans set other humans ablaze?

Parents who had thanked her, newborns given a new lease on life through her - all of them were slaughtered.

-By the lord's command!

Soldiers, whose origins were unknown, demolished the village's palisades,

-We have orders from His Majesty, the King!

Knights bearing various crests struck down with their swords.

-Under the orders of the Czar of the East, who watches over the rising sun and guards all land and sea...

-As per the Holy Pope's decree, the heretic who dares call herself a saint...

-As instructed by the Great Sage of the Forest, oh spirits, let this arrow...

-By the grace of the Mermaid Queen, this orb bestowed upon us empowers our staves...

-For the honorable promise made in the primordial volcano, we, the dragon cavaliers, have arrived! Now, dragons, unleash your fire upon these cursed beings...

Though they proudly announced their affiliations and names, Ester still couldn't recognize them.

Who were these people?

Who dares to burn humans alive?

-Ahh, ahhh!

-Save us!

They hunted with precision. Surrounding the village like it was a grand hunt, there seemed no escape. A fleeing family was quickly caught and hunted down.

The only refuge was the village square.

Impaled by spears,

Chased by swords, struck by arrows,

Hit by hammers, targeted by staves, scorched by fire, people were driven more and more into the square.

-Cough!

In the center of the village.

In the heart of the paradise she had created.

Amidst the thick smoke, Ester slowly surveyed her surroundings.

-Hang in there, just a little longer...

A father bent his back. A small gap formed between the earth and his waist, a space where his young child hid. The father took the brunt of the flying sparks, inhaling the acrid smoke in his child's stead.

The father died first.

The child managed to live a minute longer.

-Just a bit more...

An old grandfather and grandmother embraced each other. Was it to bid farewell to their companion at the end? Ester thought so at first. But upon closer inspection, she saw a newborn nestled between them.

-Just a bit more...

As the flames spread, the elderly couple screamed. But they did not separate. Their elbows charred and solidified by the fire. Even as they turned into blackened cinders, the old couple held each other tightly. Not a farewell, but an embrace to save the small child.

The couple died first.

The cries of the newborn spilling from the gap ceased a minute later.

One by one.

Coughs echoed across the square.

The family that became the wealthiest in the village by establishing an orchard. The old man who toiled in the fields every dawn. The old woman who looked over the wheat fields in autumn, muttering about the golden ripeness of the grain.

-Why...?

Every citizen was shattered. A terminal illness dormant in the stomach. Cancer eating away at the brain and spine. Blind

eyes. Legs that couldn't walk. With numerous ailments in the world, Ester willingly swallowed them all.

Even more than when she had swallowed all those diseases,

-How...?

Her heart now blackened even more.

Blackened by the smoke.

Scorched by the flames.

She cautiously parted her lips.

-.....

From her mouth, came the smell of char.

Ester realized her heart had darkened a bit more.

Overnight, the village was engulfed in flames.

Overnight, Ester was consumed.

Crunch!

Ester scratched at the ashes with her fingertips.

No one disturbed her. The soldiers had leisurely departed after seeing the village wrapped in flames.

The remains of a burnt paradise.

-Leafandor...

There lay the corpse of a father.

-Dajenna...

Underneath him, the body of a child.

-Solafe..., Jou..., Ugen...

She dug.

-Mobazaijan..., Topo..., Enna..., Garchev...

With her bare hands. With her fingertips.

Through the remnants of a village reduced to debris.
Through the ashes of a paradise settled into dust. Even as her
fingers turned black and her nails cracked, bleeding blackened
blood, Ester dug.

-.....

And then, she opened her mouth and ate.

The flesh of humans.

Their bones.

And if there was no flesh or bones, then the ashes.

-.....,

Human flesh no longer had any fragrance. She could feel no hunger, no beauty. Only the scent of char. The mere lingering smell of something burnt. Yet, Ester kept eating the charred remains. Devouring them greedily. Even if it was hideous.

Ester's mouth was dirtied black.

Her teeth stained pitch black.

-Poor souls...

Her esophagus was painted black, and pus collected in her stomach. The blood turned into a viscous fluid, spreading throughout her body. It wasn't just blood. Something was flowing from her eyes too.

Perhaps it wasn't tears.

If they were tears, why weren't they clear?

-Poor souls...

So, it was nothing but dirty water.

Waste water discarded by other humans, flowing and flowing until it reached her.

With nowhere else to go, it just collected in her heart.

-Poor souls...

The black wastewater kept flowing, unstopped.

-You,

It flowed into the square.

-You... you too. You too were human.

The village flowed with grief.

-You, born as humans, knew the beauty of life and shed tears. How, how could you...

The wilderness echoed with sorrow.

-You called them monsters. But you burned them like monsters? Wasn't it enough that they knew beauty and shed tears? Did you feel no hesitation in branding and burning them?

The mountains and fields wept.

-So, you remain human, while these... my children are forever doomed to be monsters? Is that your world?

Hatred flowed like rain.

-In that world, only you smile. Are only you granted the grace to be beautiful? Only you worthy of shedding tears? Is it only you who is truly human? For you, proof is needed to be recognized as human.

The heart cries out in echoes.

-Then now, you prove it.

Rain fell.

-Show me.

Rain fell.

-I curse you.

Because the rain falls.

No longer will any village burn, nor will any borderland be engulfed in flames.

My children. My blood. The color stolen from my heart.

Though my blood has lost its color and flows merely as ash

and wastewater, the red rain falling upon this world testifies in my stead.

-Be swallowed by your own malice.

Rain fell.

Rain.

-You...

Rain,

Rain fell.

-You made me this way,

Continuously.

-And thus, you made yourselves.

Rain,

Rain for...

- "Hey, Gong-Ja."

Blink.

- "Wake up."

A voice.

- "This is not your hell."

At the gentle voice, I opened my eyes.

[Trauma re-enactment complete.]

[The target's ego has remained intact.]

[Penalty Finalized.]

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A single sword.

Just holding one blade in hand.

Simply because there remains something in this world that I must cut down.

-Zombie!

Blink.

-Now!

I looked ahead.

No.

It was what lay before me.

-Your mind is clear!

The time of confusion, as if floating for an eternity.

Before my eyes, having crossed a moment, stood someone entirely blackened.

From its body, wastewater continuously flowed.

Water, even when cut, remains water, leaving much to be cut down.

Cutting down what must be cut.

-Aaaaaah!

As it was sliced, the Demon King released wastewater.

Perhaps it wasn't wastewater after all.

If it were, why would it be red?

Blood.

Bright red blood dripped from the Demon King's body.

-Ugh... Cough...!

The Demon King staggered backward. One step. Two steps.

Three steps. When he took the third step, wastewater ceased flowing from his right arm.

Where the Demon King stepped, black puddles still gathered, but each step lessened the pool, shrinking gradually.

Eventually.

-Cough, gasp... Ugh...

The Demon King's body was shedding the wastewater.

Drip. Drop.

No longer flowing wastewater, blood took its place.

The color of life, naturally, was red.

[The existence of the Demon King of the Autumn Rain becomes faint.]

The once absolute presence there had vanished.

-No... I can't... Ugh!

The Demon King wrapped its right hand around his left arm, where blood was flowing. As if trying to recapture spilt water, desperate not to let a single drop escape, he tightly pressed the wound.

-My children... I can't let this... be in vain, the resentment, the curses...

"Retreat."

I spoke softly.

A human's sword may divide the body, but a voice can sever the soul.

As if cut by my voice, the Demon King hesitated.

"Retreat to the 20th floor. You can't defeat me anyway.

Return to your base, to your final castle."

The 'World Map' made it clear.

Blue territories. Human realms had reclaimed the continent. They crossed the central mountains, passed the canyon known as the Shield of the Goddess. The temple under the gaze of the one-eyed giant. Forests where fairies dance. Waterfalls where mermaids play. Lava-flowing mountains... There was no part of the plains not covered in blue.

In contrast, the red territory...

"Return to your starting point."

Was just a dot.

Merely one dot.

No matter how far the flames burned the fields, in the end, they reduced to a single ember. Even if the waters flooded to the very skies, eventually, they dwindled to a single droplet.

On the vast world map, only a tiny red dot remained.

That was...

"Your end. Demon King."

The Demon King grunted.

-You, scum...

It lifted his head. Wastewater had ceased, and blood flowed, but half his body was still blackened by the ash. Its face too. Only the red eyes shone ominously. With a face still immersed in ashwater, the Demon King glared at me.

"Hmm."

The Sword Saint silently gripped the hilt of his sword.

"I'll leave the final blow to the King of Death."

The Witch casually controlled her six mirrors.

-.....

There was no chance for a reversal anywhere. No gaps. Was it because I witnessed the Demon King's trauma? The situation felt eerily similar to a village surrounded by soldiers.

A barrier of humanity with no escape.

-Cough!

The Demon King had no answer but to flee. Yet, it hesitated to choose that path, knowing it wasn't the right one.

Just as fleeing to the square from the flames only prolonged life by a mere minute. Being chased away by us to the twentieth floor would only delay the moment of defeat.

-Damn it...! Damn it all!

Blood spilled from the Demon King's mouth.

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain decides to retreat.]

[The Demon King of the Autumn Rain retreats to the 20th floor!]

Yes.

Fleeing, knowing one will burn to death, is what humans do.

The more it fled, the closer the Demon King came to being human.

[Confirming the Demon King's retreat.]

[Timeline Alteration.]

[Altering the 19th floor.]

The world once again enveloped in a light droplet.

After confirming the Demon King's disappearance, I turned around.

"Sword Saint."

"Hmm."

"Black Dragon Witch."

"Yes."

"I apologize. I wish to conquer the 20th floor alone."

I bowed.

"Thank you for your help so far. But I want to settle this with that Demon King. Please let me go alone."

"....."

The Witch shrugged nonchalantly.

"Sure. I'm okay with it. You've contributed the most in getting here... Besides, we agreed not to act for five days according to your word. I broke that agreement to help, so this time I'll really stay put."

"Hmm."

The Sword Saint sheathed his sword.

"When today ends, it'll be five days. After clearing the 20th floor, we should meet separately. There's much to discuss between you and me."

"Yes. Understood."

I bowed again.

"Thank you."

And then I proceeded.

"Transfer."

The 20th floor.

[Welcome, King of Death.]

To the Demon King.

To the village where Ester was born.

Chapter 45: The Demon King's Name (2)

[You have entered the Boss Stage.]

This is the second time.

It's my second entry into a Boss Stage.

Comparing then and now... there are many similarities, yet many differences.

[Challenger: King of Death. Alone.]

[May fortune be with you.]

First, the notification.

Just like when I challenged the ‘Hellfire Mansion,’ I was still a solo player. As always in the tower, it quietly wished luck to the challenger, to me.

However...

There were definite changes from that time.

[Clear rewards will be given.]

[Clear rewards from floors 11 to 19 will be collectively tabulated.]

Now, I was no longer just a challenger.

I had conquered from the 11th to the 19th floors and ascended here.

The tower welcomed me, the conqueror, and joyfully sounded its trumpets nine times.

[Tabulating Floor 11 clear reward.]

[Tabulating Floor 12 clear reward.]

[Tabulating Floor 13 clear reward.]

[Tabulating Floor 14 clear reward.]

[Tabulating Floor 15 clear reward.]

[Tabulating Floor 16 clear reward.]

[Tabulating Floor 17 clear reward.]

[Tabulating Floor 18 clear reward.]

[Tabulating Floor 19 clear reward...]

Step.

I took a step forward.

[Tabulation complete.]

While listening to the melody that greeted my footsteps.

[The tower acknowledges your achievements.]

[You are granted the right to modify a skill!]

[You can enhance any skill, except for those of EX rank.]

It was like a hymn blessing me.

The tower had prepared the stage in advance, with the quest's path set. However, I didn't walk the paths already laid out. I created a completely new stage and cleared it in my own way.

The tower acknowledged my strategy.

As if to say, 'That's also a good approach.'

[Adjusting the King of Death's authority!]

This time was no different.

[You are temporarily granted the authority of an Apostle.]

[For this reward, you have limited management authority.]

[How you enhance a skill is left to your discretion!]

A stage not predetermined.

A strategy not predetermined.

Therefore, naturally, the rewards were also not predetermined.

'Indeed.'

I nodded inwardly.

‘Leaving the choice to me.’

I don't know why the tower was built, who built it, or why it's filled with creatures from other worlds.

There's still much I don't know.

But now I have a guess about what the tower is.

‘An entity that observes our choices.’

And an entity that remembers my choices.

‘Alright.’

Swish!

I drew my sword.

‘I’ll show you my choice again.’

An artifact said to be crafted by the founder of the empire.

[Leafanta Aegim's Holy Sword of Protection] resonated with my aura, emitting a white light.

I aimed my sword at the [enemy] in front of me.

“Now.”

At the entrance to the twentieth stage.

At the path leading to a small village, it stood.

“It’s time to decide your fate, Demon King.”

-.....

It growled softly.

Like a beast irreversibly wounded.

A beast engulfed in the world's flames and driven out by fire
had only a tiny refuge left. The entrance to the village.

-My...

A road lined with acacia trees.

In the middle of the road, draped with white flowers, the
beast stood alone.

-My village!

It roared.

-Do not dare to destroy my paradise!

And its voice echoed.

[Initiating the Boss Stage.]

The stage was set.

A stage to defeat the weakest boss in the world.

"....."

I looked up at the sky for a moment.

It was clear and blue.

The sky had always been a territory of blue.

Looking up at the cloudless sky, I was certain.

Today...

There will be no rain.

Acacia petals fluttered down in white.

As they drifted, the petals made no sound.

The ground was silently painted white by the falling petals.

Only the breaths exchanged above the path filled the world's silence.

-I cannot forgive!

The breath that filled the world was harsh.

-I will never forgive! The burn marks still in my eyes! The smell of char embedded in my brain! That fire! You people! How could I forget your malice!

It swung its red sword, crying out in despair.

Every scream narrows the world a bit more.

The 20th floor was especially cramped.

In comparison to other floors, the minimap revealed it to be less than 1/100th in size. Even checking the World Map wouldn't change anything. Just a tiny red dot, one pixel in size, marked on the world map.

That was the boss stage of the 20th floor.

-Go back! Turn back time!

It was just an ordinary rural village.

-Are you trying to burn down my paradise again!

The narrowest stage in the world.

And...

The weakest boss monster in the world.

-Again! You people, always like that! Always!

In the path littered with acacia petals, it was screaming. Just one person's scream. A frail voice. But even a single person's outcry was enough to fill this narrow world.

A small world.

A tiny village.

"The roles are completely reversed now."

I deflected the Demon King's sword.

Our blades sharply collided.

"Remember? On the 12th floor, you were the Demon King and I was the hero. You invaded, and I defended. It's ironic, isn't it? Now you're the one defending."

-Die!

“Sorry, Demon King.”

I twisted my blade.

“That line means nothing to me.”

My sword easily pushed away the Demon King's. The strength was incomparable. The Demon King's physical power was already insignificant. Unable to withstand my push, it exposed its flank like an open path.

A gap.

My blade smoothly sliced through the Demon King's torso.

-Aaaaaah!

Red blood gushed.

[The Demon King of Autumn Rain's existence becomes faint.]

Blood flowed.

On the ground, among the white acacia petals, red scents dripped, staining them.

“You’ve weakened, Demon King of Autumn Rain.”

I took a step forward.

Red petals were crushed under my feet.

“You’ve really weakened.”

-Ugh, cough... Ahhh...

“But it’s still not enough.”

I swung my sword.

“Become weaker.”

-You...

“Much weaker than now.”

My blade cut through the Demon King.

The white petals turned a shade redder.

[The Demon King of Autumn Rain's existence becomes faint.]

The road to the village.

Behind the Demon King, the path was white.

But the road behind me gradually reddened.

[The Demon King of Autumn Rain's existence becomes faint.]

One step.

[The Demon King of Autumn Rain's existence becomes faint.]

Another step.

With each step the Demon King retreated, the whiteness of the petals diminished.

With each of my steps forward, the one-lane acacia path reddened further.

It wasn't just that.

-Ugh... Ahhhh...

The Demon King's entire body began to reveal itself.

Resentment. Grudges. Curses.

The clotted wastewater was being stripped away.

-No...

The Demon King's feet became visible.

-It can't be...! No more, I can't endure...

Both of its legs standing on the path were revealed.

-Ugh...

Next, its left and right arms were fully exposed.

And after that, the area below and above the waist appeared.

Furthermore, a long neck became visible.

-Tower, it can't be... it just can't be...

I swung my sword.

[The Demon King of Autumn Rain's existence becomes faint.]

And then.

Finally, the face started to be revealed.

[The Demon King of Autumn Rain's existence becomes faint.]

The jaw.

Lower and upper lips.

The philtrum and tip of the nose, both cheeks.

[The Demon King of Autumn Rain's existence becomes faint.]

The red eyes.

The white forehead.

[The Demon King of Autumn Rain's existence becomes faint.]

Lastly...

[The Demon King of Autumn Rain's existence becomes faint.]

The hair, resembling a lion's mane.

Each strand of hair lost its black color.

The last of the wastewater dripped away.

-Ah...

It let out a groan. Its thin forearms trembled, unable to bear the weight of the sword anymore.

-Uh, uh...

Standing under the acacia tree, it was no longer the Demon King. No one would call someone who couldn't even properly lift a sword a Demon King.

And then.

[The Demon King of Autumn Rain's existence becomes faint.]

[The Demon King of Autumn Rain can no longer maintain its authority.]

The tower too did not call it the Demon King.

[Initiating rank adjustment.]

[Revoking The Demon King of Autumn Rain's alias.]

The former Demon King shivered.

-No!

It was engulfed in a white light.

Like being swarmed by bees, it thrashed around.

-It can't be! It can't be! No, it can't be!

But it was futile. The light unwaveringly enveloped it.

[Announcing once again.]

Executing.

[Revoking The Demon King of Autumn Rain's alias.]

[Revoking The Demon King of Autumn Rain's authority.]

It screamed.

-Ahhhhhh!

The once absolutely powerful Constellation had now fallen.

-Ah, ahh! Ahhhh!

It reached out frantically, as if trying to grasp the dispersing light droplets. Desperately trying to catch the light. But the light could not be grasped, slipping through its fingers.

The white light scattered and dissipated.

-Ah,

There.

"Ah,"

Only a fragile creature remained.

"Ah, uh... no, uh... ahhh..."

Not the Demon King of Autumn Rain.

Not the master of nightmares.

Not the Saintess of the Outskirts.

A fragile being.

"Right."

I gripped the sword hilt.

"Now you are weak enough."

"Don't come... Don't come closer..."

"Then stop me."

Step.

I took a step forward.

"What will you stop me with, words? A sword? Try anything. Otherwise..."

Another step.

"I will stand right in front of you."

It took a step back.

Facing me, it struggled to speak.

"You... to me, to my children... You dare do this to me, after all that..."

"You're wrong."

I took another step forward.

"As you said, I am a foreigner from another world. Yes. From the Demi-Human Alliance to the Temple, the Church, the Kingdom and the Empire, everyone in this world collaborated to burn you and your village. Let's say there isn't a single person on this continent who is free from that responsibility. But, I am different. A complete outsider. Hunters like us are free from such responsibilities."

"Uh..."

"You have no right to hold me accountable. And of course,"

I took another step towards it as it retreated.

"You no longer have the power to stop me."

It trembled. The trembling leaked from its lips.

"I... I didn't do anything..."

"You mean you did nothing wrong?"

"I! I just helped the sick..."

"[Ester] was afraid like you are now."

It flinched.

"She screamed for help. Cried not to be killed. Sought her father. What did you do to such a child before you became Ester, before you gained human memories?"

I calmly recounted what it had done before it gained human memories, before it became Ester.

"You bit the neck of a struggling person. Ate them at your whim and became Ester. Not just that. You devoured the newborn baby entrusted to you by a woman who believed in you. And yet, you pretended to be a savior, acting all high and mighty. You betrayed the woman who trusted you with her child."

"I... That's not... I didn't..."

"You hid the truth. You remained silent, knowing people would misunderstand, afraid of being treated as a monster. You deceived people."

I took another step forward.

"Excuses are useless. There's no one in this world who knows you better than I do. I know what you've experienced, how you felt, and how you changed."

"....."

"You are not an innocent saint. Not an innocent victim. There's no need to even mention the woman and child. Like I said, the moment you devoured Ester, you lost any right to claim your innocence,"

"I am!!"

And it suddenly exclaimed.

"I didn't know!!"

I stopped.

Clenching its teeth, trembling, it covered its face. Sobs leaked through the gaps in its fingers.

"I didn't know back then. I had no human memories... no knowledge..."

The meaning of pleas for mercy.

The struggles.

The begging.

"Back then... I didn't understand what that meant..."

"You mean you made a mistake because you didn't know."

"Yes! If only I had known, I never would have devoured Ester,"

It tried to say it wouldn't have eaten her, and I spoke first.

"That's what humans do."

It lost its words.

"The people who burned you could make the same excuse. Actually, they definitely did, didn't they? What did they say when they faced you, as you covered the world in blood?"

We didn't know,

We didn't realize you were innocent.

We just thought you were an evil witch.

"Uh..."

Finally, it fell completely silent.

To the silent being, I spoke quietly.

"Sorry, but I'm not very educated. I don't know much. There's only one form of justice I know in this world."

Another step.

"And that is Karma."

It shivered.

"An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth. If you believe what you swallowed in shadow and then spat back out were people, fine. Then suffer the same fate. At least that's fair, isn't it?"

"What... what are you saying...?"

"Tower!"

I looked up to the sky.

"I want to use the clear reward!"

I pulled out a golden card. The clear reward earned by breaking through from the 11th to the 19th floors. I decided to use it on this skill.

+

[Ghoul Summoning]

Rank: SS

Effect: You summon as monsters those whom you have personally killed. The deceased do not inherit their abilities or memories from life. They are merely summoned as monsters like goblins, orcs, zombies, skeletons, etc.

*However, you can only summon once a week.

+

Ghoul Summoning.

An SS rank skill.

I held the card and raised it towards the high sky.

"The tower clearly said I could modify the skill as I wish!"

[The tower affirms your statement.]

A voice responded to my call.

[However, excessive modifications are not allowed.]

[The tower uses an example for your understanding.]

[Evolution of an SS-rank skill to an SSS-rank skill is within the permissible range.]

I nodded.

My request was simple from the start.

"I request the modification of the Ghoul Summoning skill!"

[The tower asks for your intent.]

"Don't touch anything else! Just modify the part about memory. The 'do not inherit memories' part. Allow the summoned to retain their memories from life, but only if I wish it!"

It flinched.

"You... what are you trying to do?"

"How about it! Isn't this a reasonable request?"

Ignoring Ester, I shouted.

"I'm not asking for the inheritance of their abilities! Not even to inherit their skills. Not even to reduce the cooldown. Just memories! Only memories. I want the dead I kill to

remember their lives!"

Silence.

The sky was silent.

[Measuring your request level.]

[Currently measuring...]

After a moment.

[The tower acknowledges that your request is reasonable.]

Permission was granted.

[Confirming your request.]

[Do you wish to use the special privilege earned by clearing floors 11 to 19 on the Ghoul Summoning skill?]

"Yes."

[Ghoul Summoning's requested modification is as follows.]

[If you wish, the dead will inherit their memories and appearances from life. If you do not wish it, they will be summoned only as monsters.]

[Is the above request accurate?]

"Yes."

[Confirmation complete.]

[Requesting approval from Zuraqua.]

[Approval complete.]

And then.

[The King of Death's request is approved.]

White light enveloped my skill card.

A storm of light blew through.

After the light settled, I carefully examined the card.

+

[Ghoul Reincarnation]

Rank: SSS

Effect: You summon those you've personally killed. The deceased do not inherit their abilities from life. However, if you wish, they can inherit their memories and appearances from when they were alive. If you do not wish it, they will only be summoned as monsters.

*However, you can only summon once a week.

+

Ghoul Reincarnation.

That was the new name of the first SSS-rank skill I had acquired.

'Good.'

Everything I wished for had been perfectly fulfilled.

I turned to look at it.

Our eyes met.

“I’m going to kill you now”

“If the word ‘kill’ doesn’t sit well with you, think of it as ‘swallowing’ like you did. Just as you thought while swallowing Ester, the sick, and the children into the shadows. I’ll kill you in the same manner---”

Slowly.

I raised my sword.

“And resurrect you in the same way.”

It trembled in fear.

Chapter 46: The Demon King's Name (3)

Fear.

A feeling more human than any other.

“Hi...”

The face of the fallen Constellation was colored with such an emotion.

Uncertainty about the unknown future. The fear of possibly dying right there.

‘It’ was afraid of me. As I took another step forward, it groaned in terror. But a mere groan could not stop someone's footsteps.

“I’m really glad you’ve become human.”

I said.

“If you had remained a monster, killing you wouldn’t have made you eligible for [Ghoul Summoning], right? Or now it’s [Ghoul Reincarnation]. Whatever the skill name is...”

“Aaaaaa!”

Stagger.

It made a final attempt in its fear. The Demon King’s red sword, now too heavy to be properly wielded. In a desperate effort, it grasped the great sword. Its arms, weakened to the extreme, lifted the red sword, swinging it wildly at me.

"Hmm."

Of course, such a reckless attack wouldn’t affect me. I easily dodged it. Once, twice, thrice, the fallen Constellation shook as it swung its sword.

The Sword Emperor muttered behind me.

-It's hopeless.

He frowned.

-Even the stance is sloppy. Not properly grounded. Swinging a sword without even looking ahead. No confidence in the sword path, huh? What do you plan to do after swinging it? What's your goal?

The Sword Emperor grumbled.

-Tsk. Typical of a swordsman who relies only on skills and aura. No, not even a swordsman.

After remaining silent since clearing the 19th floor, the 'farce' unfolding before the Sword Emperor seemed to deeply displease him.

-Look at that. A zombie. Look at that. That's why I always stress the basics. At the very last moment, all a human can rely on are their own hands and feet.

The Sword Emperor continued.

-End it.

I did.

With a single swing of my sword, I shattered another. Chaang! The clashing of blades echoed fiercely. The fallen Constellation, in apparent shock, widened its eyes.

"Ah,"

Before my eyes, the red greatsword split in two.

"Aah, uh... Aaah..."

With the sword shattered, the last defiance of the fallen throne broke as well. Thud. The fragile creature fell to the ground, crushing the acacia petals beneath its small body.

‘Is this the end of the Demon King?’

I calmly looked down at it, collapsed on the ground.

‘The Harvester of Death...’

Suddenly, I remembered what the tower said when it bestowed the title on me. A tribute to the King of Death. That's what the tower declared. Somehow, it seemed to fit the current situation, making me feel strange.

‘Right. It's not wrong.’

I slowly applied force to the sword handle.

Just as I was about to strike down and claim the neck of the fallen Demon King.

-Wait, Zombie? Hold on for a moment.

"....."

-It's rude to interrupt while you're posing so dramatically, but I had to say something. Actually, I'm not sorry. Just bored.

Anyway, don't kill it yet, just wait.

As always, the Sword Emperor did 'Sword Emperor' things.

"Ah, geez. Why?"

I snapped back, irritation bubbling up. Since I didn't bring the Sword Saint or the Witch to the 20th floor, there was no hunter to misunderstand my talking to myself.

-It seems like you're taking it for granted.

"What do you mean?"

-So, it's not a monster anymore, that's clear. But does that make it human? I mean, does it get treated the same as a human like you, Zombie?

Maybe it just became a regular NPC?

"So what if..."

-Does an NPC still count as a target for [Ghoul Reincarnation]?

I paused.

“Uh... maybe?”

-You're such a sucker, you haven't killed an NPC even once, right? It's clear that monsters don't count for [Ghoul Reincarnation], but it's still unknown about NPCs.

"....."

-What if you impulsively go ahead with it, and then it turns out [Sorry! NPCs aren't eligible for the skill!]? What will you do then? Will you be responsible for the awkward atmosphere?

“No, but...”

-Hey, Kim Zombie. Wake up! I've experienced it, and the tower is extremely ruthless in this aspect.

Damn it.

Still fearful of death, the fallen throne was cautiously watching me.

Eyes filled with the terror of death.

As I cursed and rechecked the skill card.

+

[Ghoul Reincarnation]

Rank: SSS

Effect: You summon those you've personally killed. The deceased do not inherit their abilities from life. However, if you wish, they can inherit their memories and appearances from when they were alive. If you do not wish it, they will only be summoned as monsters.

*However, you can only summon once a week.

+

-Look at that. It says you summon 'those' you've directly killed.

The Sword Emperor pointed at the card.

-How do you know if this 'those' includes NPCs? Huh? Are you sure?

"Yes, NPCs are people. People."

-Oh. That's what you think, Mr. Kim Zombie.

The Sword Emperor spoke with a stern and solemn expression.

-Negotiate with the tower before chopping off that thing's head.

"Negotiate with the tower..."

-Why? What's wrong with that? You did well by yourself earlier. You've already done it once, can't you do it twice?

"Hmm..."

That was true.

Feeling slightly sheepish, I looked up at the sky.

"Excuse me, Mr. Tower...?"

[The tower listens to your words.]

Thankfully, I wasn't ignored this time.

Maybe it's because I was given the 'temporary apostle's authority' earlier. At least for now, it seemed I could communicate freely with the tower.

"I have a question."

-Come on. You were all informal with the tower earlier, now suddenly looking for polite language? Funny guy.

“That’s because I got emotional and slipped into informal speech earlier... Ah, forget it. Just be quiet!”

Even as we bickered, the tower diligently responded.

[The tower pays close attention to what your question is.]

“Let's see. Uh. So, does the Ghoul Reincarnation skill recognize NPCs as targets if they are killed? Or does it only count hunters like me?”

An unexpected answer came back.

[The tower is judging.]

[Your question is beyond the tower's authority.]

“Huh?”

But that wasn't the end.

Then came a response that exceeded my expectations.

[Verifying the authority of the questioner.]

[Cleared. The King of Death currently holds the status of a temporary apostle.]

[The tower acknowledges the King of Death's question as a subject of discussion.]

And then.

[The tower requests a vote from the Six Pillars of All Lives.]

A blinding white light enveloped my vision.

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'Huh?'

A moment passed, and when I blinked, I found myself in a secluded place. It wasn't unfamiliar. It was more disconcerting because it was familiar.

The Netherworld. My dark hell.

The starting point I return to every time I die.

‘Why here?’

Just then, a voice brought my consciousness back to reality.

[Confirming participants.]

Not just the voice.

[The 6th Pillar, ‘Staff of Time Immemorial,’ has joined.]

[The 5th Pillar, ‘The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages,’ has joined.]

[The 4th Pillar, ‘The Moon Contemplating Blindness,’ has joined.]

[The 3rd Pillar, ‘Legislator of the Beginning,’ has joined.]

[The 2nd Pillar, ‘The God Who Dances in Emptiness,’ has joined.]

"....."

No matter where I looked, only endless darkness unfolded, and nothing was visible to my eyes. However, I could feel it.

Their presence.

[Confirmed the presence of the Six Pillars of All Lives.]

[The tower shares the query raised by the temporary apostle, the King of Death.]

Their presence was felt from all directions.

Not just an indication of presence, but an overwhelming existence.

[Sharing complete.]

Voices flowed in a space wriggling with gazes.

[The majority vote meeting on the agenda begins.]

[Does the skill 'Ghoul Reincarnation' include NPCs as targets?]

[If you agree that NPCs are included, please vote in favor.]

[If you disagree that NPCs are included, please vote against.]

Suddenly.

Beings without form spoke.

-Gesh... la... ZakuA cho... Deo...

An incomprehensible language.

-Sato, yovela? Weloyo-na Sh...! Deo phenta...

-kunto, nyola Gesh-ve-Nail na? Nai-Gesh-Nail na?

It was like a language made of shadows.

Invisible snakes filled the space. From the left and right, above and below, no, right in front of me, they hissed. Sssk... Sssk... Their voices were the tongues of snakes. The tongues were red and long, slipping into my ears and touching a corner of my brain. They licked it.

-Gesh... Mula-Gagamia... cho Gretehen Weloyo...

-Nail.

Dizziness overwhelmed me.

Despite being nothing more than a disembodied consciousness at the moment, nausea surged within me. I wanted to vomit, to expel anything. It felt like grease was seeping into my brain.

The sensation of being licked to the core of my soul by tongues.

-Layo na.

Suddenly, all voices ceased.

-Gesh. Nail. Nai-Gesh-Nail.

-.....

-.....

-Deo zakun.

Silence.

A profound silence descended upon the void. No entity spoke. The voices that had flowed into my ears, licking and consuming my brain fluid, also stopped. I finally felt like I was able to breathe.

‘They are not from the Tower!’

I gathered my thoughts with difficulty.

‘Entities from the Tower translate all languages... But these beings are different. They reside outside the Tower. Entities far beyond the likes of the Demon King of the Autumn Rain!’

Perhaps they were the architects of this Tower, lurking in an unimaginable realm.

After a brief silence,

[The vote on the query will proceed.]

A familiar voice echoed, bringing me comfort as if I had returned home.

[The 6th Pillar ‘Staff of Time Immemorial’ casts a dissenting vote.]

[The 5th Pillar ‘The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages’ casts an affirmative vote.]

[The 4th Pillar ‘The Moon Contemplating Blindness’ casts an affirmative vote.]

[The 3rd Pillar 'Legislator of the Beginning' casts a dissenting vote.]

[The 2nd Pillar 'The God Who Dances in Emptiness' abstains.]

Two votes in favor.

Two against.

One abstention.

"....."

I paused, perplexed.

Who are these beings and where do they come from? I do not know. But one thing is clear: they have the authority to decide the fate of my skill [Ghoul Reincarnation]. Yet, their decision is neither purely in favor nor against.

Why?

What do they expect from me?

‘Wait a minute.’

A realization struck me.

I looked around the formless space.

‘One more entity hasn’t voted yet.’

Right.

When I was summoned here, it was explicitly stated:

「The Tower requests a majority decision meeting with the Six Pillars of All Lives.」

Was it not the same before the serpentine voices hissed?

「Confirming participants.」

「Confirmed the presence of the Six Pillars of All Lives.」

‘Yes. It was mentioned there are six!’

The Tower assured that six entities were present in this space. However, the current voting tally was odd. Two affirmative votes, two negatives, and one abstention. That's only five.

Where did the sixth vote go?

And...

“.....”

“.....”

Who is this remaining entity that silences everyone?

“.....”

The one who doesn't need to be summoned here.

Already present, not needing to arrive.

Always here, knowing everything.

The master of the Tower.

‘I believe...’

I looked straight into the dark space.

There was a heavy presence lurking there.

‘I think an affirmative vote is the right choice.’

I spoke as calmly as I could, sharing my thoughts.

‘If NPCs are not included in the skill, how did the Demon King summon countless monsters? The humans of the empire

and the citizens of the kingdom that he slaughtered were all NPCs, weren't they?'

The presences quietly observed me.

'Of course, I understand your concerns. You worry I might recklessly kill NPCs and then summon them as minions... But I've shown enough of who I am.'

In the dark space.

I looked in the direction of each presence.

And said,

'I am not that kind of person.'

-.....

'And I won't live like that in the future.'

It's always the same.

No matter how mighty the being I face, my options are limited. There are only two options:

Fight them or persuade them.

'The Demon King could summon NPCs as minions, why can't I? That's unfair.'

-Not bad.

Suddenly, something spoke.

The voice.

As if whispering right in my ear, yet also seemingly far away. It sent shivers down my spine. Every syllable sent a current down my spine.

-But it's troublesome.

The voice chuckled.

-King of Death. Speak from your heart, not your head.

'.....'

I paused for a moment.

And I spoke the words I needed to say.

"This Demon King is my prey."

I said what I could.

“---It’s mine so keep your hands off.”

The voice burst into laughter.

[The 1st Pillar.]

[‘The Master of All Lives’ casts an affirmative vote.]

The laughter shattered the darkness like glass.

[The voting is concluded.]

[Three votes in favor, two against, one abstention.]

[The skill ‘Ghoul Reincarnation’ of the King of Death will include NPCs as targets.]

Clink, crack! The laughter fragmented the darkness. In this empty hell, gaps of emptiness widened, letting in streams of white light. [The temporary Apostle authority of the King of Death is revoked.]

Enveloped in blinding light, I realized something.

[The meeting is concluded.]

I had successfully convinced the Tower.

[May fortune be with you.]

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-Zombie? Hey, Kim Zombie?

Blink.

When I reopened my eyes, acacia petals, the Sword Emperor, and the once-called Demon King of Autumn Rain, now the

fallen Constellation, filled my view. The acacia petals were silent, and the Fallen Pillar dared not make a sound.

Only the Sword Emperor floated about, speaking.

-Why the daze all of a sudden? Didn't I tell you to ask the Tower?

"....."

-Zombie King, hey! You hearing me?

I felt strange.

It seemed like only a moment had passed, yet at the same time, it felt like an eternity. The memory of what just happened was quickly fading, making it hard to recall exactly what was discussed.

"Sword Emperor..."

-Oh, finally a response. Calling you a zombie so much, you're

starting to act like one.

“Didn’t you hear it? Didn’t you see it?”

-What?

“That thing, the Tower summoned me to the Netherworld, talking about All Lives, some Pillars, and... something like the Tower's master appeared, laughing... I don't know?”

The Sword Emperor frowned.

Like someone looking at a rabid dog.

-In my whole life, I've never felt sorry for anyone, but suddenly I feel sorry for you... I'll ease up on the zombie jokes. Get your head together.

"....."

I didn't know.

The Sword Emperor, who had conquered the Tower up to the 99th floor and earned the title 'Sword Constellation,' had no idea what I was talking about.

A chill ran down my neck.

‘Who did I just meet?’

The chill wrapped around my neck and spread to my shoulders, eventually reaching my spine.

‘What exactly...’

I gripped the hilt of my sword tightly.

‘Calm down, Kim Gong-Ja.’

After swallowing hard, I looked ahead.

My path still lay before me.

‘There’s still much I don’t know.’

The fallen Constellation sat collapsed in the middle of the road.

‘But there are things I do know.’

I slowly raised my sword.

‘Now, I deliver the final blow to my prey.’

Someday, when I reach the 100th floor of the Tower, perhaps I’ll understand more.

The Sword Emperor tilted his head.

-Are you just going to kill it? Without asking the Tower?

“It’s fine.”

I replied.

“I've already received my answer.”

The fallen Constellation reached out.

“Wait...! Spare...!!”

I swung my sword.

This sword, a reward for appeasing the 10th floor, the same sword that moved the hearts of soldiers when I first challenged the 11th floor. It had been in my hand for tens, hundreds, thousands of times, especially when trapped in the prison-like 12th floor.

A sword that witnessed my time.

With that sword, I cut down the Fallen Constellation.

".....!"

A faint scream, and with its end, the Fallen Pillar collapsed.

Blood flowed.

The blood stained another acacia petal. Looking down at the white turning red, I slowly opened my mouth.

“Ghoul, revive.”

Squirm!

My shadow stirred.

From the flat shadow, a black hand surged like emerging from a pit in hell. Seemingly reluctant to leave this hell, it resisted. But the struggle was futile.

“Stand up.”

The shadow couldn’t defy my command. It regurgitated a head, then a chest, waist, and legs.

“This... black, ah... aah...”

The entity, like a newborn fawn, trembled weakly. Despite having a fully grown body, it was merely a newborn life.

And...

"Ester is not a name you can have. It's not yours to take."

Those who bring life into the world always have responsibilities.

The first of those responsibilities is to give a name to the life I've burdened.

“Preta.”

With long hair flowing, it looked up at me.

“From now on, your name is Preta.”

“You shall serve me, and live.”

Once called Ester, hailed as the Saintess of the Outskirts, and revered as the Demon King of the Autumn Rain, she shivered.

“Yes...”

On the last of the promised five days.

“...My lord.”

The King of Death and the Demon King.

One of the two kings had fallen.

Chapter 47: How to Confront the World (1)

In the aftermath of the king and his subject, it wasn't either of them who spoke.

Rather, it was the 'Emperor', neither king nor subject, who solemnly opened his mouth...

“...Sword Emperor, even at a time like this, must you always 'be the Sword Emperor'?”

Always an expert at ruining the mood, that man.

Twisting his body like a pretzel, he seemed in agony.

-Yeah... I have to... I don't want to, honestly... Deep down, I wish I could just stay away from you guys, pretend I don't know you... Oh, but I'm the only one who can say this.

“Ah, what are you saying?”

-What are you guys doing?

I wondered what he meant, but apparently, that's what the Sword Emperor wanted to convey.

“What do you mean? As you can see.....

-Yeah. You killed the Demon King, right? You brought her back with your skill. Even gave her a name... Ah, jeez, even the name. Preta for a girl? If you had to name her Preta, at least make it cute, like "Chorong* Preta" or something.

*Chorong is a famous korean singer/songwriter/actress.

“Are you seriously quibbling over her name now?”

-Forget the name. The thing is... why did you suddenly form a master-servant relationship?

The Sword Emperor scrutinized me and Preta as if he had

seen the strangest of things.

-You guys, what, have some kind of bond? I get it for you, Zombie. It's your prey, right? You have the right to play the old song of "I've got you under my skin". But why is she bowing to you saying, "Yes, my lord"? I don't get it.

I learned one of the Sword Emperor's hobbies.

Something I wish I hadn't known... but that's not what's important.

Hmm.

“So, you're wondering why Preta is willing to serve me unquestioningly?”

-Yeah. Zombie? Let me objectively list what you did to her.

I nodded.

-You blocked her path and played "Hehehe, can't escape,"

right?

“That’s how it started.”

-You destroyed everything she built, and later, shattered her mental state with a truth bomb.

“That’s how it unfolded.”

-Then you literally beheaded her. Oh boy, the cherry on top was dragging her out into the world with Ghouls Reincarnation, despite her refusal.

“That’s how it ended.”

The Sword Emperor clicked his tongue.

-Hah, truly heartless. Are your arteries made of snakes?

“Maybe some cobras too. You forgot to mention, I also broke her sword following someone's advice on 'showing the fate of those who aren't even swordsmen'.”

-That was necessary, and she must be deeply grateful for it, if there's still a spark of a swordsman within her.

The Sword Emperor spoke solemnly.

I thought this guy only talked nonsense, but now I see he's also good at utter nonsense.

-Anyway, I thought she'd be filled with hatred and anger toward you. So why is she kneeling and submitting? Was the great calamity that swallowed a world actually just a massive masochist?

“Wow.....”

I had wanted to distance myself from the Sword Emperor, but now I took a step back.

His level of thinking was just...

“Sword Emperor... It's because Preta willingly submitted to me.”

-Why?

“She knows.”

I glanced at Preta.

“Soon, you will know too, Sword Emperor.”

Weeping echoed through the acacia forest.

“Hic... ah... sob.....”

Preta was crying. Tears of frustration and sorrow.
Heartbreaking sobs fell drop by drop.

Indeed.

Preta knew all too well.

[Searching for the Demon King's existence on the 20th floor.]

What tragedy was about to unfold.

[Not found.]

Preta's shoulders jerked, convulsing.

[Confirming the absence of the Demon King.]

Shaaah!

Lights erupted everywhere. They sprang from the ground and flowed from the acacia trees. The 20th floor stage was a small world, quickly surrounded by a swarm of light.

In the midst of blinding light.

“Please, no... don't let it happen...”

Preta trembled and moaned. But what was the use? Her moans might excuse her life, but not her sins.

[Timeline Alteration.]

The sky spoke with solemn authority.

Announcing judgment like a court to a foolish sinner.

[Altering the 20th floor.]

Slowly.

The predetermined history began to repeat itself.

“Ah...”

Preta, with tearful eyes, looked towards the entrance of the acacia forest path. Something was approaching.

Clank! Clank!

Each step they took, their armor and helmets cried out

fiercely. Flags of various colors fluttered above them.

“Please...”

Numerous banners.

Sounds of military boots, hooves, and flapping wings.

“Not again, the village will burn... Burn to ashes...”

To restore history as it was.

To burn the paradise.

Now, the allied forces dispatched from around the world entered the acacia forest path.

“Please, no... Oh, ah...”

Preta collapsed onto the path, huddling.

Huddled, her head and clasped hands pointed directly at me.

“My lord.....”

As the Sword Emperor said, to me, she should be an unforgivable nemesis.

Yet she bowed deeply to me, feeling immense anger and resentment.

“My lord.....!”

But she did.

She had to.

“I will not hold grudges..... I will not seek revenge.....”

Becoming my subordinate and accepting me as her master was the only choice Preta had.

When a powerless person has something precious to protect, they can become a Preta, able to swallow any humiliation.

TL/N: Preta is the Sanskrit for “Hungry Ghost”.

“I will do anything, follow any order..... I'll be your maid, your slave... Whatever happens to me doesn't matter, just please,”

She begged on her knees.

“Please save my village.....”

“Yes.”

I replied.

“Alright.”

I didn't say much.

I took a step.

Led by my step, the Sword Emperor followed. Just moments ago, he mocked me and Preta with a ridiculous expression, but now, his face was heavy as a mountain.

-So, that's how it is.

“Yes, that's right.”

Step.

-The subject is obliged to follow the sovereign.

“The sovereign has the responsibility to protect his people.”

Step.

-I'm sorry for being sarcastic.

“You lost the bet, remember? Just think about the compensation.”

I walked past my subject.

Inhaling deeply, I infused aura into my voice.

And shouted.

“Halt, all troops!”

Like a giant's fist scattering petals, the acacia leaves fluttered.

The roar of the dragon wings ceased, the rattling of the armors stopped. The sound of horse hooves, the clanking of spears and swords, all came to a halt.

I stood.

On the acacia's single path.

Between me and the legion, there were only petals.

Petals make no sound when they flutter. So when they cover the world, it seems as if the world quietly drifts into slumber.

But eventually, petals that leave the branch must fall to the ground.

The commander of the Aegim Empire, donned in sea-colored armor without a gap, bearing the sun's seal on his breastplate, stepped forward.

I knew who he was.

“I am General Sarbast Aegim! Who dares block our path!”

And of course, he had no idea who I was.

Hmm.

“Well...”

I faced countless monsters, thousands of zombies. I even received the direct gaze of Preta when she was the Demon King at her peak.

Despite having faced menacing auras as much as anyone, I still needed to carefully choose my next move.

I gripped my sword handle.

“What business do you have in such a remote village?”

“It is the will of His Majesty, the Emperor!” bellowed General Sarbast Aegim.

A battalion of soldiers rattled their spears in response. Birds fled the forest, no longer dropping petals but taking flight in panic.

“We’ve heard of a witch here, misleading the good people of the continent! Even monsters fooled by her charms, how could we stand by and watch?”

“And so?”

“We shall purify with holy fire!”

I silently glanced at the blue dots on my ‘minimap’.

“It’s not just the will of the Emperor!”

There weren't just one or two blue dots. Hundreds. Thousands. The map was filled with them, and more were still converging towards this location.

I knew who they were.

“The Pope himself decreed, punish the heretic who dares call herself a saint!”

Paladins from the Temple, whom I saved on the 13th floor.

“The lord of the forest entrusts us, may all spirits bless our path!”

Elves from the Forest, saved on the 14th floor.

“The current monarch of mermaids grants us the soul orb in acknowledgment of our mission!”

Magicians from the Falls, saved on the 15th floor.

“For the honorable oath, warriors from the ancient volcano have come forth!”

Warriors from the Volcano, saved on the 16th floor.

“Merchants from the Free City Federation, the Field Cavalry, and soldiers from the small kingdoms and even smaller territories, all have joined us!”

Armed merchants from the 17th floor, nomads from the 18th, and soldiers from small nations and territories from the 19th floor.

“All worlds unite for our retribution!”

From the 11th to the 19th floor.

Places I trod, stood upon, and saved.

Heroes of those stages, ranging from dozens to hundreds, rallied under their respective banners.

"....."

I knew them all, yet they did not know me, just as Sarbast Aegim didn't.

"I ask again!"

Sarbast Aegim roared.

"Who are you to obstruct our mission!"

I looked at my mission window.

+

[The Hero of a Time-Frozen World]

Difficulty: Unknown

Objective: You have made up your mind. You will not tolerate even a single sacrifice.

It is called justice to not expect anything back from those you have saved. It is called devotion to not expect recognition from those you have saved. And they call those who are dedicated to justice a hero.

Hero!

The people of the Empire will not know your justice. They will not realize your devotion. But still, justice remains justice, and devotion remains devotion. Will you continue to choose to be a hero in this frozen world?

The Demon King has escaped after being injured. He hasn't gone far. If you wish, you can still pursue him.

Now only your choice remains.

+

Of course, my decision was already made.

“General Sarbast Aegim.”

Sarbast Aegim faltered.

I pointed at him with a taunting tone.

“You said you came under the Emperor’s command?”

“You... you dare? To me, a general under imperial command, you now.....”

“Hah, what a joke. Who knows the situation of the Empire better than you to talk about imperial commands?”

“H-how could you.....”

Well, I saw your trauma when I killed you to steal your skill.

I also knew about the intensifying power struggle among the princes.

Wasn't it the talk of the Empire's capital when I liberated the 12th floor?

Instead of saying all that, I just glared at Sarbast Aegim with a stern gaze. The general, who had been leading the allied forces, frantically scanned his fellow monarchs.

My earlier words touched a sensitive nerve about the imperial family, but his confusion didn't last long. The dragon knight captain and paladin leader frowned, but the rest acted as if they hadn't heard.

The world's most powerful nation's general cleared his throat and glared.

“.....How dare you say such a vile thing! Are you another minion of that witch over there?”

“Vile? Ha. You're talking about vile when you're plotting to

dethrone the legitimate crown prince and raise the third prince to that position? You're the one spouting vile words!"

Sarbast Aegim was shocked again. This time, his expression shattered under the weight of his surprise.

I continued to provoke him with a calculated tone.

"You... That's no way to live. Do you even realize how much the Emperor has done for you? A nobody destined to mend nets at the docks, now an imperial guard and a general – all thanks to His Majesty. And you, blinded by power....."

I spoke calculatedly to incite his anger.

Finally losing his cool, the general exploded.

"This makes sense now. You're from the Amber Palace, aren't you? Trying to sway public opinion at a gathering of world unity! If you're a true imperial, you should know the only rightful heir is His Highness, the third prince....."

"Fool!"

I sharply cut off his fury.

And changed my tone, catching the flustered Sarbast Aegim off guard.

“Amber Palace? Ha! Do I look like a mere pawn of a deposed queen to you? Blind as a bat! Foolish and ignorant!”

“Then, who sent you.....”

“Who am I, you ask!”

I raised my sword and shouted boldly.

“See for yourself!”

Sarbast Aegim's eyes filled with horror.

“Yes!”

Indeed.

“Even with those knot-hole eyes, you can see this, Sarbast Aegim!”

I had raised [Leafanta Aegim's Holy Sword of Protection]!

+

[Leafanta Aegim's Holy Sword of Protection]

Rarity: Legendary

Description: 'He who seizes the holy sword, shall conquer the continent.' The legendary ancestral sword of Aegim. Rumored to be bestowed upon the founder of the Aegim Empire by the Goddess. 'He who conquered the continent, shall be seized by fate.'

The founder named his successor and then disappeared. Suicide? Betrayed? In a time when legend and history had not yet diverged, his whereabouts became unknown, and the holy sword vanished without a trace. Leaving only a prophecy as a guide.

'On the day destiny arrives, he who seizes the holy sword shall also arrive.'

The owner of the Holy Sword of Protection receives absolute support and trust from those of the Aegim Empire.

+

I declared loudly.

“The Emissary of the Great Emperor, Leafanta Aegim, stands before you!”

Sarbast Aegim trembled uncontrollably.

That trembling spread to the knights bearing the imperial crest and then to the soldiers. Until the entire imperial army was shaking, I stared them down like an eagle.

“Sarbast Aegim!”

“Yes, yes……”

“I am aware of the imperial turmoil, and the misdeeds of the reckless crown prince! That you sided with the third prince out of sheer loyalty to the imperial lineage, I know! My earlier rebuke was just to test your integrity! Are you upset about that!”

Sarbast Aegim's eyes now welled with emotion.

“Upset? How could I be... you recognize my loyalty... But how can I atone for my folly... Oh, Emissary of the Great Emperor.....”

“There’s nothing to be upset about! And if you have no qualms in calling me so! Why are you still on your horse looking down upon me!”

“My negligence.....!”

Sarbast Aegim hurriedly dismounted his horse. He stumbled. Scrambling to his feet, he knelt without even brushing off the petals and mud on his armor.

“Guardian of the rising sun! Protector of all that dwells between the sea and land! The Aegim Empire shall shine eternally!”

The empire's general cried out with emotion.

“Humble words in the presence of the Emperor's Emissary.....!”

The effect spread rapidly.

“I see him!” Imperial knights dismounted. “I see him!” Soldiers knelt in unison. “I see him!” Some prostrated in respect.

“The Emissary of the Great Emperor is here!!”

The world alliance gathered to vanquish the witch.

The mightiest of the eight forces had knelt before me.

-Wow.

The Sword Emperor marveled sincerely.

-Kim Zombie... I thought you were only good at rants and nonsense, but you have a knack for bullshitting too.

‘Just realizing that now?’

Like when I faced the six pillars of the tower.

No matter how mighty the opponent, no matter how many I face, my course of action is always one of two.

Fight them or persuade them.

And just as there are various ways to fight---

‘There’s more than one way to persuade.’

Alright.

It’s time to deceive the world I saved.

Chapter 48: How to Confront the World (2)

The Guardian Spirit a.k.a. the Sword Emperor, seems like the kind of guy you'd get if you mixed a psychopath and a know-it-all in equal parts. Thanks to this golden ratio, 99% of what he says to me is either insane or useless.

-When wielding a sword, what really matters is not just your skill.

In other words, that 1% contains the essence of both psychopath and know-it-all.

-Faith! Confidence! Faith in yourself is what's most important.

The Sword Emperor's face was stern.

-Bullshitting is the same!

A profound statement filled with life's experiences!

-To deceive others, you must first deceive yourself! Believe in your own bullshit. Have confidence! The most plausible lies won't be believed if said without confidence. But even the most outlandish lies can be convincing if delivered with confidence.

‘Really?’

-I've done it enough to know!

Perhaps the ratio of psychopath to know-it-all was actually 6:4.

-Of course, if it's completely 100% false, neither the other party nor you will believe it. So mix truth into your lies! Blend 10% truth with 90% lies!

‘Mix them?’

-Yes. The charm of a lie lies in that. If you believe 10% of the truth, the remaining 90% of the lies will naturally flow out!

Indeed.

-Remember this, Zombie. Confidence is the key to bullshitting!

"Hmm."

I looked ahead.

Armies from across the continent, gathered to capture Witch Ester... Among them, the vanguard of the Aegim Empire's army, their soldiers, and their general, all looking at me.

I had to deceive them to avoid danger on my side.

"The Emissary of the Emperor..."

"But that sword is definitely..."

"Why is the Emissary here?"

Murmurs.

Some of the soldiers looked at me suspiciously. The Aegim Empire's soldiers were dutifully bowing their heads, but that was it. The soldiers from other affiliations were clearly doubtful. Perhaps the influence of the holy sword only extends to the empire's own troops.

"But, Emissary of the Emperor...?"

The leader of the Aegim Empire's army cautiously observed my expression.

"May this ignorant soldier ask one thing?"

"What is it?"

"The reason we came today, as mentioned, is to subdue the witch. But how did the Emissary of the Emperor come to be here?"

I closed my eyes for a moment,

‘Confidence.’

and then, opening them wide, shouted.

“Soldiers! I have already subdued the witch!”

My voice, filled with aura, echoed through the acacia forest path.

General Sarbast Aegim flinched.

“Yes... yes? You've already subdued her? What do you mean by that...”

“Look this way!”

I stepped aside, revealing the figure of Preta, who was hiding behind me. Some recognized her appearance as Ester and shouted.

“That’s Ester!”

“The witch from the west!”

“I’ve seen her before! That woman is definitely her!”

“Burn the witch!”

Preta flinched, making a startled noise.

But I was undeterred and commanded.

“Preta.”

“Yes...?”

“Come forward and kneel before them.”

" "

A firm command.

Preta, now reduced to my Ghoul, had no power to defy my order. She staggerly walked forward and knelt down.

But that wasn't the end.

“Bow your head.”

Preta bowed her head.

“Place your hands on the ground.”

""

With trembling hands, Preta touched the ground. Was it rage or humiliation? She bit her tongue so hard her cheeks were deeply indented. Soon, blood from her lips dripped down her chin.

“Place your forehead on the ground.”

“Uh... ”

Preta complied with my command.

The soldiers watched in stunned silence as the former Demon King pressed her forehead to the ground. Her breathing mixed with more rage and humiliation. Yet, to protect her small paradise, she obeyed my commands.

A scene of noble surrender.

Then, I authoritatively commanded.

“Now, perform a forward roll while in that position.”

Silence.

A moment of stillness hung over the acacia path.

".....What?"

Preta turned her head to look up at me.

A look of disbelief, as if she had misheard.

I frowned.

“Didn’t you hear?”

“Um, um...?”

“Perform a forward roll immediately!”

Startled, Preta obeyed the command hesitantly. In other words, she placed her hands on the ground and did a forward roll.

Roll!

Her small body rolled across the ground, her long hair scattering acacia petals. After completing the roll, Preta still looked bewildered.

“Hmm.”

I nodded.

“Now stand on your head.”

"....."

Preta looked at me again.

A look of doubt about the sanity of her new master.

Naturally, I didn't flinch.

“Why aren't you standing on your head yet!”

"Gasp."

Trembling, Preta placed her hands on the ground and slowly tried to stand on her head. She fell with a thud, unable to

maintain balance. Sobbing, she flailed on the ground like swimming on dry land.

Regardless, I continued my stern orders.

“Perform twenty jumping jacks!”

“Do ten sit-ups. Begin!”

“After that, immediately ten push-ups!”

“Now twenty sit-ups!”

“Maintain a plank position for 20 seconds!”

A while later.

“I can’t anymore, my lord... My body won’t move...”

The former Demon King lay sprawled, utterly drained.

Tears glistened in her eyes.

"Hmm."

I turned to Sarbast Aegim.

"Do you understand now?"

Sarbast Aegim stood with his mouth agape. Not just the general, but his soldiers wore similar expressions. They watched Preta, crying like a helpless child, in stunned silence.

"Emissary, what is the meaning of this...?"

"As I said."

I intensified my gaze.

"The witch has already been subdued by me. She can no longer defy my commands!"

Naturally, I added.

“She can no longer harm the people of the continent. Soldiers. You can rest assured about the witch!”

The soldiers were restless.

As the lower ranks wavered, their leaders were equally perplexed.

“Hmm. If the Emissary says so...”

“Wait a minute!”

While Sarbast Aegim seemed willing to believe me under the authority of the holy sword, other commanders, especially the Paladin Commander, were clearly skeptical.

“What’s all this about!? We came to vanquish the witch.”

“Not so. Didn’t the Emissary of the Emperor say the witch has already been vanquished...”

“How can we believe that!”

“On the contrary, how can you not believe it? The Emissary of the Emperor commanded and... well, whatever it is, you also saw the witch strictly following those... commands, didn't you!?”

Sarbast Aegim angrily retorted. The power of the holy sword was indeed formidable.

The Paladin Commander, nearly jumping out of his skin, shouted.

“That's what I'm saying... how can we believe that... no, no, first of all! The only proof this young man is the Emissary of the Eastern Emperor is that one sword! Because of that sword, since a while ago...”

“That one sword?”

Sarbast Aegim raised his voice.

“A mere sword? My goodness. Are you questioning the authority of the Great Emperor who founded our empire! That

holy sword is the very proof of our goddess' favor. How dare you!”

The Paladin Commander flinched.

“No, General. Calm down... What I meant to say was,”

“What could you possibly mean!”

“Po, Pope His Holiness gave me a strict command. He ordered me to subdue the wicked witch... but now because of such words,”

The imperial general roared.

“Such words! You’re doubting the words of the Emissary of the Emperor over the Pope’s command!”

Wow.

“What, what...”

The Paladin struggled for words.

It took precisely two seconds for astonishment to evolve into fury.

“How dare you question the authority of the Temple!?”

“You were the first to doubt the authority of the Holy Sword!”

“Oh, fine! Very well! It seems the 3rd Prince's faction of the Empire doesn't need the Pope's endorsement!”

“Bah, such an endorsement. The Emissary of the Emperor has already appeared and subdued the witch. With the goddess's favor watching over the Empire and its lineage, why should that matter!”

“That is indeed the will of the 3rd Prince's faction!”

The Empire's general and the Temple's paladin were fiercely arguing.

I smiled inwardly.

‘Perfect.’

There's something to be mindful of when various groups come together.

Once conflict is exposed, even just once, it rapidly spirals toward collapse.

‘No need to look far.’

When we Hunters ascended to the 12th floor, there were precisely eight factions.

Me, the Sword Saint, the leaders of the five great guilds, and then the smaller factions from 8th to 10th in contribution.

Although united under the external goal of ‘conquering the tower,’ we were never a cohesive unit.

There was distrust and underlying tensions.

So, when the variable of the [Witch's Reward] arose, it led to a pathetic collapse.

"Warriors, the ones who chose to climb the tower."

I recalled the Goddess's hologram's words when the 11th floor opened.

"You will face a test from the 11th to the 20th floor. A test of faith."

I smirked to myself.

That so-called test of faith.

‘Not just the Hunters, but the tower's residents should experience it too, right?’

It would only be fair.

As the Empire and the Temple began their real [Test of Faith], other factions started to join in.

“Sigh, everyone... now is not the time.”

The elf ranger captain from the Fairy Forest sighed.

“Shouldn’t we verify more thoroughly whether that young man truly controls the witch? Even if you humans are foolish, please choose the right time and place.”

It was unclear whether he was trying to mediate or exacerbate the situation.

Naturally, he was no help at all.

“To add one thing, it seems the Temple is caught in its own contradictions, isn't it? The Holy Sword of the Aegim Emperor, revered by the Temple, was bestowed by the Goddess of Protection. Doubting the Sword's authority is tantamount to doubting the Goddess's. This is why short-lived humans are so foolish...”

“What!? So, the elves have been looking down on us!?”

“That’s why these long-eared fellows are untrustworthy!”

If anything, it only caused more disruption.

“Why are the Empire and the Temple behaving like this! We came here to honor our noble oath!”

The dragon cavalry leader from the volcano erupted in anger.

“Settle it in a duel like warriors! What’s the use of carrying weapons otherwise!”

They were simple-minded.

Reminds me of Viper, the leader of Chun-Moon or the Celestial Martial Guild.

“The Free Cities Federation agrees with both the Empire's Sword and the Temple's Hammer. There must be someone even more correct. We're open to suggestions.”

“Typical. That’s why these farming weaklings... So, when do we get to plunder that village? You said we could plunder it, right? We came all this way and...”

“Everyone, everyone... the witch's den is right before us...”

A mediator trying to stir trouble from the Armed Merchant Company, a nomadic chieftain complaining while calming the horses.

The lords of the smaller nations, closest to Preta's paradise and therefore most desperate to conquer it, were the only ones fretting.

A situation on the brink of chaos.

-Keheh!

Meanwhile, the Sword Emperor and I were more relaxed than ever.

The Sword Emperor crossed his arms and shook his head.

-Now I understand why Preta caused fights among the Hunters. There's a certain pleasure in inciting discord!

‘I agree.’

It was honestly fun.

But of course, not everyone in their ranks was just a troll.

“Sigh, everyone. Please, step aside!”

Naturally, there was also a mediator, someone trying to sort out the chaos. Like the ‘Vigilante Corps Leader.’

The lizardman wizard from the Mermaid Falls stepped forward.

“To me, the issue at hand is simple. That,”

The lizardman pointed at me.

“Whether this young man is truly the Emissary of the Emperor. Whether that woman is truly the witch. Whether the Emissary truly subdued the witch and took her under his control. Just confirming these will resolve everything.”

The paladin, tired of arguing with the general, frowned.

“So how do you propose to confirm this?”

“Don’t worry. I have a way.”

The lizardman reached into her pouch.

In her grasp was a blue orb, seemingly condensed from the depths of the sea.

“This is the Soul Orb bestowed by the Mermaid Queen.”

The lizardman was very serious, as if she was about to reveal a precious treasure, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for us.

“By dropping a blood droplet on it, we can determine if the blood's owner has a [Good Soul] or an [Evil Soul]. If it’s a good soul, the orb will emit a bright white light; if evil, it will turn black.”

Hmm.

‘So, it's similar to the Vigilante Corps Leader's [Lie Detection] or the Sword Saint's [Eyes of a Detective]?’

-Yeah. Seems like the Demifolk do well in making these gizmos.

The Sword Emperor and I were at ease. It sounded grand with the Mermaid King's Orb, but it was nothing new to us.

Oblivious to our thoughts, the lizardman was confident.

“Come! If you truly are the Emissary of the Emperor and that woman the witch, accept this test of the orb!”

The lizardman raised the orb.

“Your sins and deeds will be laid bare by the orb!”

“Very well.”

I nodded readily.

“Go ahead and test.”

“Don’t regret it. As I said, the orb will expose your soul for what it is.”

“Blathering on and on. Get on with it.”

The lizardman's snake-like eyes narrowed.

“Let's hope your confidence is not mere bravado. First, let's verify the soul of that woman.”

She approached us confidently, grabbed Preta's wrist, and sharply scratched her palm with her nail.

Blood oozed from the palm.

"Gasp."

Preta shuddered. Dark red blood droplets fell, drip, drip, into the Mermaid King's orb.

Whoosh!

The orb instantly turned a deep black.

“Gasp!”

“Good heavens.”

The commanders watching the soul test were horrified. The color that stained the orb wasn't ordinary black. It was like a bottomless abyss, a shadowy blackness that writhed like a serpent.

“Such an evil soul...!”

Even the lizardman conducting the test swallowed hard.

“How many sins and killings must she have committed... Such a being should not exist. A truly cursed entity... undoubtedly a witch!”

Thud.

The wizard dropped Preta's wrist like discarding dirty water. In her snaky eyes, immense contempt and equal fear towards Preta were visible.

“No. She's more than a witch. She's undoubtedly a Demon King!”

Preta shrank further.

The mood shifted. Was it because the lizardman announced Preta's identity? The soldiers' murmurs ceased. The commanders stopped arguing and glared at Preta. As they did, Preta withdrew further, timidly stepping behind me.

“Now, it's your turn.”

The crowd's attention naturally shifted to me.

The lizardman raised her sharp nail.

“Self-proclaimed Emissary of the Emperor. Are you ready?”

“I am always ready.”

“No amount of pretense will help you now... Come, give me your hand.”

I willingly extended my left hand. Nick! The lizardman's nail passed, and the flesh parted like gills.

Red blood flowed from the split flesh. My blood droplet fell quietly into the darkened orb, stained by Preta's blood.

And then.

“Ah...?”

There was light.

“What, what...?”

The dark aura in the orb vanished as if washed away. Not just that. A brilliant white light accumulated and intensified, eventually exploding outward.

Flash!

The Acacia forest path was instantly illuminated in white. Small screams erupted here and there. Soldiers startled, closed their eyes, and commanders covered their faces with their palms.

The lizardman wizard holding the orb was no exception.

"How, how..."

She fluttered her lips, stunned.

"What is this soul...?"

"This is unbelievable!"

The Paladin Commander shouted.

"Mermaid King's droplet! Why is such light bursting from the orb!?"

“The soul is...”

The wizard, not even looking back at the Paladin, muttered.

“How could it be so pure... What lives must he have saved to be so brilliantly white, this is... this is truly...”

“Ah,” the lizardman wizard said.

“This man... is the Light!”

That's right.

I was the light.

Chapter 49: How to Confront the World (3)

“Light...?”

The Temple's paladin stuttered.

The brilliant white light from the orb had subsided a bit.

Now it was bearable to look without closing the eyes.

“How can a person be light? What does that even mean?”

“I told you... This person is just... just light...”

The lizardman wizard choked up.

I wasn't great at reading lizardmen's expressions, but now it was clear. The wizard was moved. Tears, like dew at dawn, glistened in her torn snake eyes.

“Can’t you recognize this sparkling soul...?”

“I, I don’t understand.”

“Why don’t you? Is it a problem with your eyes? Or your head...?”

The paladin wore a sullen expression. Suddenly, his intellectual capacity was under scrutiny.

“No. I mean, I don’t understand what you mean by light.”

“Aah.”

The lizardman wizard sobbed.

Then, she spun around to face the paladin.

“This is why those fools at the Temple...!”

“Wh-what?”

“This person, you see? He is the light! Real, complete light! Why can’t you see that? Are you blind? Brainless? It’s not just any light, but bright white light!”

“But, isn’t light usually white?”

“Aah, this is why! It’s impossible to talk with vulgar humans!”

The lizardman magician, seemingly irritated, thumped her chest. Bang, bang. A little more frustration, and she looked ready to strike not her chest, but the paladin’s head. Sensing this, the paladin quickly backed down.

“This soul... to tell such a lie to us!”

The lizardman wizard's voice soared.

“Even if it were a lie, it would be for our sake! Foolish humans, stay quiet and obey this person’s words. He is surely the Emissary of the Emperor... No, the Apostle of the Goddess!”

The lizardman wizard looked at me, seeking agreement with her words.

Not just her, but the entire army gathered on the Acacia forest path was holding their breath, watching me.

"Hmm."

I confidently crossed my arms.

“That’s right.”

Maintaining a solemn expression.

“I am indeed the Apostle of the Goddess.”

“Indeed!”

The soldiers buzzed. Following the Empire's general, now even the wizard of Mermaid Falls had vouched for my identity. Three witnesses make a tiger. If three people say there's a tiger, it becomes real.

“He's the light.”

“What's light?”

“Anyway, he was shining. His sword was all flashy...”

“That's the sword used by the Founder of Aegim or something.”

“Then he must be from a noble family.”

Even those soldiers who were skeptical upon seeing the Holy Sword now looked at me with ‘maybe?’ in their eyes.

Of course, one more witness was needed to complete the trio.

“No! I still don’t understand!”

The paladin stepped forward.

“Let’s say you are the Emissary of the Emperor and the light! But why would you... No, why would such a person come here to obstruct our path! Have you all forgotten? We have a mission!”

The paladin pointed assertively over my shoulder.

“We must burn that place!”

Ester’s homeland.

The place Preta called paradise was there.

“Not just the witch, the Pope was worried about her followers too! Heretics following her cannot escape divine punishment! If you truly are... the Apostle of the Goddess, then lead the charge in executing this divine punishment!”

"....."

Someone clutched the back of my robe. It was Preta. Without looking back, I could feel her fear.

‘It’s alright.’

I remained calmly crossed-armed.

‘The best lie is made of 90% truth and 10% falsehood!’

Recalling the advice given by the Sword Emperor, I slowly opened my mouth.

“Temple’s paladin, be careful with your words. It is not for you to decide how divine punishment should be executed. What punishment should be meted out to those vile groups, that is entirely my decision.”

“What is...?”

“All evil has been gathered by me, and the divine

punishment has already been executed.”

I spoke softly.

“Executing divine punishment on earth is my duty.”

“What, a duty...?”

“Watch.”

I raised my right hand.

Wriggle.

My shadow instantly spread across the Acacia forest path.

-Growl!

Skeletons began to emerge from the shadow.

The soldiers screamed. The paladin's face turned ashen, and the other commanders were shocked, drawing their weapons. While they reacted, the skeletons multiplied from dozens to hundreds, then thousands.

Soon, the continental army was completely surrounded.

Ghoul Reincarnation.

Thousands of skeletons were resurrected.

-Growl!

-Gah! Wah!

The monsters howled savagely, awaiting my command.

It was obvious to those who knew I was still in Ghoul Reincarnation mode, but to the unaware continentals, it seemed different.

“Demons!”

The soldiers panicked at the sudden emergence of thousands of monsters, as if escaping from hell through the ground.

A literal depiction of hell.

“God...”

The paladin trembled.

“What are these horrifying things?”

“My duty.”

I placed my hand on Preta's head.

She flinched but said nothing.

“See. How can only the witch be the evil in this vast world? Each of these is an evil person I've gathered, demons comparable to the witch.”

“All these monsters...?”

“That’s right.”

I narrowed my eyes, gazing into the far horizon.

Like a hero trapped in a tragic fate.

“The Goddess commanded me. To punish the evils overflowing on earth on her behalf! To gather them! And so, she bestowed me this power.”

My voice naturally became solemn.

“To punish all evil in the world is my mission. To gather these demons in hell is my duty. You are witnessing my hell.”

“My goodness...”

The lizardman wizard sighed.

“All these are on the same level as the witch...?”

I nodded.

“That’s right.”

“In our ignorance... the Apostle alone, all by himself, has been vanquishing evil in this world...?”

“That’s right.”

“My god. No one recognized you... How could you, a mere human, create such a hell alone... Apostle of the Goddess, are you alright...?”

"Hmm."

I crossed my arms and nodded.

“This is my duty!”

Sternly, solemnly, and seriously.

“There is no need for you to punish the witch or her minions. I have already gathered all the evildoers. They will eternally groan and suffer under my shadow. I am their hell!”

“Aah... The Light...”

The lizardman wizard collapsed sobbing.

“How could you shine so brightly, even I, foolish as I am, can see now! In our ignorance, the Apostle was saving our continent all along!”

I nodded again.

“Indeed it is so!”

The best lie consists of 90% truth and 10% falsehood.

Though the process was dotted with lies, the conclusion was correct.

After all, as long as the conclusion is correct, does the process matter?

-This guy...

The Sword Emperor looked at me proudly.

-I have no more for me to teach you! Go forth!

‘Ah, but all this is thanks to your advice, Master. How could your unworthy disciple go on alone?’

"No, it's not. Zombie, your moral compass has far surpassed mine..."

The Sword Emperor lamented.

-This teacher, so pure like a child, simply cannot handle a scoundrel like you...

‘You’re too modest. I still have much to learn from your wicked ways. Please, take back your words.’

-Did you ever hear of the saying 'the student surpasses the teacher'?

‘And have you heard ‘there’s no disciple better than the master’?’

The disciple and the teacher mutually praised each other's character.

In today's world, where human relationships have grown cold, there was indeed a warm and lovely master-disciple relationship here.

"Anyway."

I dismissed Ghoul Reincarnation.

Swoosh.

The skeletons, numbering in the thousands, quickly disappeared. The continental folks watched in stunned silence as the monsters sank into the shadow, like a sinking ship.

"Do not worry about the witch or her minions. As long as I am here, they will forever suffer in my hell. This is the will of the Goddess, and this is her divine punishment."

"....."

"Would you dare defy the solemn will of the Goddess?"

The paladin shuddered.

"Ah, but... your holiness, Apostle. Are these cruel demons truly safe? That is, my humble point is... if these demons escape into the world, the devastation would be unimaginable..."

"Indeed."

I nodded thoughtfully.

"You wish to verify if I'm truly keeping these demons securely?"

"I am, indeed, most apologetic for this inquiry..."

"Very well."

Snap!

I snapped my fingers.

A skeleton, not yet dismissed, approached. It stood between the paladin and me.

"What... what is this skeleton doing here, Apostle?"

"I shall clarify your doubts."

I patted the skeleton's shoulder.

"Return to your former self, Ghoul."

Wriggle!

Black muck rose from the skeleton's shadow. It climbed the white bones, forming a human shape. Muscles, flesh, and then clothing.

In a blink, a handsome man stood where the skeleton had been.

"Ah, what the fuck!?"

Although his mouth was foul.

"What the hell... Yo, you son of a bitch! What grudge do you have against me to do this to me? What did I, damn! What did I do to deserve this!"

Burning rage in his eyes.

Yes.

I had restored the memories of Flame Emperor 'Yoo Soo-Ha.'

"You crazy bastard! Damn it! I will kill you! No matter what,

I will utterly crush you!"

"As you can see."

I indicated Yoo Soo-Ha and looked at the commanders. Despite his struggles, Yoo Soo-Ha couldn't defy me, his 'master.'

"This man is also an evildoer, comparable to the witch."

I wore a forlorn expression.

"Actually, worse than the witch. The witch was born a monster, but this man, born human, committed horrifying evils. Burning anything that stood in his way..."

"I'll kill you, you hobo piece of shit! I'm going to kill you!"

No need for further explanation.

"---You, -----! Hey! I'll tear you apart, -----!!"

The Acacia forest path was filled with curses. Ghoul 'Yoo Soo-Ha' spat every curse known to this world.

With every curse, the commanders grew paler. Within a minute, Yoo Soo-Ha had described 15 different methods to kill me. Impressive.

"No, fuck, and who the hell are you guys! Hey, lizard! Big ears! What are you staring at! You want to die by my hands that badly-----."

After another minute, the curses shifted not only to me but also to everyone present, their parents, and families. About 10 more methods to murder people were added.

"This, this atrociousness...! Such darkness...!"

The lizardman wizard was horrified.

"We don't even need the Soul Orb. That man, he truly possesses a demon's soul!"

"Definitely..."

The elf ranger captain groaned.

"I've lived a long time and seen many foolish humans, but such an ugly and evil one is rare..."

Oh, rejoice, Yoo Soo-Ha.

Finally, your greatness is acknowledged in another world.

-Zombie. But isn't this desecration of the dead?

‘Exactly.’

-Isn't that problematic?

‘Yoo Soo-Ha deserves this. And Sword Emperor, you called me the king of zombies. If a zombie king uses a zombie-like creature, what's so strange about that?’

-Hmm.

The Sword Emperor deeply nodded.

-You're right. I can't argue with that logic...

‘Right?’

-Indeed, your moral compass is far beyond mine, Zombie.

That was a minority opinion.

Snap!

I snapped my fingers again.

"Dance."

"What the, shit, what----."

Upon my command,

Yoo Soo-Ha began tap dancing. His heels cheerfully wandered the flower-strewn path. Tap, tap! His moves were surprisingly good, possibly honed in clubs in his heyday.

"No, what is this, damn---."

"Dance again."

Snap!

Yoo Soo-Ha's dance changed from tap to breakdancing. Fortunately or unfortunately, Yoo Soo-Ha had a talent for dancing. He seamlessly transitioned from breakdancing to the Cossack dance.

"I'll kill you!"

Yoo Soo-Ha screamed while dancing the Cossack dance.

"You, I'll kill you! You bastard! I swear I'll—!"

But as everyone knows, anything said while doing the

Cossack dance, no matter how foul or terrible, doesn't seem serious.

Even if Hitler returned to give a speech, if he did the Cossack dance, no one would take him seriously.

That's the power of the Cossack dance.

"Shit, shit... Fuck, damn..."

Realizing the futility of his words, Yoo Soo-Ha just cursed repeatedly while diligently dancing. It was an entertaining backdrop of music and visuals.

"Hmm."

I turned to the paladin.

"Are you still worried?"

The paladin gaped in shock.

"Demons can never defy my command. Rest assured."

Ultimately.

The paladin slowly knelt.

"Apostle of the Goddess... may I inquire your name...?"

A trembling voice.

The continental forces all looked at me.

I boldly accepted their gazes and crossed my arms again.

"My name is Gong-Ja."

The paladin bowed deeply.

"I will follow your words, Lord Gong-Ja...!"

The last remaining commander, who shouted to burn the village, gave up.

Then.

[Congratulations.]

A welcome voice.

[Normal Stage Clear.]

[Hidden Quest, 'Hero of the Time-Frozen World,' cleared!]

And an unwelcome voice.

-You crazy bastard!

The voice's owner was rolling on the ground, clutching his stomach.

-Crazy! You're the first to clear a quest like this! Really, where did this nutcase come from? I admit it, Kim Gong-Ja!

‘What are you admitting?’

-You are... the light of all crazies!

That was a minority opinion.

Volume 3 – Chapters 50-74

Chapter 50: Paradise After the Ending (1)

"Crazy bastard!"

The continental forces retreated a bit.

Meanwhile, the Sword Emperor kept laughing, holding his belly.

"From now on, I shall call you Kim Crazy!"

‘Ah, please stop it...’

I sighed inwardly.

'Do you know how many nicknames you've given me? Kim Zombie, Zombie King, Kim Crazy. At this rate, I could fill an entire A4 paper with just nicknames.'

"Ah, that sounds great. Let's go! A crazy person with dozens of nicknames, let's gooooo!!"

The Sword Emperor's laughter filled the sky.

Thankfully, not everyone in this world was just there to tease me.

[You have cleared the Boss Stage.]

The voice of the Tower.

It announced that I had fully conquered the 20th stage, echoing in my mind like when I cleared the 10th stage, the so-called 'Hell Mansion.'

[The conqueror is the King of Death.]

[Alone.]

I slowly looked up.

Between the branches and leaves of the Acacia, the blue sky stretched out.

[Tabulating the clear reward.]

[Tabulation complete.]

[The reward will be given upon entering the 21st floor, 24 hours from now.]

Yeah.

I smirked.

‘What does it matter if I’m called crazy or not? Anyway, I did my job.’

-Oh, look at that confidence?

‘I cleared up to the 20th floor my way.’

I had vowed not to leave anyone to die.

What a preposterous ambition it was, in hindsight.

‘Not a single hunter died while I conquered the 20th floor.’

The Demon King of Autumn Rain. By dealing with the fallen Constellation, I prevented the tragedy of hunters killing each other out of suspicion.

I had preemptively blocked the root of the tragedy.

‘And not a single person of the empire died either.’

I fought for the otherworld while time stood still.

‘And...’

I raised my right hand and rested it on someone's head.

‘I’ve also taken care of this one.’

Preta.

The former Demon King, now confined to my shadow, sat on the ground, blankly staring at the continental forces.

The soldiers who would have burnt her small hometown in the original history.

But today, history did not repeat. The moment the paladin knelt, the continental forces withdrew their hostility. Believing my words as the Apostle of the Goddess, they abandoned their mission.

Paradise was preserved.

‘This is just my thought, but.’

I gently stroked Preta's head.

‘This 20th floor... even if I had just stood by, it would have cleared on its own. There was no real need for me to step in.’

"Huh? Why?"

‘Because burning down the village would also have been one of the [endings].’

An ending.

I realized while conquering stages that the Tower doesn't differentiate between happy and bad endings. Any properly concluded ending is accepted, regardless of its nature.

‘Otherwise, Yoo Soo-Ha wouldn't have cleared up to the 40th floor.’

Whether it's like the Flame Emperor, smashing the dolls in the Hellfire Mansion.

Or like me, just playing with the kids for a while.

Either way, it's recognized as a valid [conclusion].

‘So, this isn't a world set by the Tower.’

I turned to look at the village.

‘It's not an ending chosen out of helplessness.’

A place where wheat ripens under the sky.

A stubborn yet benign old man who overlooks kids playing mischievously, sitting in front of an orchard, smoking a cigarette.

A refuge for incurable patients.

‘It's the ending I chose.’

Today.

Rain will not fall from the sky.

And fire will not engulf the ground.

"Indeed..."

But why?

As I indulged in these proud sentiments, the Sword Emperor looked at me with a somewhat pitiful expression, as if looking at a sorrowful child. 'What's wrong?'

-It's just... is this part of the ending you chose?

The Sword Emperor subtly pointed somewhere.

There was Yoo Soo-Ha.

"Fuck! Shit, bastard! Why won't this stop!? Huh!? Stop it right now--- Fuck! Why isn't it stopping!?"

More specifically, Yoo Soo-Ha was still doing the Cossack dance.

In a picturesque scene with blue skies and petals on the ground, a handsome man was alone, cursing beautifully.

It would've hit millions of views if uploaded as a video on the internet.

‘Huh? What’s wrong with that?’

I tilted my head.

‘Isn’t it incredibly beautiful?’

-You truly are Kim Crazy...

The Sword Emperor murmured.

Then.

[Today.]

[The 20th floor has been cleared.]

A voice echoed between heaven and earth.

This time it wasn't just for me to hear.

[Announcing once again to everyone.]

[Today, the 20th floor has been cleared.]

An official announcement.

Like when I cleared the tenth stage, the same voice was likely spreading throughout the Tower.

"Ah."

I smacked my lips.

‘What a pity.’

-What is?

‘We don’t have internet here.’

My smartphone was soundly asleep in my backpack. It had been five days in the real world, but hundreds of days in the time I spent here, and I hadn't touched my phone.

The internet only works in the Tower from the 1st to the 10th floor.

‘It must be chaos on the internet now...’

-Eh? I thought you didn't care about people's reactions anymore?

‘When did I say that?’

-Didn't you? You said you'd rather get recognition from people like the Witch and Marcus than from ordinary people?

'Ah.'

I shrugged.

'More is better, right? To receive recognition from the Witch and the Sword Saint, and also from ordinary people. To look up at the sky without shame.'

-Wow. Are you a pig? So much greed.

'Humans live by their desires.'

Luckily, I could compensate for my regret of not being able to see the internet.

[The 21st floor will open in 24 hours.]

[24:00:00]

Boom!

Fireworks adorned the sky, just like last time. The first firework burst into a clock of light. Just at that moment, as if waiting for this precise instant, two hunters were teleported here.

"King of Death!"

It was the Witch and the Sword Saint.

The Witch used a teleport skill to fly over instantly. Whoosh! She bent her elbow and hugged my head. Then she beamed her signature bright smile.

"You're insane! You're absolutely crazy!"

"Ow. Ouch! Wait a minute, Black Dragon Witch. That hurts unexpectedly..."

"Brat! A whippersnapper not even thirty years old!"

I tried to resist, but it was futile. I couldn't escape her headlock. Oh my. How many elixirs had she consumed to be this strong?

"Really, clearing the 20th floor in just five days! Aren't you crazy!? You're insane!"

"Please, calm down, Black Dragon Witch..."

"You have no idea the chaos that's erupted in the Tower right now! Look!"

The Witch showed me something.

It was a smartphone.

An old model, at least five years old, with a battery barely hanging on. The phone screen, which should have no internet access here, displayed numerous online articles.

"What's this...?"

"I stopped by the 1st floor to capture these!"

Her voice was genuinely excited.

"There were too many articles to capture them all! Sorry! But you have to understand, King of Death. It's not just the Tower in chaos, but the outside world too. I captured only the top-clicked articles, but look how many there are!"

She swiped through the smartphone screen.

There were headlines.

-[Breaking] Lightning-Fast Conquest! 14th Floor Cleared!

-King of Death decided as a sacred alias.

-Official announcement by the Black Dragon. The current conquest team is just made of three members.

-Who is the main character? The Sword Saint? The Witch? Or the King of Death?

-[Special Feature] Focused coverage on the King of Death.

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There were many.

Too many headlines to read them all.

"The titles say this, but..."

The Witch smiled.

"They're all about you!"

"Uh...."

"Starting from where you're from, your life story. How you entered the Tower and quickly climbed to the top rankings. Really, that's all they talk about-"

"Wait a minute."

I was bewildered.

Not by the newspaper articles. This reaction was to be expected. In the past five days, the internet must have been ablaze hundreds or thousands of times.

I'd experienced this before.

What bewildered me was something else.

"You captured all these yourself?"

"Yes!"

She nodded, her face close to mine due to the headlock.

"Of course!"

"To show me?"

"You think there would be any other reason?"

"Um. So...."

I narrowed my eyes.

"You went all the way down to the 1st floor to show me these articles, searched for them one by one, and captured each one... Is that what you're saying?"

"That's the gist of it!"

I imagined it.

Hunter ranking 2nd place. Leader of the largest guild in the Tower.

Such a high-ranking person hurried to the 1st floor, diligently fiddling with a smartphone, clicking and capturing, then proudly showing off the captured screens upon returning.

"....."

Imagining it, the scenes seemed quite cute. But still, I didn't understand.

"Why would someone like the Black Dragon Witch go through such trouble...?"

"What are you even talking about?"

The Witch laughed brightly.

"Of course, I wanted to do something for you!"

"....."

"Ahh, and don't read the article comments later. Accusations

of fabrication and fraud. The envious ones have unleashed terror there."

The Witch sighed softly.

"Why do they always do that? Zero casualties is an incredible feat! King of Death. Don't bother with those nobodies. From now on, the Black Dragon will take care of the media for you."

What? Is she an angel?

-Kim Zombie. You're so easy to please with a bit of kindness.... Even though you've led such a pitiful life, be more resilient to kindness. Why are you so weak to it when you're so strong against malice?

An angel, or perhaps even a goddess?

-You're insane....

The Sword Emperor's face contorted.

-You're finally losing it, aren't you?

"Then maybe you should praise me more often. Do you know how starved I am for compliments? How precious a little attention is in my dreary life? You wouldn't understand."

-That's... not pleasant.... I'd rather achieve nirvana than this.

The Sword Emperor feigned vomiting.

Such a psychopath.

-Hey! What nonsense! I had friends, you know!?

"Excluding the Sword Saint?"

-.....

The Sword Emperor looked away. A quiet victory for me.

The reason for this victory remained unknown.

"And look at this!"

Finally, the Witch released the headlock.

What she wanted to show me this time wasn't a smartphone screen. The Black Dragon Witch opened a small backpack and pulled out a thick stack of newspapers.

"Here!"

She unfolded the newspaper widely.

"Yesterday's front page!"

I couldn't immediately make out the article's content.

However, the list printed in big letters caught my eye first.

The list had the title [Hunter Rankings Updated!] on top.

+

1st place. Sword Saint

2nd place. Black Witch

3rd place. King of Death

4th place. Countess

5th place. Heretic Inquisitor

6th place. Viper

7th place. Babel's Linguist

8th place. Wide-Area Communicator

9th place. Paladin

+

"....."

I was speechless for a moment.

While I was trapped in the prison of time, fighting the Demon King alone.

Below the 12th floor, something had happened in the world.

"It's the first time something like this has happened since the Tower opened!"

The Witch laughed.

"Jumping straight up to here from outside the rankings!"

3rd place.

The hunters' aliases, just like the rankings, are determined by the Tower.

These rankings are displayed on the stele in the 1st floor square.

"You might not feel it yet... but go down to Babylon today. You'll immediately realize the kind of person you've become."

Thump!

The Witch rolled up the newspaper and tapped my shoulder.

"Congratulations, King of Death!"

That's right.

"You now represent all hunters!"

In just five days, the world had changed.

Chapter 51:

Paradise After the Ending (2)

"Now you really need to think more about your future!" the Witch said.

She continued to hit my forearm with the rolled-up newspaper bundle. Thump! Thump! Her excitement was palpable.

"My future?"

"Yes. Right now, you're a member of all five major guilds. But you're effectively independent. Considering how well things have gone, it might be good for you to establish your own guild."

The Witch laughed pleasantly.

"A hunter ranked third should at least hold a title like 'Guild Master.' Even if you're a member of all five major guilds, just being an ordinary guild member doesn't really fit the bill."

It was hard to grasp the reality.

"Guild Master?"

Me, leading a guild? It was unimaginable. Did I even need to control hunters when I had an army of skeletons?

"Well."

Noticing my reluctance, the Witch shrugged. In the background, the Sword Saint watched silently.

"Perhaps you're more suited for solo play, like the old man here. There are surprisingly many who dream of smashing everything alone. If you're not interested, I won't press the issue."

"Oh. Are you talking behind my back now?" the Sword Saint interjected.

"Ignoring that," the Witch continued, turning her head.

"What are those?"

Across the Acacia forest path, in the small plain, the continental soldiers were constructing something. A camp. They had given up on attacking Preta's paradise, opting to rest here today before retreating.

"Ah."

I rubbed my chin.

"Those soldiers are from all over the continent."

"From all over the continent?"

"As I was saying..."

I explained, leaving out the story about Preta. I only told them how I deceived the continental army.

The Witch and the Sword Saint listened, their expressions growing more peculiar as I spoke. The Witch's comment summed up their thoughts.

"King of Death... you have quite the talent for lying."

"Well, thanks to that, we cleared it without shedding any blood."

"No, I'm not criticizing. Actually, it's impressive."

The Witch's eyes narrowed, like a shrewd merchant devising a cunning plan.

"Now we can trade with this continent. No more groveling to the old folks outside. Those bad people always beat down the price with food. Let's see if they can continue that."

Resentment flowed from her voice.

"Fundamentally, trade between the Tower and the outside world is unfair," the Sword Saint added.

"Capital, resources, technology - the outside world is richer in everything. Though the Tower has unique ingredients and elixirs not found outside..."

"Food! It's always about food!"

The Witch stamped her foot.

Initially, she seemed taciturn. But having cleared floors 12 to 19 together, her emotional expressions had become much more varied.

"We're going to start trading with these continental people?"

"Yes? Of course. The outside world needs to taste bitterness too."

"Then."

I grinned.

Pointing to the encampment on the plains, I said, "We'll have

to start talking to them. But just saying 'Let's trade' won't work. To them, we are foreigners, and to us, they are from another world."

"True."

"I'll lend you my name."

"I am the Emissary of the Founder Emperor and the Apostle of the Goddess in this other world. If you present it as if you're also sent by the Goddess, it should be useful, at least for starting the trade."

"....."

The Witch's eyes narrowed.

"That's a generous offer. Effective, too. But you wouldn't suggest lending your name for free... What do you want?"

"The 20th floor."

"What?"

I looked around.

The Acacia forest path, the small plain, Ester's homeland.

This tiny world was the entirety of the 20th floor.

"I want to own the 20th floor."

The Witch was momentarily speechless.

"Wait a minute. Own the entire 20th floor?"

"Yes. Specifically, I'd like to own all the land on the 20th floor."

"That's..."

"In exchange. I won't take anything for clearing floors 11 to

19. The profits from trading with the continent should be shared with the other hunters." The Witch's lips sealed again.

It was a bold proposal.

Usually, when hunters clear a stage, participants share the outcomes. Ownership of items, resources, and so on. But about half of the rights are left for all hunters to share.

There's no precedent for someone owning an entire floor.

"This isn't something I can decide alone," the Witch said, looking troubled.

"We need to call the other guild masters and discuss it."

"Well, we have 24 hours to spare, so I can wait."

"...Do you really want this floor?"

The Witch glanced around.

"At first glance, it doesn't seem very valuable. The Acacia flower path is pretty, but it's not good land for farming. The floor is also cramped."

"Hmm."

"My experience says, King of Death. At times like this, it's more profitable to just take your share of the clear. You could make a tremendous amount of money."

I smiled.

"I prefer real estate over money. Land is the best."

"Deal?"

The Witch sighed.

"I'll gather the guild masters. Let's discuss it in Babylon on the 1st floor."

"Sounds good."

"Okay. You should show your face to the people anyway. But..."

The Witch slowly turned her gaze.

"I've been wanting to ask since earlier."

"Yes."

"...What is that?"

She pointed in the same direction I looked.

"Fuck... Black... damn it, stop...! Stop it! Is this request so hard, fuck! What grudge do you have against me, what did I do wrong....!!"

There, the Tower's greatest dancer was showcasing his talent.

His sweat and tears beautifully moistened the Acacia forest path.

Beautiful.

"Witch."

I smiled brightly.

"You saw nothing."

"Huh?"

"You didn't see anything. Understand?"

"....."

The Witch made a face like a biologist who had encountered the mystery of a lifetime.

"Fine. I'll accept that. There are various kinds of people in the world. But still," the Witch muttered.

"You're really not sane..."

That too was a minority opinion.

Leaving Preta and the Flame Emperor on the 20th floor, I teleported with the hunters to the 1st floor.

"Is it okay to have the meeting at the same cafe as last time?"

"Yes. I'm fine with anywhere."

Back in the city of Babylon on the 1st floor, after what others would see as just five days, but for me, it felt much longer.

"Ah."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Just now, I was feeling the realization of having cleared the stage."

The Witch chuckled.

"Well. You might need to feel it a bit more."

"Huh?"

"I told you. Right now, in the Tower, people are only talking about you. Be mentally prepared."

There was no need to ask what kind of mental preparation I needed.

"Huh?"

"Is that...?"

It didn't take long after stepping on the 1st floor teleportation stone for the surroundings to start buzzing.

Pedestrians walking the streets, vendors at their stalls, hunters gearing up for their next hunt—all began to whisper among themselves.

"That's the Witch and the Sword Saint."

"Then that person is..."

"The King of Death!"

Someone shouted, and it became a turning point.

"The King of Death has appeared!"

A customer examining used weapons at a stall turned their head. A couple at an outdoor cafe stood up. A flower merchant, hunters chatting, dozens, hundreds of people all turned to look our way at once.

In an instant, a crowd gathered around us.

"Wow, wow---."

"He cleared the 20th floor alone, is that true?"

"Please look here! Just a moment! Over here!"

Buzzing voices surrounded us.

I had no time to react. In the blink of an eye, we were completely encircled. By the time I blinked again, the crowd had doubled.

"Uh..."

"Don't say anything."

The Witch whispered in a voice only I could hear.

"Have you never dealt with the media before?"

"Yes, of course not."

"A man of mystery? A popular star?"

"Huh?"

"Your concept. Do you want to be a man of mystery, or a popular star?"

Even as the Witch whispered, the crowd tripled in size. Our pace slowed to a crawl. Click! Click! Every step was accompanied by the loud snapping of camera phones.

My mind was completely overwhelmed.

"Once you choose a concept, it's hard to change. Decide now."

"What's a popular star?"

"Similar to a movie star."

The Witch explained.

"First, you need to start a new SNS account. You'll have managers for image and media relations. Of course, you'll hire someone to take care of your appearance and fashion. Don't

worry about money; the Black Dragon Guild will cover it."

My already scattered wits were fraying at the edges.

The Sword Saint frowned beside us.

"He doesn't like this crap, that's why he always goes solo."

That seemed like a wise decision.

"Let's go with the man of mystery, please..."

"People enjoy the attention at first. The Inquisitor even started modeling for magazines and shooting personal photo books."

I knew that.

Before the 4000-day regression, collecting and organizing those magazines and photo books was my hobby. The Black Witch before me was a regular on magazine covers.

"No, please, a man of mystery."

Aren't I shot in the head!

"Shyness will kill me!"

"Everyone's shy at first. Well, except the Inquisitor... But King of Death, what you shouted atop the Imperial Palace tower was much more..."

"If it's not a man of mystery, I'll quit the five major guilds."

I was dead serious.

The Witch chuckled softly.

"Yeah. That suits your personality."

"What does a man of mystery do?"

"It's simple. Just keep a straight face."

For the first time in my life, I was advised to keep a straight face.

"Avoid SNS activities. No interviews or appearances in magazines or on TV. Even if personal broadcasters or journalists request interviews, refuse them. A couple of interviews a year are fine, but only with journalists I've vetted."

Hmm.

"...Is that all?"

"You don't realize how hard that is."

The Witch giggled.

"Attention is like a drug. The most addictive kind."

The Sword Saint picked up where she left off.

"And the drug that most thoroughly destroys people."

"Right. Just 10 people giving you attention can make you feel happy. But once you reach this level, millions respond to your every word. Few can resist such a drug."

The crowd pressed in closer.

It felt like the entire city's population was here.

"It's all vanity."

Said the Sword Saint.

"Yep. But it's a pleasant vanity."

"Maybe enjoying such a drug is part of being famous. Until you tire of it. Or until you become disillusioned with others taking the same drug. What will you do, King of Death?"

I looked around.

A curtain of humanity.

People packed so tightly there wasn't a single gap. Camera flashes never stopped, and I had to squint to see through them. The flashes looked like mirages, and the curtain of humanity like a shadow.

"...I might be the least deserving of attention."

I spoke up.

"What I want is recognition. And I think... getting attention and getting recognition are different."

I thought of the Flame Emperor.

The absolute ruler who once monopolized all attention in the Tower before my 4000-day regression.

"I'm fine without the attention of millions. The attention of those around me is enough. Whether it's thousands or millions, what I want from the world isn't attention, but recognition."

"Right."

The Witch smiled.

"I think they're not entirely separate, but if that's your answer, I respect it."

"Thank you."

"You're that kind of person, and I'm glad for it."

That was something I'd heard before.

"So, how do I keep a straight face?"

"I'll tell you a secret."

Crowd noise swelled around us.

We seemed to slow to 10cm per second.

"Think of a truly bad memory."

"A bad memory?"

"Yeah. For me, it's when my father died in a civil war in the outside world."

The Witch spoke calmly.

"I was seven. We were fleeing, and soldiers were probably chasing us. My father stayed behind. He shouted, 'Don't look back, just run.' But..."

She pushed through the crowd.

"I didn't look back. I heard gunshots but kept running."

Click! Click!

Camera flashes never ceased.

"It was a long time ago."

"A long time ago."

The Witch murmured.

"I don't regret running. I was a child. But why didn't I even look back? It would have been easy. Just to look."

"....."

"When I need to be expressionless, I remember that moment. My heart races so hard. It's my little secret."

The Witch looked at me.

"You have such memories too, don't you?"

I do.

In a dark alley, gripped by the Flame Emperor, burning all over.

"That's right."

Without a mirror, I knew.

I was wearing a perfect expressionless face.

"Look here, please!"

"Say something, please!"

"Black Witch, when can we expect an official statement?"

"What's your relationship between the two of you!"

"Sword Saint! What do you think of the King of Death!"

As I looked around again, I'd become accustomed to the

camera flashes. I could see clearly despite being surrounded by so many people. This was my first time being encircled by such a crowd, my first time under such a barrage of flashes.

But...

"It works amazingly well."

I wasn't as mentally scattered as before.

Just calm as usual.

The Witch's mouth tWitched slightly.

"You learn fast. You'll get used to it quickly."

In just five days, the world had changed.

But I hadn't changed enough to be affected by it.

Chapter 52:

Paradise After the Ending (3)

We finally made it to the cafe through the crowd, where familiar faces awaited us.

"Ahaha, welcome!"

The Heretic Inquisitor, guild master of the Temple of the Omnipotent God, waved his arm.

"Clearing the 20th floor in just five days! This is the greatest feat since the Tower's creation. I sincerely respect you, Hunter Kim Gong-Ja! No, I should say, King of Death now!"

"Still feels like a dream..."

The Paladin sipped her iced coffee.

"Honestly, I thought you, the Black Witch, and the Sword Saint would fail and die. And you even soloed the 20th floor? Amazing. If there's a secret, please share it."

"A secret?"

I sat at one side of the table.

"Just live a decent life?"

"A very practical advice."

The Paladin smirked.

"Anyway, it's nice to see you all after a long time. How have you been?"

"Well, it's only been 5 days."

The Countess puffed on her long pipe.

"We stayed in the audience hall as promised. A promise is a promise, after all. But soon after, NPCs from the empire started roaming around. It was a surprise!"

"Ah."

That was when I defeated the Demon King on the 12th floor.

I received a quest, which restarted the frozen time.

"I didn't think about that. What happened?"

"The empire's NPCs thought we were traitors who invaded the palace!"

The Heretic Inquisitor chuckled.

"Some well-dressed person was shouting, 'Catch those traitors!' and the empire's knights and elite troops came after us. It was chilling!"

"But this little guy has various tricks."

The Celestial Martial Clan Master, Viper, ruffled the Inquisitor's hair.

"We got caught first, then escaped from the prison. It was... quite the adventure."

"Ahaha! Wasn't it fun! I never imagined a secret passage in the underground prison! It felt like going back to childhood!"

"Wait, weren't you kidnapped by the Bulgarian mafia as a child?"

"Yes!"

The Inquisitor laughed genuinely.

"That's why it reminded me of my childhood. Prison! Underground! Escape! Ah, all these things glorified my youthful days! Now they are just distant memories."

"Madman..."

Viper sighed deeply.

While I was busy filming the Demon King saga, it seemed the guild leaders had their own adventures.

"Right. We all had quite the lives in the outside world."

The Black Witch joined the table nonchalantly.

"The Countess was born in a slum in India. Viper, your parents were gang leaders. The Paladin struggled in Venezuela."

"....."

"So we're all trash in the eyes of the outside world, right?"

The cafe's atmosphere suddenly grew heavy.

Only the sound of the Paladin sipping coffee echoed.

"...This isn't a conversation for this occasion."

The Paladin glanced at me.

"Are you considering the King of Death as [one of us] now?"

"Yes."

The Black Witch replied.

"You might not know, but the King of Death has contributed decisively to the Tower's conquest."

"We know that."

"No. You don't."

The Black Witch shook her head.

"In this conquest, we didn't have a single casualty. Even on

the 11th floor where numerous hunters participated. All thanks to the King of Death's strategy and tactics."

All eyes turned to me.

"Hmm."

"It's true."

"I."

The Black Witch spoke.

"I want to make this man the hero representing our Tower."

Silence enveloped the cafe.

The Black Witch scanned the hunters around the table.

"Countess, you're too greedy for money."

"It's true, can't deny it."

"Heretic Inquisitor, you've killed too many."

"Yes! It was a necessary sacrifice!"

"Paladin, you hate getting attention from others."

"It's just my nature."

"And Viper, you are..."

"Uh? What?"

"...sorry. You're too ugly."

"....."

Viper's face contorted, a portrait of middle-aged sorrow.

"As for the Sword Saint, well, he's obsessed with swords."

"Hmm."

"I have to operate in the shadows, so I can't."

After scanning the table, the Black Witch finally turned to me.

"But the King of Death has no public image yet. With some effort, we can mold him into the perfect hero. It's an opportunity. A chance to renew the Tower's image."

"Indeed."

The Heretic Inquisitor stroked his chin.

"We're old figures, lacking in appeal. Even though we're constantly in the news, our sales are steadily declining!"

"Right. That's what I mean."

"So, we should start image-making today!"

The Inquisitor stood up, circling around me like an excited puppy.

"Hmm, a bit short, but that's fine! As you can see with me, photoshop fixes everything!"

"Uh..."

Wasn't your short stature your charm point?

His small face broke into a wide smile.

"[A small but passionate man, the King of Death]. This phrase will hit the mark!"

Before I could respond, the hunters gathered around.

The Black Witch, Countess, Viper, Paladin.

Regardless of affiliation, they came close, examining me thoroughly.

"Do you have a partner right now?"

"Uh... no."

"Any lovers or romantic interests in the Tower?"

"None."

"So, there's no risk of scandals. Perfect!"

What does 'perfect' even mean?

The top rankers began to murmur.

"He looks a bit cunning when he smiles. Let's push the mysterious concept. He's good at keeping a straight face."

"Having no partner is troublesome."

The Paladin spoke.

"We might need to create a fake scandal. Otherwise, outsiders will start rumors..."

"Don't worry. I'll handle that."

"Ah, a love story blossomed during the fierce battle of the past 5 days. Ahaha, great! A story people will love!"

"No, wait..."

"Let's call the photographers! Let's take some photos!"

The Inquisitor beamed brightly.

"Call all the designers. We need to distribute at least one photo to the media today. We have some videos of the 11th floor battle, we'll release them online at the right time!"

Wait.

Hold on.

"Everyone, I..."

"Don't worry."

The Black Witch interrupted me, smiling with deep wisdom.

"You don't need to do anything, King of Death. We'll handle everything. Just keep doing what you've been doing."

"But, you said a mysterious concept. Designers aren't necessary, right?"

"Just for today, please."

The Black Witch pleaded gently.

"The whole world wants to know about you. Just one photo. Let's show them one picture. Okay? Don't worry, our contracted designers are incredible."

Thirty minutes later, it turned out to be far more than just one photo.

"Look here, please!"

Click!

A swarm of designers dressed me up, styled my hair, and every time they did, the photographer flashed the camera.

"Yes, perfect. Now, hold a dagger! Like a wolf stalking prey in the bushes!"

"No, wait..."

"Excellent!"

Click!

The hunters huddled behind the photographer, scrutinizing my pose.

"The suit surprisingly suits him."

"Maybe a slightly more mischievous feeling."

"No way! I've already secured the mischievous concept!"

"Then, how about a young man burning with a sense of adventure?"

"Let's go with that."

Click!

"Perfect!"

Perfect my foot.

-Hahaha!

The Sword Emperor was rolling in the air, laughing.

One hour, then two hours passed, and my patience finally broke.

"I'm not doing this anymore! I quit!"

I threw the suit on the floor.

"Hunters are supposed to climb the Tower! What's with all this media image and photo shoot nonsense! This is why you couldn't even clear the 10th floor for years!"

Silence.

Did my heartfelt words resonate? The atmosphere turned cold. The Black Witch and the hunters all stared at me intently.

Then, they nodded.

"...That line wasn't bad."

"Hmm. The embodiment of a young man burning with passion."

"The headline for tomorrow's newspaper: [King of Death, Shocking Declaration. He will give up his rights from the 10th to 19th floors to all hunters, stating he's satisfied just conquering the Tower.]"

"Agreed!"

"Second page: [King of Death, known for donating to orphanages since long ago.]"

"Yes. Leave the 20th floor to the King of Death as our token of gratitude and respect."

"Perfect! What a beautiful conclusion!"

No.

They didn't listen to me at all.

These people were obsessed with making me a hero.

"Forget it, young man."

The Sword Saint spoke bluntly.

"I went through the same when I became rank 1. All kinds of nonsense about old man's charm, how to grow a beard differently. They said everything."

Oh no.

"They want to show the outside world. [We are also living proudly.] It's a kind of inferiority complex."

The old swordsman murmured.

"Having given up everything in the outside world to come to the Tower, why do they still yearn so much..."

The Sword Saint turned to leave.

"Let's go."

"Yes?"

"If we stay, there's no end to this. After photos, they'll want videos, then a press conference. That's how they are. If you don't escape now, you'll lose a whole day."

A terrifying thought.

"Let's escape quickly!"

"A wise choice."

We ran, infusing our steps with aura. "Ah!" cries echoed behind us, but we didn't stop.

"King of Death!"

The Black Witch shouted.

"Come back in the morning for the press conference! Don't get noticed, move secretly! Escape via the rooftops! Be careful!"

The Guardian Spirit laughed uproariously.

-Heh, she's more like your mother than an angel or goddess, isn't she?

Indeed, she was.

Although I'm not sure what a mother is like.

Soon, the world was bathed in the glow of sunset.

As advised by the Black Witch, we escaped via the rooftops. Looking down, hundreds of people still swarmed the cafe. Reporters from TV stations were buzzing around as an added bonus.

'Good thing we didn't exit through the main door!'

We leapt across the rooftops tinged with red.

Our stop was a bell tower in the square.

A security guard, fiddling with his smartphone, belatedly recognized us.

"Wow! Sword Saint, sir?"

"Hmm."

The Sword Saint landed gracefully on the tower.

"Would you mind stepping aside for a moment?"

"Ah, but... um..."

"Five minutes will suffice."

The young guard was flustered, understandably overwhelmed by a living legend. Then his gaze met mine, and his eyes lit up.

"Is that... the King of Death!?"

"Ah, yes."

"Wow, wow! It's my first time seeing you in person, wow! Amazing!"

The guard fumbled through his bag in excitement. A romance novel popped out, probably to kill time during his shift.

"I only have this paper right now. Could I get an autograph, please!?"

The Sword Saint, as if used to such requests, took the novel.

"Have a pen?"

"Here, sir!"

"What's your name?"

"I don't have an alias yet...!"

With neat handwriting, the Sword Saint signed the book.

The guard, like an innocent boy, received the autograph and turned to me. His eyes sparkled with eagerness.

"C-could I also get one from you, King of Death?"

"Sure."

My autograph?

"I've never done something like this before..."

"It's a lifetime wish of mine! Please!"

I awkwardly took the book and pen.

A lifetime wish for my autograph? How light must one's life be.

I glanced down at the book, already signed by the Sword Saint. I hesitated, realizing that writing 'King of Death' would be the first time I put that name in writing.

Before I knew it, our signatures lay side by side.

+

Sword Saint 劍星.

King of Death 死王.

+

"....."

"Thank you so much! I'll treasure this! I won't sell it, promise! Thank you, thank you! Have a great weekend!"

The guard hurriedly descended the tower stairs, his excited voice fading, "Yes! Scored big!"

The tower was left with just a red sunset and our soft breathing.

"....."

After a long silence,

"Um, Sword Saint."

"Listen, young man."

We spoke simultaneously, our voices colliding in the air.

Awkward silence ensued, but not for long.

I spoke.

"To you, Sword Saint, I must appear as someone who killed countless people. A mass murderer who must be punished."

Calmly, I looked at the Sword Saint.

"But if you look in the mirror, you'll see a mass murderer who has also killed countless people. Yourself."

The Sword Saint gazed not at me, but at the twilight sky.

"Yet, you don't seek to punish yourself. You must have a clear standard for killing: 'punish those who have harmed many.' Similarly, I've always had a clear standard: 'punish those who will harm many.'"

This was a carefully crafted lie prepared since I falsely claimed to be a prophet,

"If someone killed many in the past, and you killed them for it, then I have been killing those who would harm many in the future."

Before I could finish, the old man softly interrupted.

"You don't need to convince me of that."

"Huh."

"Sword Saint, I..."

"Young man."

His gentle call silenced me.

Still fixed on the sunset, he spoke.

"I'm different from the other hunters."

It seemed an abrupt statement.

"Black Witch. Countess. Heretic Inquisitor. Viper. Paladin...
all suffered harshly in the outside world. But I'm different.

Born into abundance, I lived without the lack of anything."

Marcus Callenbury.

I knew the man before me was from a prominent family. I had researched him during my investigation. A renowned family in Northern Europe.

"When the Tower appeared, I had already established a family. Ran a business, married, had children, and saw my grandchildren. I experienced success as much as one could."

His voice was steady.

"But doubts crept in."

"Doubts?"

"I wondered if my success was truly my own achievement. It just suddenly intrigued me."

The old man slowly drew his sword.

"Was it just because I was born into a good family?"

The twilight reflected on the blade.

The sword that had not cut anything was red.

"Born under a good family, educated well, befriended the best, grew up drinking only the finest... Was I just a bird in a gilded cage? I was proud, believing I achieved everything on my own... but maybe it was just a delusion."

He said.

"No."

Sharp as a blade.

"It can't be."

His heart was as red as the sunset.

"True, I was born into privilege. Yet, I still stood tall on my own. I wanted to prove my pride wasn't a delusion."

"So you came to the Tower."

"Hmm."

He nodded.

"In the Tower, where no one can return to the outside world, where I have no family, supporters, or prestige... I wanted to prove my life with just myself."

"But," he murmured.

"I think I've grown complacent."

"Skill card open. Reveal."

Flash!

A silver card materialized in the Sword Saint's hand.

+

[Eyes of a Detective]

Rank: B-

Effect: You can know the kill count of others. Direct murders only. The skill counts only intentional killings.

*However, the method of murder is unknown.

+

"Foolish."

He gazed at his skill card.

"Though I resolved to rely only on my eyes and hands...

before I knew it, I was dependent on 'skills.' I saw through skills rather than my eyes, and trusted the skill's judgment over my own."

And then,

"Last question, young man."

His blue eyes met mine.

"Have you ever killed an innocent life?"

That's why he said no need to convince himself.

I understood.

Convincing is done by 'mind,' as I just did, merely luring someone's mind, not capturing their heart.

"No."

Convincing, not convincing.

"I haven't. Sword Saint."

Like when I addressed the Tower's pillar,

I spoke through my heart.

"I won't in the future either."

The Sword Saint silently closed his eyes, as if savoring my expression and voice.

Silence flowed.

Then,

"Whoosh!"

The card flew.

The golden twilight shone through the split card, torn by the red blade.

"I'll trust my eyes."

The card disintegrated into light dust.

"Thank you for the past five days. For indulging an old man's whims. Rest well tonight. After the press conference tomorrow, the 21st floor will open."

He stepped off the roof.

Before leaping to another building, he glanced at me.

"Looking forward to your performance on the next floor, King of Death."

And he quickly vanished.

"....."

I stood still for a long time.

I awkwardly spoke.

"Sword Emperor. Did he just...?"

-Yeah.

"Recognize me?"

-It seemed so.

A weight lifted from my heart.

"Wow..."

I slowly sank to the ground, the stone floor cool beneath me.
I gazed blankly at the darkening sky.

"Wow, it's really over. The 20th floor is mine now. The media

will be handled by the guild leaders... Yes, everything is truly over."

The Guardian Spirit chuckled.

-Not really over. You'd think you cleared the 50th floor.

"Feels like I've cleared the 90th."

-Tsk, sometimes I can't tell if you're brave or just naïve.

"Sometimes, I'm not sure myself..."

But I had wrapped up everything up to the 20th floor.

As I settled into this strange sense of fulfillment,

[The Goddess of Protection marvels at your achievements!]

A voice I hadn't heard in a while echoed.

"Huh?"

Come to think of it.

Even after defeating the Demon King of the Autumn Rain, the Goddess of Protection was quiet. Except for when I first conquered the 12th floor, she was always silent.

[The Goddess of Protection recognizes all your deeds!]

Her voice, silent for so long, now flowed continuously.

[The Goddess of Protection acknowledges that even though your claim of being her apostle was a lie, you indeed have the qualifications to be a true apostle.]

[The Goddess of Protection permits you to continue using her!]

But there was something odd in her words.

"Continue to use her? What does that mean?"

[The Goddess of Protection is upset that you've been getting along well but now ask what she means.]

Even more confusing.

"Getting along well?"

[The Goddess of Protection urges you to look down at your waist.]

I looked down.

Nothing but the stone floor.

[The Goddess of Protection suggests you look slightly to the left.]

I shifted my gaze.

There were my legs and waist.

On my waist hung the legendary weapon, the Holy Sword of the Aegim Empire, allegedly bestowed by the Goddess herself.

"Wait a minute. Could it be?"

[The Goddess of Protection advises you to focus your gaze on your waist.]

I felt a strange premonition.

I recalled the scene where I was fighting against the Demon King's army on the 12th floor.

At that time, the Goddess of Protection had said she was exerting her last bit of strength. Right after those words, something I was holding emitted a bright white light.

There were no other miracles.

"Wait. Let me think. The [Goddess of Protection] that was occasionally mentioned while fighting the Demon King..."

With a sense of incredulity, I spoke.

"Are you... perhaps the 'sword'?"

After a brief pause.

The voice responded.

[The Goddess of Protection says yes!]

Good heavens.

It seems that the holy sword I had been using was indeed a sacred weapon.

Chapter 53: The Ultimate Fanboy (1)

-You are now watching an astonishing footage!

-The Witch, known by her alias "Black Witch," is leading the 11th floor assault team. This is the latest footage we've obtained at BBS. Ah! Let's zoom in on this part.

-Yes, right here! Let's pause the video for a moment.

In a quiet waiting room.

I was blankly watching the television.

-Viewers, do you see this? The Black Witch is holding hands with another hunter. This hunter is presumed to be the "King of Death."

-If this footage hasn't been manipulated, it appears the King of Death single-handedly hunted the stage boss of the 11th floor. It's commonly referred to among hunters as a one-shot kill. However, there's been no recorded instance of a boss monster being defeated in one shot until now.

The caster and commentator were making a fuss.

-So, this is a first?

-Yes, indeed. Of course, the Black Witch assisted, but it seems that the King of Death was the only one who directly confronted the boss monster.

Below the screen, a breaking news ticker read, [King of Death's press conference this afternoon].

-Viewers, let's watch the next footage together.

-The King of Death, shrouded in mystery until now, finally revealed himself yesterday afternoon. He returned to Babylon via a transmission stone. As you can see, the Black Witch and Sword Saint are accompanying him.

-It almost looks like they are escorting the King of Death, right?

-Yes. To convey the atmosphere on the scene, let's turn up the volume for a moment.

A video, seemingly shot on a smartphone, played.

In the center of the screen, I was walking expressionlessly.

-Look here, please!

-Don't push! Can you say something?

-Black Dragon Witch, when can we expect an official statement?

-What is the relationship between the two of you...

Click!

Unable to bear it any longer, I sharply pressed the remote.

The Guardian Spirit, watching TV beside me, frowned.

-Ah, why turn it off? I was enjoying it.

I spoke up.

"I feel like I'm going to die of embarrassment!"

This was the waiting room.

It had been a night since the Sword Saint acknowledged me.

Today, a press conference was scheduled to report the progress of our tower assault. Normally, the leaders of the large guilds would handle it, but this time I was invited as a special guest. The conference would start soon.

-So what if you die? You don't die even when you're dead.

"I still don't like it!"

I thought of watching TV since there was nothing to do until the conference, but it was a mistake.

-Oh, come on. Then change the channel.

"It's the same on every channel, talking only about me!"

Regardless of whether it was a news channel or not, nearly all broadcasts were covering the 10th to 20th floor assault. And it wasn't just television; the internet was no different.

Overnight, I became a celebrity.

[The Goddess of Protection points out that your achievements are so exceptional.]

The holy sword at my waist vibrated.

[Fame is a tax that heroes pay as they progress. You should get used to being a hero, advises the Goddess of Protection!]

"....."

I felt incredibly burdened and looked down at the holy sword.

"Yesterday, I was too tired to talk and fell asleep... Hey, Goddess? Aren't you overestimating me a bit?"

[You are the light!]

The sword vibrated more strongly.

It seemed like a fan idolizing a celebrity.

[The Goddess of Protection still vividly remembers. Standing on the pavilion of the empire, proclaiming 'Please take good care of the empire' with a roar... Your confident declaration was truly majestic....]

"Ah!"

I covered my ears.

"Stop it! Stop! I was completely excited when I said that!"

But it was no use. The sword's voice was transmitted directly to my mind.

The sword continuously whispered about my embarrassing history.

[The Goddess of Protection says true heroes must love themselves! A hero without self-love always meets a miserable end, bringing misfortune to those around. In that sense, your confidence is very admirable! It's fantastic!]

Yes.

The Goddess of Protection was my fervent fan.

"Please... just stop...!"

Like how I once obsessed over the Flame Emperor, the sword was obsessing over me.

It would have been fine if the sword fangirled in private, but its voice was broadcast directly to me 24/7. [The Goddess of Protection confesses.]

[She is happy to serve a person like you as her second master.]

Good grief.

Has anyone ever experienced someone praising them earnestly non-stop? Especially about memories you consider embarrassing and wish to forget?

I'd rather die.

[The Goddess of Protection especially remembers the moment you took the Demon King of Autumn Rain as your subordinate, murmuring, 'The lord has the responsibility to protect his people.'...]

This is unacceptable.

I took out maintenance oil from my backpack, used for polishing swords. I soaked a cloth in oil and glared at the holy

sword.

"You started this."

My hand approached the blade.

[The Goddess of Protection feels threatened.]

[The Goddess of Protection begs you to stop.]

[The Goddess of Protection...]

10 minutes later.

[The Goddess of Protection apologizes for her wrongdoing.]

Sparkle-.

Thanks to my diligent polishing, the holy sword was now clean. The blade was so clear it reflected my face. But the

sword trembled with humiliation.

"Phew. Finally, it's quiet."

I looked down at the now subdued holy sword.

"So, why are you a sword if you're a constellation? Were you always in a sword?"

Constellations, as I understood, were like stage managers.

There might be cases like Preta, who started as a monster and became a constellation. But I couldn't imagine how a 'sword' could become a constellation.

Expressing my doubt, the holy sword emitted a faint white light.

[The Goddess of Protection shakes her head.]

[It's easier to think of a constellation as 'something that represents that world.']

The representative of the world.

[The Goddess of Protection speaks.]

[She was originally a holy spirit revered as a god. However, the founder of the empire, 'Leafanta Aegim,' split her into five swords and sealed her.]

[She is the first holy sword, 'The Idol.']

I blinked.

"The sword's name is 'The Idol'?"

[Affirmative.]

The Goddess of Protection listed the five swords.

[First sword, The Idol.]

[Second sword, The Pity.]

[Third sword, The Prayer.]

[Fourth sword, The Sacrifice.]

[Fifth sword, The Salvation.]

[These are the five sister swords.]

[The Goddess of Protection boasts that gathering all the sister swords can restore power comparable to her heyday.]

"Interesting. So where are the other sister swords?"

There was no reply.

An awkward silence settled in the waiting room.

"Hey? Goddess? Where are your sisters?"

Silent.

My eyes narrowed.

"...You don't know, do you?"

After a moment, a soft voice flowed.

[The Goddess of Protection exercises her right to remain silent.]

"So you don't know."

[She can sense their presence if they are close, the Goddess of Protection argues.]

I shrugged.

"Well, it's not urgent. Anyway, you have at least 1/5 of your power. So, what can you do, The Idol sword?"

[You can receive absolute support from the citizens of the Aegim Empire.]

"Nobody knows that better than I do. What else?"

Whooosh!

The Holy Sword emitted light at its maximum output, as if it had been waiting for this moment.

"Aack! My eyes!? My eyyyes!?"

I rolled on the floor, covering my eyes.

A gloating voice resounded in my head from the Holy Sword.

[The Goddess of Protection boasts of her ability to emit light.]

"I've seen enough of that already!"

Seriously, it was a close call. If I hadn't protected my eyes with aura in time, I could have gone blind!

"No, I mean, apart from getting support from the empire's citizens and shining brightly, what else can you do?"

Silence followed.

The Holy Sword emitted a dim light, almost as if it was stuttering.

[I'm confident in repelling monsters.]

"....."

[And also in repelling humans, the Goddess of Protection hastily adds.]

Knock, knock.

In the midst of my speechless reaction, someone knocked on the waiting room door. I quickly sheathed the Holy Sword. To

anyone else, my conversation with a sword would look insane.

"Who is it?"

"It's me."

The Witch's voice came from outside the door.

"It's been noisy here. What's going on?"

"Nothing! Everything's fine!"

"Really...?"

The Witch sounded suspicious but didn't press further.

"The press conference starts in 5 minutes. The reporters will bombard you with questions. After the conference, the 21st floor will open. We just need to answer the reporters briefly, then head straight to the 21st floor. Got it?"

"Yes!"

"Your answers are just perfect... Don't be late."

I heard her footsteps walking away. After ensuring the Witch had completely left, I drew the Holy Sword again and stared at its blade.

"So, apart from shining, you're pretty useless."

[The Goddess of Protection protests against this unfair opinion...]

"That's it. From now on, you're not the Goddess of Protection but Shiny. The name 'Holy Sword' is too grand for you!"

Thinking about it, this Constellation was lamentable!

Unable to protect its world, devoured by the Demon King of Autumn Rain. I had to carry it to protect this Constellation's world. Like Preta, this Constellation too was not in a position to hold its head up against me.

"And you're too noisy. Having the Sword Emperor in my head is already too much. Your constant 'Goddess of Protection, Goddess of Protection' chatter is driving me crazy! From now on, unless it's really necessary, don't speak to me."

[The Goddess of Protection...]

"Ahem. Do you want to go back to the Aegim Empire? Got it, Shiny?"

Silence lingered for a while.

Then, the Holy Sword vibrated.

[Shiny acknowledges your command, Oh Valiant Hero.]

It was the moment I truly claimed the Constellation.

The press conference was held in the central plaza.

The plaza and even the alleys were swarming with people.

Easily tens of thousands. As we walked onto the stage set up in the middle of the plaza, camera flashes erupted from all directions.

The Witch, Sword Saint, and me.

We three sat side by side at the prepared table.

"-Thank you for welcoming us."

The Witch was the first to take the microphone. Her calm voice flowed, and cheers erupted from a corner of the plaza.

"Black Dragon Witch~!!!!"

"Kyaaa!"

"Please look here, Black Dragon Witch! Just once!"

A group waved banners. Some even brought magazine covers featuring the Witch.

‘Impressive.’

Was it because it was before the era of the Saintess? The Witch, as a female hunter, enjoyed unparalleled popularity.

The Witch bowed in greeting and then smoothly led the conference.

"As you all know, we've conquered from the 10th to the 20th floor. As highlighted by various media and broadcasters, it's a remarkable achievement. We pondered how to share this joy, but you all publicized it for us. Yes, we're deeply grateful you saved us advertising costs."

A faint laughter came from the press.

"But what we're most proud of is something else."

The plaza grew quieter.

"It's not the fact that we finally conquered the 10th floor, which everyone has longed for, for years. Nor is it the unprecedented speed with which we reached the 20th floor. The most joyful thing is... we didn't have a single casualty."

A little humor followed by sincerity.

Even to me, inexperienced in public speaking, the Witch masterfully controlled the conference.

‘Is this what it takes to lead a top guild?’

I wondered if this was the same person who playfully dressed me up yesterday.

"Please look down for a moment."

The Witch spoke.

"Look at the floor of Babylon's plaza you're standing on. You will see names engraved on each stone. Names of the fallen warriors who sacrificed their lives in the tower conquest. Our predecessors."

Whirring-.

The cameras of the press turned to the plaza floor.

"When the 2nd and 3rd floors were conquered, countless names were engraved. Their sacrifices brought us here. I'm sincerely happy to declare in front of them."

The Witch's voice filled the plaza.

"Today, nobody's name has been engraved."

Click! Click!

Reporters snapped photos of the tiles and the Witch. This determined the mood of the conference and the day's news. The crowd chanted the Witch's alias.

'I don't even need to step in.'

I observed the conference expressionlessly, feeling unexpectedly pleased.

'It's important to choose the right allies!'

Comforted, I glanced up at the sky.

[01:22:10]

Just like when the 11th floor opened. The light clock was drawn in the sky. When the numbers hit 0:00:00, the 21st floor would open.

‘I can't wait to finish this and head to the 21st floor...’

In the midst of the smooth conference, as questions from reporters and the Witch's answers were exchanged.

"John Evans from Babylon Daily News!"

A reporter suddenly stood up.

"I have a question for the King of Death, who recently rose to 3rd in the rankings."

‘Me?’

I looked at the reporter. Naturally, the crowd's gaze also turned to me.

"There's much talk about your sudden rise in the rankings. Especially the theory that [you're a big newcomer secretly groomed by the major guilds] is gaining traction!"

"Uh..."

"If this is true, it means you're a hero deliberately created by the major guilds. What do you think about these suspicions?"

Murmurs spread across the plaza.

"There are concerns that the major guilds are monopolizing the tower from the 10th to 20th floors. Especially since you, King of Death, have exclusive rights to the 20th floor! Is that true?"

The air buzzed more intensely.

Tsk.

The Witch, expressionless next to me, clicked her tongue softly enough only for me to hear. She turned off the mic and whispered.

"It's bait. Don't answer. I'll handle it."

"No."

I shook my head.

"They'll keep coming anyway. I should clarify my position at least once."

"But..."

"It's okay."

I reached out my hand to the Witch.

"Please pass me the microphone."

"....."

My resolve was firm.

Before climbing the 21st floor, I would decisively cut off such bait.

Chapter 54: The Ultimate Fanboy (2)

"Haah."

The Witch sighed as if worried.

"Don't go too far. I can cover for minor mistakes, but if you really go overboard, I can't control the media."

"I'm the most well-behaved person you'll know. You know that, right? I'm a prophet, okay? I roughly know what the most exemplary answer would be."

"...Can I really trust you?"

"Hey, of course."

I received the microphone from the Witch. Even in the last

moment of handing it over, the Witch seemed concerned about me, but I was truly fine. I had a [secret weapon] for this.

"Ah. Ahem."

I lightly cleared my throat. My voice spread across the plaza through the speakers.

"Hello, everyone. I am a hunter known by the alias King of Death. Nice to meet you all for the first time."

Click! Click!

Lights created a grand wave. I wasn't too flustered. Maybe my experience being surrounded by a crowd yesterday served as a kind of vaccination? Surprisingly relaxed, I endured the flash bombardment.

"Your name is... John Evans, right?"

"Yes, that's correct."

The young reporter looked straight at me. His eyes, burning with journalistic spirit, seemed to say he wouldn't miss a single move of mine, determined to expose my true identity.

It was a quite burdensome gaze.

"Hmm."

Facing such a look at this moment, there was only one thought occupying my mind.

"I think it's all because of my shortcomings that these concerns are arising."

A lesson in what not to do.

Don't be like the Flame Emperor!

"What?"

The reporter blinked, microphone in hand, apparently not expecting this kind of response. Meanwhile, I recalled the

Flame Emperor's smug face in my mind and said,

"I'll say it again. I think it's all because of my shortcomings that these concerns are arising."

My ultimate strategy was very simple.

'Just say the opposite of what the Flame Emperor would say!'

Did I have any great interviewing skills?

I was different from the Witch. I had no talent for captivating a crowd with a speech. I lacked talent, skills, and even experience.

But I had one thing.

Knowledge that others didn't know.

Specifically, interviews of the most despicable hunter in this world!

'If I just go the opposite way of the Flame Emperor, I'll at least hit a decent mark.'

I had been a fan of the Flame Emperor for almost ten years. As a result, my head was like a library filled with records of the Flame Emperor's atrocities and outrageous statements.

If the Flame Emperor were holding this microphone right now?

He would have said:

「It's all because I'm so great that I conquered up to the 20th floor. You little punks.」

「I slaved away to conquer this, so what? The items and experience points I earned are obviously mine. Hey, reporter. If I don't take them, then who should I give them to? Huh?」

「Your dad?」

This wasn't something I made up on the spot. He actually said that!

‘That's why before regression, the Witch's face turned pale during the press conference....’

The infamous [Your dad?] incident.

Understandably, the press conference exploded spectacularly. The reporters' curses were broadcasted live, and even though the Witch hastily ended it, it was too late.

A complete disaster.

The live broadcast was abruptly cut off, but the tragedy didn't end there.

The Flame Emperor's verbal onslaught against the reporters, spewing every curse known to mankind, was live-streamed by personal broadcasters.

‘No wonder they call him the Flame Retard.’

Rumor has it that the Witch was bedridden for a week after that day.

Probably, the [Your dad?] incident was a turning point for the Witch, leading to her aversion to the hunter named Yoo Soo-Ha. Maybe this incident even contributed to the major guilds distancing themselves from the Flame Emperor.

‘In the past, the Flame Emperor completely botched this press conference.’

Meaning...

‘I just need to do the exact opposite of the Flame Emperor.’

Turn the worst into the best!

I recalled the Flame Emperor’s outrageous quotes as I firmly gripped the microphone.

「It's all because I'm so great that I conquered up to the 20th floor. You little punks.」

"I'm aware of the heated public opinion about me. But it's an overestimation. Without the Black Dragon Witch and Sword Saint here, I could never have conquered the 20th floor alone."

「 I slaved away to conquer this, so what? 」

"Of course, I pride myself on having put in maximum effort. I strived to the bone with the goal of zero casualties. But I don't see it as my 'sacrifice.'

It's just what you naturally do as a human, what you should do as a hunter. Above all... it's something I did because I enjoy it."

「 The items and experience points I earned are obviously mine. 」

"Therefore, I have no intention of claiming my rights. I've entrusted the rights from the 10th to 19th floors to the guild leaders here. Regarding monopolizing the 20th floor... No. The 20th floor is more like a [Greenbelt] area. The original residents of the tower will live there, and I will be content with the role of a manager."

「 Your dad? 」

"Mr. Evans. That's all."

"....."

"Do you have any more questions?"

The young reporter, previously ablaze with journalistic spirit, stuttered.

"No... I don't."

Good.

I quickly thought further.

If the Flame Emperor was in my place, how would he have responded to the reporter's silence?

「 Alright. If you have nothing to say, get lost, you American pig. 」

I could vividly imagine the scene, complete with the grandeur of a middle finger.

‘So, if I say the exact opposite of this...’

I spoke.

"Thank you. Ah, if there are any other questions, let's briefly take them, everyone."

Silence fell across the plaza for a moment.

But it was only for a brief moment.

"Here! Summons Times!"

"Please take my question, King of Death! Tower Daily!"

"From the Babylon Tower Broadcasting System!"

"King of Death!"

The reporters eagerly raised their hands. Sensing that I was

approachable, they rushed to get more material for their stories.

Their eagerness was like baby ducks eagerly pecking towards their mother bird.

‘Wow.’

I admired the press corps inwardly.

‘...The result of doing the opposite of the Flame Emperor is amazing.’

As always, the Flame Emperor, the most annoying psychopath in the world.

He always served as my compass in the worst possible way.

Even now, the compass clearly guided me on how to react.

‘What? Summons Times? I won't do interviews with you. It's full of old fogies. Just opening your newspaper makes it

smell old. Hey, if you're a journalist, at least take a shower. 」

I thought of the Flame Emperor's quotes and said,

"---Then let's start with a question from the Summons Times reporter."

The effect was tremendous.

The press conference ended triumphantly. A great success for over an hour of rapid-fire Q&A, and I didn't make a single slip of the tongue.

In fact, it was not easy to conclude the conference. The reporters were desperate to extract even one more line of news. In the end, the Witch had to snatch the microphone from me to pacify the press.

"Everyone! I understand your desire to know more about our new hero. However, unfortunately, we're running out of time." The Witch gestured towards the sky.

[00:05:27]

The light clock was now just minutes away from 0:00:00.

Just a few minutes until the new stage opens!

The perfect excuse to end the press conference.

"We've finished our night of rest and will dedicate ourselves to conquering the tower again today. Please continue to watch over us with deep interest and warm support. We will strive towards our goal of zero casualties, as before."

"Ah..."

Sighs of regret echoed here and there.

Just when it seemed the conference was wrapping up, a brave soul raised their hand.

"Uhh, Black Dragon Witch! One last question, please!"

"Yes. This will be the final question and then we'll conclude."

"Black Dragon Witch and King of Death! What's the relationship between you two?"

At that moment, people's eyes sparkled.

Pure curiosity. A hint of slyness.

Humanity's eternal fascination: romance. The reporters probably wanted to link the Witch and me in that direction.

"Hmm..."

The Witch glanced at me.

A hint of mischief in her eyes.

"Our relationship..."

The Witch slowly opened her lips.

And then came a statement destined to be remembered.

"– More than friends, comrades in arms."

Murmurs and whispers.

The press was unsure where to focus. Should they concentrate on the phrase "more than friends" or on "comrades in arms"? They couldn't grasp the exact nature of our relationship.

The person who asked the question widened their eyes in surprise.

"Are you saying it's more than a friendship?"

"Well,"

The Witch replied leisurely.

"As I said, it's more than friends, but comrades in arms. That's all. I hope there's no misunderstanding or

misinterpretation."

"Misinterpretation and misunderstanding mean...!"

"Today's press conference hosted by Black Dragon ends here."

The Witch stood up.

"Thank you again to everyone who showed interest and support. I was the guild leader of Black Dragon, the Black Dragon Witch. I wish everyone a great day."

The reporters also stood up quickly.

"Black Dragon Witch! You can't just leave like this!"

"Please, a more detailed comment on your last statement!"

"Black Dragon Witch!"

"King of Death, what do you think about her statement! King of Death!"

Wow.

The reporters cried out hoarsely, trying to get more information. But the Witch remained composed throughout, smiling slyly as she led me behind the stage.

"Let's go now."

"Okay."

I glanced back at the press corps. They all looked dejected.

"...Leaving after heating up the grill like this?"

"I'm a drama queen."

The Witch playfully winked with her left eye.

"A grand impression is left only when you fan the flames at the end."

Indeed, a statement befitting a guild leader who reigned over the tower.

Behind the stage.

We walked until we were out of sight of the public. There, the Witch let out a big sigh and suddenly grabbed both my hands.

"Perfect! King of Death!"

Her eyes sparkled.

It was hard to believe that this was the same person who had been managing her expressions so neutrally throughout the press conference.

"When did you learn to handle interviews like that! I'm impressed!"

"Uh... "

I just did the opposite of what the Flame Emperor would have done.

"Your humble attitude was especially a plus! People love heroes, but there's something they love even more. A hero who bows to them! Of course, if humility becomes servility, that's a problem... but you were just right. It was a perfect balance!"

I just recited the opposite of what the Flame Emperor used to say.

"Not knowing you also had the talent to handle the media was a surprise. Ahh, where have you been all this time? You're conquering the tower, building a great image, making my shoulders feel ten times lighter...!"

"....."

What?

I was feeling guilty for just mimicking a psychopath's opposite behavior.

"Don't hesitate to tell me if you want anything. Money? Fame? Power? Or a lover? Don't worry, if it exists in the tower, I'll give it to you."

"I'm already taking care of what I want... But, Black Dragon Witch. What was that statement about being more than friends but less than comrades? I was quite surprised."

"Oh, that?"

The Witch shrugged nonchalantly.

"It's nothing. Just spreading some smoke."

"Smoke?"

"Yes. The media will dig into baseless scandals anyway. That would damage your image. So, it's better to direct the attention to you and me instead."

"Is that so...?"

I wasn't sure if it was the right or wrong approach, having no experience in handling the media.

The Witch smiled faintly.

"Don't worry. King of Death. I've been handling public opinion alone for years. Trust me completely in this field. Leave it to the expert. Got it?"

"Ah, yes."

Strange.

Something felt odd... like being targeted by an unknown monster in a hunting ground. But this wasn't a hunting ground; it was Babylon, the first-floor city of the tower. There couldn't possibly be any monsters.

Was it just my imagination?

-Tsk, tsk.

The Guardian Spirit clicked its tongue.

-Pathetic, zombie. You have a head but no brain, so why wouldn't I call you a zombie? Shame on you, a hunter walking into death's ground unknowingly.

'What now?'

-Pathetic! Pathetic!

The Sword Emperor hit his chest in frustration, looking like a disgruntled gorilla.

Then, it happened.

"Woahhh!"

From beyond the stage, towards the plaza, a high-pitched cheer erupted. It was a bit different from the cheers for us earlier.

"Ten!"

"Nine!"

"Eight!"

The countdown began.

I stopped talking to the Witch and looked up at the sky.

[00 : 00 : 05]

Time had nearly run out for the opening of the 21st-floor stage.

"Three!"

"Two!"

"One!"

And then.

[00 : 00 : 00]

The beams of light that formed numbers in the sky scattered in all directions. The cheers of the people grew even louder. Responding to their cheers, the beams of light regrouped to form the image of a goddess.

[Warriors.]

In the blue sky.

The goddess's figure spoke.

[Heroes who climb the tower.]

[Congratulations on breaking through the shadow filled with the Demon King's resentment.]

The moment a new stage was unveiled.

The crowd, having already witnessed the goddess's image before, chattered happily.

But I knew, having experienced the tower in the past.

-Zombie.

'Yes.'

I nodded.

'I won't be careless.'

Just like the tower changed from the 11th floor after being a tutorial up to the 10th floor.

The fact that a completely different stage would unfold from the 21st floor onwards.

[You could have stayed forever on the first floor of the tower.]

The goddess's figure stated coldly.

[A refuge for those who fled.]

[You could have chosen comfort over giving up the challenge.]

[But by breaking through the 10th and 20th floors, you made your choice.]

Her voice echoed in the vast sky.

[To witness the end of this tower.]

[Then, it is right to respond to your will.]

Whoosh!

Suddenly, a white light enveloped us. It wasn't just the Witch and me. From the direction of the plaza, bewildered voices reached us.

"What, what's this!?"

"We didn't even say anything about..."

This was the biggest change from before.

No one had yet said 'transfer,' but we were engulfed in white light.

The Witch looked down at her feet in confusion.

"...Forced teleportation?"

Her guess was correct.

[Warriors who ascend the tower.]

[Those who have resolved to climb.]

[Only the chosen warriors will bear the noble burden from now on.]

In an instant, the white light completely enveloped us.

Chapter 55: The Ultimate Fanboy (3)

In any field, latecomers face disadvantages.

In a red ocean already dominated by veterans, newcomers must dive in and prove their worth, much like a low-ranking soldier struggling to climb a fortress seized by the enemy.

The tower was no exception.

"---Welcome!"

As the white light faded and we regained our sight, we were not greeted by the goddess's voice.

"Warriors ascending the tower!"

It was a child, indeterminate of gender.

A little kid, draped in an overly large robe, reminiscent of traditional eastern clothing at first glance.

"This Holed-Up Head Librarian has been eagerly awaiting your arrival like a day feels like three autumns!"

However, upon closer inspection... it was entirely different.

Other than the long sleeves, there was nothing resembling traditional eastern formal wear. In fact, the sleeves themselves were extraordinary, stretching out over 5 meters.

"Ah, but no matter! Life starts and ends with encounters. Looking back, what matters most in life is whom we've met. Waiting is just a spice that deepens life!"

There's a saying that fashion is completed by the face. No matter how special the clothing, it varies drastically depending on who wears it.

In that sense, the kid fluttering the 5-meter-long sleeves was definitely unique.

"Let me express my sincere welcome once again!"

In the air.

"Welcome to the Great Library of All Knowledge!"

The kid floated high in the sky, looking down on us who had been abruptly summoned.

[Holed-Up Head Librarian welcomes you all!]

The Head Librarian, in charge of managing floors 21 to 30.

The representative of this world spread his arms wide with a broad smile.

Regrettably, no one responded to his greeting. Hunters were still confused, trying to comprehend the situation.

"Uh, uh... what?"

"Why were we teleported all of a sudden?"

"Where are we?"

Roughly a few hundred people.

The hunters murmured in dismay. Most were those who had been in the plaza counting down just moments ago.

But there were others who were having 'personal time' elsewhere.

"Ahhhh!?"

"Don't, don't look here!"

Embarrassed screams echoed here and there.

Hunters who were summoned while showering, lovers teleported in the nude, and even someone who appeared to have been summoned from sleep, all drowsily looking around. Unexpectedly victimized hunters emerged.

"Oh my."

The Head Librarian chuckled.

"I might have lacked a bit of consideration."

While the hunters panicked, the librarian snapped his fingers. Large bookcases flew in. These bookcases, with holes for the head, arms, and legs, automatically fitted themselves onto the naked hunters.

"Ah..."

"Th-thank goodness."

Onlookers sighed in relief. I, too, felt a bit embarrassed by the scene.

"What... what the heck is this..."

The actual victims, now dressed in gigantic bookcases like Gundam suits made of cardboard, looked distressed. But they were in the minority. With this wave of embarrassment passing, people started to regain composure, looking up into the sky one by one.

"...Who are you?"

The Witch, representing the hunters, spoke up.

"And where is this...?"

"Ah. I'm just a humble manager of a slightly large library. Black Dragon Witch. Compared to you, I'm nothing more than an extra. I'd appreciate being treated as invisible."

"....."

The Witch frowned.

The stranger knew her identity, which she found to be an ominous sign.

I was already somewhat familiar with the concept of constellations, having recruited both the Demon King of the Autumn Rain and the Goddess of Protection. But to other hunters, constellations were still an unknown entity.

"-Just a slightly large library."

Seizing the moment when the Witch closed her lips, I took the initiative.

"I doubt it's just a slightly large level."

The 21st floor.

This place was one enormous library. Perhaps it was even an understatement to call it merely enormous. Bookshelves packed with books stretched from nearby to the horizon, from the floor we stood on to the ceiling above.

It was more akin to 'a world made of a library.'

"Interesting."

The world's master looked at me.

Eyes of pure innocence.

Eyes like those of a purely innocent child sparkled.

"Indeed. You must be the King of Death."

Hmm.

"Don't worry too much. My friends. I'm harmless. I sincerely just want to welcome you. To me, you're like the heroes from an epic."

Heroes from an epic.

Knowing what that meant after 4,000 days of regression, I pretended not to understand and asked.

"Heroes from an epic?"

"Like this."

Snap!

The Head Librarian flicked his fingers. Two hardcover books flew out from the countless shelves. Floating, they circled around the librarian.

Their titles were clearly written on the covers.

+

[Chronicles of the Aegim Empire]

[Story of the City of Ascension]

+

The Head Librarian smiled softly.

"My hobby is reading books. But the books in my library are no ordinary records. They're your histories. Books about the worlds where the tower has been erected."

The Head Librarian gently caressed the spine of the books.

"Wondering why only you among many warriors were summoned? The reason is simple! In your world, only you have 'character names.'"

"...Character names?"

"Aliases, as you call them."

The Head Librarian looked down at us with a faint smile.

"302 of you gathered here. All warriors with aliases."

The hunters murmured.

"Only hunters with aliases were summoned?"

"Then, the others are..."

"Wait. Does this mean we have to climb the tower amongst ourselves!?"

Yes.

Not the real names used outside, but the unique names given by the tower. Aliases. That was the entrance ticket from the 21st floor onwards.

'...That's why I couldn't set foot beyond the 20th floor before regressing.'

Pioneers with aliases.

Those without aliases, the latecomers.

'The gap between the two groups will only widen.'

I fiddled with the hilt of the dagger at my waist, a method to calm and focus my mind... a small personal ritual.

'I'm different from before.'

No longer was I the dropout who couldn't even step beyond the 20th floor due to lack of skills and aliases. Now, I was a

hunter who just ascended to the 3rd rank.

'I won't just be excluded and fall behind.'

But few others maintained such composure.

The Witch was one of them.

She muttered in disbelief.

"It's impossible. Climbing the tower with just 300 people..."

"Don't worry!"

The Head Librarian grabbed [Chronicles of the Aegim Empire]. He smiled.

"You defended the Aegim Empire with just three people. 300 is a hundredfold more! You'll easily pass the stages I've prepared. Have confidence!"

"....."

Most hunters exchanged anxious glances. In the midst of the vast library extending to the horizon, the small group of hunters seemed insignificant.

Before the anxiety spread further, I interjected.

"Let's proceed, Head Librarian."

"Ah!"

"Though I'm thrilled to meet living beings, we'd like to ascend the tower quickly. The quest hasn't even been assigned yet. We request swift progression."

"Ah,ahaha."

The Head Librarian chuckled softly.

"Indeed! In my excitement, I neglected to assign the quest. However, explaining everything verbally isn't quite my

style...."

Thud!

Hundreds of books flew towards us.

The hardcovers circled around the librarian, whirling in the air.

"Let's see... Which work will resonate most clearly? This apocalypse is too bland, and this one's end of the world is too quiet... Ah, yes! This one will be perfect."

He grabbed a book.

"But be warned."

And opened it.

White light burst from the opened pages.

"It's just a taste, so don't be too startled."

Whoosh!

A wave of light engulfed us.

All the hunters were transported somewhere.

It was clearly not our world. Buildings of unfamiliar architecture surrounded us, resembling termite mounds enlarged hundreds of times.

Including me, the hunters floated in the sky. We were high above, and beneath us, buildings unlike any we'd seen or heard of before stretched out.

"S-scary!"

Someone screamed. Perhaps they had a fear of heights? Despite not falling, the hunters instinctively clung to each other's sleeves.

Watching their antics, the Head Librarian laughed.

"I am the Head Librarian. But as mentioned, the records that gather in my library aren't ordinary history or fiction books. They are much more, no, significantly higher in level!"

The Great Library of All Knowledge.

A repository where the records of numerous worlds converge.

"These are the worlds you've conquered."

He tapped the spine of the book titled [Chronicles of the Aegim Empire].

"And this is your world!"

There was also a book titled [Story of the City of Ascension].

Hundreds more books flew around the librarian, resembling a childlike figure. He looked at his collection with an

expression of unbearable adoration.

"People call these books various names. Some call them epics. Others refer to them as novels or chronicles. Annals. Or even sagas. But my preferred term is different."

The librarian turned to us.

"Apocalypse,"

He laughed.

"A peculiar laughter resonated in the sky.

"Your apocalypse is... let's say, still in [serialization]. You've just ended a long prologue and are beginning to climb the tower. You're entering a phase that's just starting to get interesting."

Then...

"But not all apocalypses are smoothly [serialized] like yours."

Rumble, rumble.

Something began descending from the sky. Descending was too gentle a word; they were tearing through the heavens.

"Regrettably."

Meteors.

"Some apocalypses have unfortunately faced [serialization cancellation]."

Massive rocks blazed and plummeted.

They struck the termite-mound-like buildings. Boom! An immense roar shook the world. The earth itself split under the torn sky. Cities that might have harbored other intelligent life were obliterated without a trace.

The hunters screamed.

Clouds of dust from the impact engulfed us.

"Not just one, but many."

In the dark, only the librarian's voice echoed magnificently.

"There are many."

Snap!

A book closed somewhere. With that, the dust clouds vanished. The destroyed city disappeared. The cracked earth and torn sky were gone.

In their place, new worlds unfolded beneath us.

"If the cause of cancellation in that apocalypse was stone -"

Tsunami.

"Then the reason for this one is water!"

A tsunami, reaching the bottom of the sky, engulfed the city.

It was too vast to be called a wave and too violent to be merely a tsunami. It was a disaster. The tsunami, nearing us, set off more screams among the hunters.

"Ah."

The librarian sighed sorrowfully.

"How tragic is it?"

Worlds where all humanity died from a disease.

Worlds where the last drop of water dried up under encroaching sand.

Worlds where volcanoes erupted, shrouding the sky in smoke and clouds.

Even a world ravaged by a zombie virus.

"These people were just like you. Alive, creating their own stories. But before reaching a proper ending, before achieving a grand finale, they met an unjust end."

The librarian closed the book.

"I call this 'serialization cancellation,' but..."

Hundreds of books still circled him.

"You would simply call it 'destruction.'"

Back in the enormous library.

"Ugh, ugh..."

"Blargh!"

Sounds of retching echoed. Dozens of worlds had been witnessed meeting their demise. Though physically unharmed, many hunters were mentally shaken.

"The quest for you is simple."

The librarian looked down at us.

"Choose eight apocalypses from those that have faced cancellation."

Select eight worlds from those that have been destroyed.

"I wish to finish reading the apocalypses that faced untimely ends!"

He wanted to continue the stories of worlds that were destroyed for irrational reasons.

"Enter the eight apocalypses yourselves,"

Enter those eight worlds directly.

"And save them from the brink of cancellation!"

Prevent their destruction.

"That is the quest I bestow upon you."

That was the quest from the 22nd to the 29th floors.

As the retching in the library continued, a voice resonated in the hunters' heads.

[The 22nd floor quest has been assigned.]

Text appeared before our eyes.

+

[Remake The World, Volume 1]

Difficulty: Undecided

Objective: There are countless worlds, and countless

destructions. The 'Holed-Up Head Librarian' refers to this as 'serialization cancellation.' He wishes for the worlds that have faced unjust cancellation to resume their stories.

First, choose one of the canceled apocalypses!

If you succeed in saving the world, it will be registered as your 22nd floor.

*However, if you fail, the 22nd floor will not open.

+

Indeed.

This librarian was none other than a book-crazy, world-obsessed reader.

"So..."

I slowly opened my mouth.

"You're unsatisfied with the endings, so you want us to write the books for you?"

"Exactly so!"

The librarian laughed heartily.

"Please satisfy my reading tastes!"

Remaking the endings of worlds for this book-crazy reader.

That was our mission.

Chapter 56:

Bibliomania (1)

Silence filled the great library.

Hunters with weak stomachs were retching. Those with stronger constitutions stared at the quest that appeared before them, lost in thought.

The constellation.

"Ah."

The librarian, the only one with 5-meter-long sleeves fluttering, spoke up.

"Please clean up after yourselves if you're sick. Isn't that basic manners? The cleanliness of the library is maintained only through everyone's efforts."

Clap!

The librarian lightly clapped his hands. From the shadowy, dark corners behind the bookshelves, unidentifiable things approached. At first glance, they might have seemed human due to their limbs...

The Witch narrowed her eyes.

"...Bookmarks?"

The mysterious beings had bodies made of bookmarks.

Odd drawings adorned the middle of the bookmarks. Maid outfits? Servant dresses? Anyway, they bore images of attire that old-timey maids would wear.

"Ah. Right on the mark. These are Bookmark Maids!"

The librarian cleared his throat and placed his hand on his waist.

"They will serve you until you clear the 30th floor."

The maids depicted on the bookmarks bowed their bodies.

"If you need to eat or use the restroom, just speak to the Bookmark Maids. They might not look it, but they are quite capable."

"Monsters... right? Basically?"

The librarian covered his mouth with his sleeve.

His eyes smirked while he spoke.

"You may think of them that way."

Though his eyes smiled, his voice did not. The hunters flinched. It was the first time the constantly cheerful voice of the constellation turned cold.

"While you stay here, there are a few things to keep in mind," the librarian continued.

"First, never touch a book I haven't permitted. Don't even lay a hand on them. These are all books I've painstakingly collected. Unique apocalypses in this universe. Anyone who dares to touch a book without the owner's permission..."

"Damn it."

Suddenly, a hunter cursed.

"This is a joke. You're just the boss monster!"

"...Hmm."

"Hey! Arm yourselves! Forget quests and stuff; if we all attack that guy, we can clear up to the 30th floor. What kind of 'lord' are you! If we attack together, we can take him down!"

The crowd began to murmur.

The librarian didn't stop the instigator, just quietly watched with a smile. Seeing the constellation's silence, the hunter became even more emboldened.

"We can take down a little kid like that! Even that newbie, calling himself the King of Death, cleared the 20th floor alone."

"....."

They're dragging me into this.

"We can do it too! Right!?"

As the instigator pointed at me, several people turned in our direction. The hunters were of various ethnicities, with eyes of all colors. But the emotions in their eyes were all the same.

Envy, jealousy, greed.

All too familiar emotions.

"Stay out of this! You, the Five Great Guilds, back off!"

The hunter shouted not only at me but also at the Witch, the Sword Saint, and even the Heretic Inquisitor and the Countess, leaders of the large guilds.

"I didn't like that you monopolized the assault from the 11th floor. Acting like you represent the tower, bringing in some new hero. Thinking we don't know about your tricks?"

The Witch bristled.

"Who are you talking to...!"

Squeeze.

I grabbed her wrist.

"Hold back."

"No, King of Death. If we let them..."

"Just bear with it for now."

I whispered to the Witch.

"This is all being 'broadcast' live."

She blinked.

"Broadcast? What do you mean?"

"It's being projected as a hologram in Babylon Square."

"....."

In the past, I couldn't set foot on the 21st floor as I lacked an alias. Yet, I knew exactly how this stage worked, what the quest was, every detail.

"It's like a TV program. People gathered in the square are watching everything we do live."

"Why would they do that...?"

"The librarian said it. We are no different from 'characters.'"

I quietly said.

"Of course, there are 'readers' watching these characters."

That's right.

Even in the past, I saw it in the square. I watched it. Although I couldn't participate in the assault... I watched how the titled hunters cleared from the 21st to the 30th floor.

'There must be a hologram in the square right now.'

Everything we do and say is broadcast live to hundreds of thousands of readers.

In the truest sense, we are on stage.

"Don't let your guard down thinking no one's watching. Black Dragon Witch."

"If we say or do something strange here, it will stay in people's memories forever."

The guild leader immediately understood.

How terrifying that was.

"Indeed. This stage isn't just about clearing it or not."

I nodded.

"Yes. It's most important 'how' we clear it."

We must avoid doing anything that might be criticized later. We, the people, no, the readers, must feel like heroes in a book, acting and fulfilling our roles.

"We are already in a work called [The Great Library]."

That's when it happened.

After the quest appeared, a notification that should have followed arrived.

It wasn't the Witch's or the librarian's voice, but the voice of the tower.

[Welcome, King of Death.]

I smiled inwardly.

[Receiving the 20th floor clear reward!]

The reward for yesterday's deeds, for saving the Aegim Empire and the continent.

It was time to receive it.

The tower is harsh on latecomers.

But it generously rewards those who lead.

[Normal stage reward.]

[Blessing, God of Beauty's favor descends upon you!]

[From the 21st to 30th floors, you can observe the favorability of characters.]

The rewards didn't end there.

There was still the reward for completing the hidden quest.

[Hidden stage reward.]

[Blessing, God of Snakes's favor descends upon you!]

[From the 21st to 30th floors, you can observe the psychology of characters.]

'Great!'

They were the perfect privileges for me.

In this quest, how well you perform your role is key.

'These are exactly the privileges I need now!'

To play a role, it's not enough to be good alone. You must also understand the psychology of others, of other characters.

After all, acting is always teamwork, not solo play.

'Ability window.'

Before starting the quest in earnest, I checked my status.

+

Name: King of Death

Rank: D

Skills (5/6)

1. I Want to Become Just Like You (S+)

2. Returner's Winding Clock (EX)

3. Sword Constellation (A+)

4. Goblin High Society (F)

5. Ghoul Reincarnation (SSS)

6. None.

*God of Beauty's blessing is in effect.

*God of Snakes's blessing is in effect.

+

'Okay.'

I glanced at the Witch. I realized I was still holding her wrist. I let go as naturally as possible and muttered a plausible command in my mind.

'Character window.'

Swoosh!

A hologram appeared before my eyes.

For the first time, I saw a status window I had never seen before.

+

Name: Black Witch

Favorability: 82

Preferred Genres: [Romance]

Disliked Genres: [History]

Preferred Characters: [Prince on a White Horse], [Young Guys], [Wild Man], [Goofy Guys]

Disliked Characters: [Psychopath], [Soldier], [Politician], [Incompetent Female Lead]

Preferred Plots: [Gratitude], [Small Sacrifice for a Greater Cause]

Disliked Plots: [Forgetfulness], [Betrayal], [Misunderstanding by the Female Lead]

Mental State: 'If our actions are truly being broadcasted in Babylon... I must portray a noble character for the future. Clearing the stage is secondary. Yes, I need to move with calculated political tactics. The wisest tactic would be...'

+

Uh.

As I was bewildered and lost for words, the witch's expression hardened. It seemed she was worried something had gone wrong with me.

“What's wrong? Is something the matter?”

“No, no, it's nothing.”

“...Well, that's good. But if you have any information I need to know, tell me right away. I'm thinking of a strategy.”

“Yes, yes.”

The witch turned her head and immersed herself in thought again.

With a very serious look.

While looking at her profile, I felt a certain emotion.

‘What is this?’

What was this inexplicable sense of guilt?

‘It feels like... I've secretly read someone else's diary....’

-Hahahaha!

The Guardian Spirit, sharing my consciousness, was already rolling on the floor laughing.

Kicking the air and bursting into laughter.

-The Prince on a White Horse! The Prince on a White Horse...! Ah! To think that someone that age, maintaining her youth with elixirs, is dreaming of a Prince on a White Horse at this age! Zombie, why don't you find a majestic horse to ride on! You're a hero, right? Just put a crown on a hero and he becomes a prince! Wow, what a perfect match!

"....."

I stared blankly at the Guardian Spirit.

-Huh? What's with that look? You seem to be glaring at me.

I murmured softly in my mind.

‘...Character Window.’

-Eh? Wha-what? Hey, Kim Zombie! What are you doing!?
Man! Hey!

The Guardian Spirit panicked and waved its hands.

But waving hands couldn't stop my command.

The Guardian Spirit's character window was blatantly displayed before my eyes.

+

Name: Sword Emperor

Favorability: 59

Preferred Genres: [Martial Arts]

Disliked Genres: [Everything but Martial Arts]

Preferred Characters: [Macho], [Rivals], [Mothers]

Disliked Characters: [Weaklings], [Fools]

Preferred Plots: [Victory], [Cathartic]

Disliked Plots: [Defeat], [Frustration]

Mental State: ‘Shit! Does this thing work on me too!?’

+

‘Pffft!’

I burst into laughter internally.

I barely managed to maintain my expressionless facade.

‘Oh, a mama's boy, Sword Emperor? I didn't see that coming...’

-I'll kill you!!

The Sword Emperor's eyes widened in rage. More than just widening, it exploded in anger. Flailing its limbs, it caused a ruckus.

-I'll kill you! Turn it off now! Forget it! Erase it from your brain, damn it! If you don't erase it right now, I'll blow your head off! I'll really kill you! I'll break off all ties with you, man!?

I had known him for quite some time, but I had never seen him this flustered. The more disadvantaged a person, the louder they become. Unlike the Sword Emperor, I was completely relaxed.

‘Until the 30th floor, keep your head down around me.

Otherwise, I'll bring up your character window whenever I get the chance.'

—Eek...!

The Guardian Spirit gasped. His nostrils flared tremendously. But no matter how impressive his nostrils were, what could it do? He couldn't hit me, nor could it block my abilities.

-Just you wait! You'll get what's coming to you!

'Haha.'

The threat didn't scare me at all.

While I was testing my new privilege, the hunters were increasingly divided into two factions.

One side, led by the agitator, advocated for collectively attacking the [Boss Monster]. The other side, including me and the Witch, opted for a more cautious approach, observing the situation.

The aggressive faction had about 100 members.

The cautious faction had about 200 members.

“How foolish.”

The usually silent Sword Saint finally spoke.

The elderly swordsman looked disdainfully at the aggressive faction.

“Have you already forgotten what the Constellation just showed us? The destruction of worlds. If it wishes, the Constellation could throw us into such a world and easily escape. And yet, you choose to provoke it. Insanity.”

“If it's mass suicide you're after, I won't stop you.”

With just one sentence from the Sword Saint, half of the aggressive faction withdrew.

Now, only about 50 hunters remained in the aggressive

faction.

“Hey! Don't chicken out!”

The instigator, likely a high-ranking hunter, yelled.

“King of Death cleared the 10th floor alone! The 20th floor was a solo play too! Boss Monsters are always like that, but the giant guilds want to monopolize the benefits. If you want to wag your tails at the Five Great Guilds forever, then get lost!”

It seemed like the instigator might be the head of a sturdy mid-sized guild, considering about 50 people were still swayed by his words.

‘But, if I can't remember his face or title...’

“Hmm-.”

There's always a reason for that.

“-Has the situation been sorted out?”

The Head Librarian looked down at the 50 hunters of the aggressive faction.

Like planets orbiting the sun, hundreds of books revolved around the Head Librarian.

“That’s right! Boss Monster, we’re more than enough to take down a little runt like you...!”

“Sorry, I’m not particularly fond of clichés.”

The Head Librarian picked up a book.

[The Epic of the Sealed World] was its title.

“Let’s just get this over with.”

Whoosh!

The book opened and emitted a bright light. But this time, it wasn’t just a flash. Dark arms, numerous tentacles flowed out and engulfed the aggressive hunters.

Screams echoed around.

“What... what is this!?”

“In this epic, humanity has been wiped out, leaving only a single magician alive.”

One by one, the hunters were seized by the monster's tentacles and lifted into the air.

“Well, this magician, my favorite character, has become more like a tentacled monster than a human. He's my ninth favorite character, actually.”

“Aaahhhhh!”

The hunter grabbed by the tentacles was soon swallowed by the book.

“Save, save me!”

The lucky hunters who dodged the tentacles started to flee,

but it was futile. Even more tentacles emerged from the book. Some hunters were grabbed by the wrists, some by the waist, others by the ankles.

“This magician specializes in sealing magic. It's like a guest-host relationship. I occasionally give him ‘materials,’ and he gladly fulfills my requests.”

In an instant, all 50 hunters were devoured by the book.

The Head Librarian grinned.

“Just like now.”

Thump.

Thump, thump. Clatter. Thump, thump.

The book that devoured the hunters began to spit something out.

Bingeing and purging.

We held our breaths, watching the unfolding scene. Although we couldn't see it from here, probably tens of thousands of people gathered in Babylon Square were doing the same.

“Ah.”

The book regurgitated giant bookmarks.

As tall as a person.

Bookmarks with arms and legs.

“The magician’s hobby is to dress up his creations in maid outfits.”

A maid's outfit was drawn in the center of each bookmark.

“A bit perverted, but what can you do? Everyone else in his world is gone. It'd be more strange if he kept his sanity.”

The hunters looked around in horror.

Just within sight, there were 50 bookmark maids.

Looking further around the library, there were hundreds, even thousands of bookmark maids, holding mops or dishes.

"....."

The hunters were silent.

Just considering what was visible, the scale was immense.

The Grand Library stretched beyond the horizon.

If the entire library was considered, how many bookmark maids were wandering around?

"Hmm. It's tidied up nicely! The unnecessary extras are cleared out."

Thump!

The Head Librarian closed the book.

“Are you ready to be the protagonists now?”

Chapter 57:

Bibliomania (2)

The hunters gathered around in the library.

"Um..."

Hunters sat in a wide circle, and in the middle of them were hundreds of [Apocalypses] piled up. Now, they had to choose one, but no one dared to approach the pile hastily.

It was understandable. Just moments ago, their comrades were devoured by books, fifty of them. Everyone was either fearful or gloomy.

In such a situation, who would dare to laugh cheerily unless they were a lunatic of sorts?

"Ahaha!"

Surprisingly, such a lunatic existed.

"50 deaths right at the start. That's quite a blow."

The blond boy, recognized as one of the top lunatics in our world, stroked his chin. The Heretic Inquisitor spoke up.

"But, sacrifices are part of advancement. We must not forget their sacrifices and strive harder in our conquest!"

"Let's lift our spirits! It's fortunate that only 50 were lost instead of a potential 100. Instead of mourning what's lost, we should be happy for what's preserved!"

As the Heretic Inquisitor spoke more, the atmosphere grew heavier.

Bookmark Maids were still serving around us. They brought hot coffee and tea, yet of the 250 hunters, only the Heretic Inquisitor accepted it with a cheerful "Ah! Thank you!"

"Hmm?"

Sipping tea, the Inquisitor looked puzzled.

"Aren't you drinking, everyone? It's quite delicious, you know?"

"Firstly..."

I interrupted the Inquisitor.

"A lunatic like you should just stay quiet."

"Why is that?"

"The more you talk, the more our morale drops. If our morale falls any further here, it'll be a disaster, so please, just shut up until I say otherwise."

"Ah, that would indeed be a disaster."

The Inquisitor laughed heartily.

"Understood, King of Death! I'll gladly shut up!"

Hunters looked at us incredulously.

Don't look at me like that. I just figured out how to handle this lunatic.

"Now."

I raised my voice to change the mood.

"Everyone, you must have realized by now. We can't rashly challenge the librarian. For now, we have no choice but to follow the quest given by him."

The hunters' gazes slowly shifted to me.

I swallowed the instinctive feeling of pressure.

'I am now ranked third.'

In this place, I'm the third most influential hunter!

I maintained a stoic expression and spoke.

"But just because we follow the quest doesn't mean we're at a disadvantage. Everyone, take a look at the quest window."

Following my cue, the hunters looked into the air.

The same hologram I saw must be appearing before their eyes.

+

[Remake The World, Volume 1]

Difficulty: Undecided

Objective: There are countless worlds, and countless destructions. The 'Holed-Up Head Librarian' refers to this as 'serialization cancellation.' He wishes for the worlds that have faced unjust cancellation to resume their stories.

First, choose one of the canceled apocalypses!

If you succeed in saving the world, it will be registered as your 22nd floor.

*However, if you fail, the 22nd floor will not open.

+

"Have you all read it?"

The hunters nodded. Some even verbally affirmed. Maybe it was the effect of silencing the Heretic Inquisitor, but it seemed there would be no challenge to my authority for the time being.

"The most important part is the last sentence. [If you succeed in saving the world, it will be registered as your 22nd floor]. Do you understand what this means?"

The hunters looked confused.

They didn't realize the immense reward it represented.

I explained.

"Depending on which world we save, the rewards can vary greatly. Imagine if we save a world laden with diamonds! Then that world becomes our 22nd floor."

'.....'

The hunters' faces began to change.

"Diamonds are just an example. We, who live in the tower, have no need for such coal chunks. But what if it's a world rich in food, water, and various ores?"

"Self-sufficiency..."

The Witch murmured.

"We can truly become self-sufficient."

"Exactly."

I stood up and walked towards the pile of books, the Apocalypses the librarian had left for us to choose from.

"Wait, King of Death!"

Viper called out from behind.

"If you touch them recklessly, more tentacle monsters might..."

I picked up a random Apocalypse. Gasps! Hunters screamed and closed their eyes, fearing another outbreak of tentacle monsters. Some even ran away.

But nothing happened for one second, two seconds, three seconds.

The Apocalypse lay quietly in my hand, just like an ordinary book.

"Eh?"

Viper cautiously opened one eye.

"Nothing happened...?"

"Hehe."

The librarian, floating in the air, laughed.

"That's right! Unless I exert my power, Apocalypses are just ordinary books. Of course, there are forbidden books that become dangerous by mere touch. But those are sealed deep away, so don't worry."

"Hmm."

I nodded and opened the book I held. Another hologram popped up, this time with information about the book.

[Tales of the Sormewin Academy]

Genre: Romance, Fantasy

Difficulty: D

Required Participants: 4-5

*The serialization has been discontinued.

Description: Sormewin is an academy of ancient magic. A normal school where friendship, competition, love, and jealousy intertwine. This Apocalypse could have remained a typical school story if not for the world-ending artifact sealed underneath the academy!

Reason for Discontinuation: The Villainess Lady loses her fiancé (the Crown Prince) to a second-time reincarnated female student. In a fit of rage, she unleashes the sealed artifact, freeing the Great Demon and causing world annihilation.

The reason for discontinuation, in short, the cause of world annihilation, was rather pitiable.

Better than worlds destroyed by meteorites or tsunamis.

'Pitiful. A world destroyed over petty romantic squabbles of kids...'

No wonder the librarian was angry.

Imagine this.

"Ah."

As if a crack formed in a blue gem, the ice-like eyes of the Crown Prince began to understand.

The long misunderstanding that had separated them melted away, now in their second life.

"My other half was here all along. Lady Silvia, you are my other half."

The prince, murmuring as if sighing, knelt on one knee. Silvia silently sobbed into her heart.

They both realized they would never forget this moment, even at death's door.

At that moment.

Bang! The Crown Prince burst open.

"What?"

In the next instant, Silvia also burst open.

The chaotic screams echoed in the fading consciousness of Silvia.

"Aaaah!"

"The demon! A demon has appeared!"

"Just my luck."

The world.

It was the moment of its demise.

Imagine a gripping romance novel abruptly ending like this.
Any reader would be infuriated.

And if it's a real world, even more so.

'Anyway.'

That's not what's important right now.

"Everyone! Come over and take a look at these books."

I shouted to the hunters.

"The difficulty and content of each book vary. We need to select books that we can clear and those that will benefit us the most!"

A few hunters stood up.

But still, the majority just stared at each other blankly.

-Idiot. You're being too polite. That's why they're like this. Do you still not understand how stubborn these hunters can be?

The Sword Emperor commented.

-The more you level up, the more [Your existence becomes better defined.] is heard. Know what that means? [Your pride grows stronger.] The higher the hunter's level, the stronger their pride. They hardly listen.

Indeed.

I let out a roar filled with aura.

"Read the Apocalypses! There are hundreds of them, how the hell can I read them all alone! Come and read!"

Startled.

Finally, the hesitant hunters got up.

"Listen up!"

I continued commanding.

"Divide into groups. Those who've read novels or history, go to the left! If you're clueless about either, go to the right! Hurry! Quick!"

The hunters' steps quickened.

Rustle!

They divided into two groups.

"Readers, divide by your favorite genre! Romance lovers, go to the romance group! Fantasy fans, to the fantasy group! Mystery enthusiasts, form a separate group for mystery! Hurry!"

Finally, the library atmosphere became busier.

Under my command, hunters began scurrying around.

"Now, we'll all read!"

I tapped the Apocalypse in my hand.

"We'll distribute hundreds of books by genre. Romance group, read romance books. Other groups, read according to your genre! Read and determine whether it's a hit or a flop."

"Uh! Uh!"

The Heretic Inquisitor waved his arms, still following my

order to keep quiet.

"Go ahead, speak."

"King of Death! I don't understand what a flop is! Can you explain the criteria? Is a story a hit if it's good and a flop if it's bad?"

"No, not at all."

I opened an Apocalypse to show him.

"Take this, for example. This is a flop."

+

[Surviving in a Volcano!]

Genre: Survival, Romance

Difficulty: D

Required Participants: 2

*The serialization has been discontinued.

Description: This world was devastated by a nuclear war. However, the tenacity of human life is remarkable! Even on the post-war surface, the protagonist and his lover survived. The protagonist couple, overcoming all adversities, vowed to become the new Adam and Eve.

Reason for Discontinuation: On their last day of camping, the protagonist couple unfortunately chose a volcanic area. A volcano erupted in the middle of the night. Rocks hurled from the volcano killed both the protagonist and his lover. Humanity perished.

+

I spoke with a sense of tragedy.

"It's not just a bad work, it's a disaster."

"Why?" the Heretic Inquisitor tilted his head.

"New Adam and Eve. Isn't that romantic and nice!"

"This world is useless to save. It's already a world after a nuclear war."

I sighed and closed the book.

"What's the use of getting a world contaminated with radiation as our 22nd floor? Do we want to die collectively from radiation?"

"Aha."

For reference...

In the past, the Flame Emperor cleared the Great Library with a brilliant strategy.

From the 22nd to the 29th floor, he exclusively chose worlds covered with [lava] or [volcanoes].

'Crazy.'

The Flame Emperor was immune to fire. In such dystopian worlds with flowing lava and erupting volcanoes, he could stroll leisurely.

He chose Apocalypses based solely on [how easily they could be conquered].

He didn't consider, not even a bit, what benefits rescuing each Apocalypse would bring us.

'An opportunity to acquire eight treasure troves!'

Such self-absorbed individuals are no help.

It's a loss for others living in the tower.

'This time, I'll pick Apocalypses that can maximize our gains.'

Apocalypses that bring forth monsters beneficial for hunters'

real-world experiences, worlds filled with rare minerals, ruins crammed with artifacts, worlds where seasoned chicken and sweet-and-sour pork frolic in forests and shrimp tempuras dance in seas.

No, let's cancel that last one. It'd be quite scary if it actually existed.

Anyway!

"Remember! It's not important whether the story is garbage or not!"

I shouted while distributing books to the hunters.

"Don't worry if the protagonist is annoying, or if the story is boring. Just read! Read from start to finish and calculate whether saving this world would benefit us all...."

I hesitated.

Paused while distributing books.

One hunter caught my eye.

"...Excuse me, Black Dragon Witch?"

"Yes. What is it?"

It was the Witch.

I slowly began to speak.

"This is the [Mystery] group."

A gathering of those who regularly read detective novels.

Somehow, the Witch was sitting there confidently.

Didn't her character window earlier show her as a fan of romance?

"I know."

The witch nodded as if it were obvious.

"You think I don't know where I'm sitting?"

"Um... Black Dragon Witch. Do you like mystery novels?"

"Of course."

Sipping her black coffee demurely, she replied,

"I'm an intellectual woman."

"....."

Insane.

Why is this guild master suddenly pretending to be ordinary? She loves dramas and romances, clearly a fan of melodramatic romance.

'Maybe.'

I had a realization.

'She doesn't want others to know she's into romance?'

Indeed, the [Romance] group had unusually few hunters. Not a single man was present. Strangely, the [Martial Arts] group was swarming with men.

I bet most of them don't actually read martial arts novels.

'Wow.'

My mind went blank.

'Are these people still pretending in this situation!?!'

-Didn't I tell you?

The Sword Emperor muttered dully.

-High-level hunters live by their pride. They've even received titles. They'd rather die than lose face. Didn't you see? Earlier, 50 of them attempted a suicide attack. They're all insane.

Going insane.

"No, Black Dragon Witch... even so..."

"What's the matter?"

She inquired calmly, her face impenetrable like a fortress.

Desperately searching for something to say, I cautiously continued,

"No... I just thought you were quite romantic... I always thought so. Seeing you not in the romance but the mystery group was unexpected...."

Her fingers around the coffee cup paused.

"Hmm. Is that so?"

Her voice remained unchanged.

"Do I look like someone who suits romance?"

"Yes. Actually, it feels odd seeing you elsewhere. Like wearing clothes that don't fit...."

"Ha."

Setting down her coffee cup, the witch stood up.

"If the King of Death says so, I can't argue. I've never read a romance novel, but let's see. A new genre to get acquainted with. It's the right attitude for a hunter to always embrace new challenges."

"That's a wise decision...."

"Okay. Got it."

The Witch walked towards the romance group, like a cowboy walking off into the sunset in a Western film.

I watched her leave with complex feelings.

"Amazing, King of Death!"

The Heretic Inquisitor looked at me with bright eyes. He too was sitting in the mystery group.

"The Black Dragon Witch rarely changes her mind. Aha. What a great new member we have!"

"...Temple Lord. Do you read detective novels?"

The Inquisitor smiled like an angel.

"I know Sherlock Holmes!"

"Oh. And Doctor Watson too."

I quietly recited a command in my mind.

'Character Window.'

The text appeared before my eyes.

+

Name: Heretic Inquisitor

Favorability: 50

Preferred Genres: [Fairy Tales] [Mythology] [Legends]

Disliked Genres: None

Preferred Characters: [Humans]

Disliked Characters: None

Preferred Plots: [Greatest Happiness for the Greatest Number of People]

Disliked Plots: None

Psychological State: 'I know Sherlock Holmes! Ah. And Doctor Watson too.'

+

Insane.

Chills ran down my spine.

'He's exactly as he appears?'

Moreover, he had no dislikes or hates.

'Is he even human!?'

A shocking and terrifying realization.

A pure, natural-born crazy psycho.

"Hmm? What's wrong, King of Death?"

The crazy psycho tilted his head.

I pondered briefly on how to handle him.

Then, pulling out a sign pen, I wrote on the Inquisitor's hand.

[Fairy Tales].

With a stern face, I spoke.

"Inquisitor."

"Yes!"

"From now on, you are part of the Fairy Tales group."

"Fairy Tales!"

"Yes. In this group, it's just you. You alone will have to verify and review all the books that come into this group."

"Oh! That's a heavy responsibility!"

The crazy psycho's eyes sparkled.

I nodded.

"Yes, it is. So please take care of it."

"Ahaha. Don't worry! King of Death. I'll thoroughly review them!"

Right.

Even though there wasn't a single Fairy Tale among the hundreds of Apocalypses.

I scanned again to ensure no hunters were pretending to be ordinary. The result was astounding. Over 100 out of 250 hunters were disguising their true reading preferences.

'These crazy people...'

It took three hours just to divide the groups.

I managed to relocate 112 pretenders to their rightful places.

But even I...

Upon reaching the last person, I couldn't help but fall silent.

+

Name: Viper

Favorability: 32

Preferred Genres: [Isekai], [Overpowered MC], [Absurd], [Harem]...

Disliked Genres: [Political], [Crime]

Preferred Characters: [Older Sisters], [Younger Sisters], [Married Women], [Innocent], [Sassy], [Cross-Dressing Boys]...

Disliked Characters: [Mafia], [Thugs], [Blond Tanned Delinquents]

Preferred Plots: [Summoned to another world, turns out I'm a pure cheat character with the blood of the strongest dragon and the demon empress, so I'll show what real overpowering is, any problem?], [Seems like my sister became the creator god for me, but as a normal high school student who just wants a peaceful life, this is troubling], [Cheat], [Unrivaled], [Harem], [Oh well, looks like I have to step up]

Disliked Plots: [NTR]

Mental State: 'Damn. What's with this Martial Sect? This is

so boring. Every line is just about beggars, assassins, and sweaty men. Damn. Isn't this too inconsiderate of the readers?'

+

This individual wore an eye patch over one eye.

This individual was known as the Master of the Celestial Martial Clan.

This individual... was the Emperor of Light Novels.

"Huh?"

Viper turned to look at me.

"What? I'm busy reading."

And Viper was sitting in the [Martial Arts] group.

"No..."

I couldn't bring myself to say anything.

"Sorry for disturbing your reading. Please continue...."

"Alright."

I turned and walked away weakly.

This 21st floor made it clear.

Every top hunter was insane.

And I had to carry these insane people.

Chapter 58:

Bibliomania (3)

The task I set for the hunters was to find successful works.

"You understand, right?"

I moved among the hunters, instructing them.

"It's not good if the difficulty is too high, nor if it's too easy. Choose an Apocalypse with a suitable difficulty level! And one that provides appropriate rewards."

Following my directive, all 250 hunters read the Apocalypses.

Each book, chronicling the trajectory of a world, was immensely voluminous. Despite all hunters being engrossed in reading, the task was far from completion.

"King of Death, something is strange."

The Heretic Inquisitor, who hadn't received a single book, was the exception.

His hand still bore the word 'Fairy Tales.'

"What is it?"

"I'm not receiving any Apocalypses. Is 'Fairy Tales' a minor genre?"

"No way. There might be people who haven't read fantasy or romance, but everyone knows fairy tales. It's a major genre among majors."

"True. But why haven't I received a single one?"

The crazy psycho tilted his head.

'Because there's no fairy tale ending with world destruction, you weirdo.'

I swallowed such words and feigned ignorance.

"Who knows? Just wait a bit more. Surely, among all these books, there must be at least one fairy tale."

"Hmm. Perhaps I'm being too impatient. I'll wait patiently!"

The Heretic Inquisitor cheerfully sat in a corner. He, the Witch, and all other hunters knew that a day with a fairy tale book for him would never come.

"Hey, religious fanatic."

Correct that.

It seems the Emperor of Light Novels didn't know.

"Yes, Master of the Celestial Martial Clan? Did you call me?"

"This seems like a fairy tale. It was mixed in with the martial arts books."

"Oh! Thank you!"

The Heretic Inquisitor received the Apocalypse from Viper. His smile was radiant, as if made from grinding angels and saints.

It was a bit scary.

"Then, King of Death, I'll start reading too! Ah, I'm curious about the content of this Apocalypse!"

"What's the alias of the Apocalypse?"

"[Me and Our Scapegoat]!"

The alias was also a bit scary.

Eventually, all groups received their books and started reading.

How much time passed, it was mealtime.

"Ugh."

"My eyes feel like they're going to pop out."

Pained groans echoed around.

Even the sandwiches and tea served by the Bookmark Maids were devoured without complaint, showing the extent of their exhaustion.

"King of Death..."

The Witch, who took charge of the [Romance] group, was no exception.

"I think I can understand the sentiment of that librarian."

"Really?"

"These Apocalypses, they all have their climax interrupted."

The Witch's face showed considerable fatigue.

"The heroine confesses to the hero, and a meteorite falls. Just as they are about to kiss, aliens invade. Everything's a mess! I mean, I get the meteorite, but alien invasions in royal romance comedies? What's that about?"

And then, the Witch continued.

"It's even worse because they're so interesting until that point. The protagonists are charming, the story is captivating, but then the ending is garbage! It's like having a perfect course meal, but when you cut into the main dish, you find something unexpected..."

"Don't say what it is. Can't you see I'm eating a pork cutlet sandwich?"

"Ah, sorry, King of Death. It wasn't very delicate of me... But I have to say! It felt like..."

"This is all being broadcast. Are you okay with that, Witch?"

The Witch hushed, closing her mouth. Really, she has a

temper at strange times, like when she was trying to match the eye of a one-eyed giant zombie.

Anyway, relieved, I was about to finish my pork cutlet sandwich when the Witch leaned in to whisper in my ear.

"It felt like..."

I wondered if everyone in Babylon Square was holding their breath, watching the Witch whisper in my ear.

Hearing the content of her whisper, I felt like my breath stopped. The details made me not want to look at a pork cutlet sandwich for at least a month.

Oh, God. Please save me...

[Shiny does its best to save you.]

I wish the goddess of her own world would just stay quiet...

Of course, the god of this Great Library didn't save me.

Instead, the Holed-Up Head Librarian floated around in the air, chuckling.

"At last, you too understand my pain."

The librarian's exterior was that of a child, but the laughter on his face was anything but childish. It was the laughter of a gourmet who had lost his taste after experiencing the sweet and sour combo of life.

"Why hide it? The 683 Apocalypses I allowed you to read are the most bizarrely destructive Revelations in my library."

"Revelations?"

"Yes. So interesting and captivating that readers can't help but love them."

His laughter grew eerier.

"But that's all! Despite their excitement, you will never be happy. Because these Revelations all have crappy endings!"

The Witch swallowed hard.

"Did you deliberately choose these works to give us the same pain...?"

"Feel free to think so."

"I can't think otherwise..."

"Ah! Join the hell of interrupted serializations. And like me, struggle in eternal pain! Go on! Suffer quickly!"

The librarian roared with laughter.

Some hunters trembled in fear.

"Could he be a demon?"

"Making us read masterpieces that were intentionally interrupted. He's insane."

"It's a sin deserving of divine punishment...!"

Later, it turned out they were originally novel enthusiasts. I don't quite understand, but to them, the librarian's words seemed to be very frightening.

Then...

"Ah. Hunter."

"Hmm?"

A familiar voice called out.

Looking around, I saw a woman from the [Fantasy] group waving. It took me a moment to recognize her, but then I remembered.

"Oh, isn't that the alchemist?"

The hunter who would later become the Master Alchemist.

The Apothecary who made me an elixir was there.

"Ms. Alchemist, you got an alias too?"

"Well, somehow. 'Apothecary' is not that glamorous, but... Hehe."

The shy Alchemist turned into the Apothecary, smiling awkwardly.

I was surprised.

'The Master Alchemist already has an alias?'

Even for a hunter destined for greatness, the woman before me had just recently been wandering the slums. 'Alias.' It seemed too early for her to achieve something that the Tower would recognize. Even I, armed with cheat-like skills, only got an alias after repeated insane acts. Was it true that promising sprouts show their potential from the start?

"You're truly amazing, Miss. How did you get an alias so quickly? I knew it; I was right about you. It was worth investing in you."

"Oh, no! I'm not that great!"

The Apothecary waved her hand modestly.

"Really. I'm not being humble... I just got an alias without doing anything."

"What?"

"I don't know how it happened either. A few days ago, I suddenly heard 'Your created item contributed to saving the world,' and then I was given an alias. I'm sorry. I really don't understand..."

'Ah.'

The Apothecary looked as perplexed as she sounded. But I realized the truth upon hearing her words.

"It's because of the Elixir you made for me!"

The cause was the Elixir I took to fight the Demon King.

During my fierce battle with the Demon King, the Elixir had greatly enhanced my senses. It allowed me to observe the Demon King's sword strikes in slow motion.

'So, that means...'

Essentially,

'I've been supporting her all along?'

I unintentionally helped someone rise to prominence.

The Apothecary twiddled her fingers, unaware of this.

"It's not me who's remarkable, but you, King of Death! Oh, I should call you King of Death now... You're truly amazing. Just a few days ago, you were outside the rankings, but you shot up to third place! It's a huge, huge honor to know someone like you! I've always wanted to tell you this!"

"Ah, it's nothing. I was just lucky..."

As I awkwardly scratched my head, the Apothecary chuckled and clasped her hands behind her back.

"King of Death, if there's anything you need, just let me know! I'll help with anything I can!"

Wow.

What's with her?

Is she an angel?

-Zombie, can't you raise the bar a little before seeing people as angels?

'I just believe in people, Sword Emperor. Even if I'm betrayed, I can't stop believing in people. It's not my fault for having such a passionate heart.'

-Hot dog sound for your hot nonsense today.

Let's ignore that last bit of nonsense.

On the fourth day of reading, we finally succeeded in reading all the Apocalypses.

Every hunter declared they had finished reading.

"The Romance group recommends four books."

"The Sci-Fi group will recommend two."

"The Mystery group..."

Each group announced their recommended works.

Suitable difficulty. Suitable rewards.

A list of recommended works with a perfect blend of both was presented.

"In my Fairy Tales group, I recommend this! It's the only one I have!"

+

[Me and Our Scapegoat]

Genre: Fairy Tale

Difficulty: A

Required Participants: 2 or more

*The serialization has been discontinued.

Description: Humanity in this world succeeded in creating a utopia. However, to maintain it, a special power source was needed. The screams of innocent children who had committed no sin. Sadly, to ensure the perfect happiness of 17 million people, one innocent child must endure. Thanks to advanced torture techniques and life-sustaining treatments, about five years of screams can be extracted from one child. Efficient!

Reason for Discontinuation: 118,000 years after the creation of utopia, all innocent children were exhausted. The utopia, having lost its power, came to a halt.

+

This Apocalypse is a must-visit regardless of difficulty and rewards.

However, there was another Apocalypse that caught my attention right now.

"The Martial Arts group strongly recommends this work."

The Sword Saint spoke.

He was the team leader of the Martial Arts genre group. Unlike someone who was outwardly a martial arts enthusiast but inwardly the Emperor of Light Novels, Sword Saint was truly knowledgeable in martial arts.

He opened one of the Apocalypses.

"This book right here."

+

[The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon]

Genre: Martial Arts

Difficulty: B

Required Participants: 2~4

*The serialization has been discontinued.

Description: In the world of martial arts, where martial arts are revered and utilized to reach enlightenment! Here, a Heavenly Demon appeared, aiming to unify the martial world. The Demonic Cult, united under the Heavenly Demon, and the opposing forces clashed over the fate of the world... or so they would have.

Had it not been for a sudden super pandemic.

Reason for Discontinuation: An unidentified pandemic spread, leading to the death of the Heavenly Demon. The Demonic Cult was annihilated. All other forces perished. The end.

"The reason for recommending The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon is simple," said Sword Saint.

"In this world, there exists a character called the Heavenly Demon. A martial artist who has collected every martial arts scripture in the Martial Realm. Thus, a massive secret library... um, sort of like a library, was established in the headquarters of the Demonic Cult."

Sword Saint looked embarrassed. Non-martial arts group members were all like, 'Martial arts scriptures? Secret library? What's he talking about?' Eventually, Sword Saint used simpler terms.

"Think of martial arts scriptures as books containing secrets of skills. If we succeed in saving this world, we'll get a library filled with the best skills in the world for free. It's an opportunity for our hunters to become stronger."

The hunters' eyes lit up.

"Martial arts."

"Gaining new skills?"

"Well, the chance to learn skills is really rare..."

"An opportunity to learn the ways of the martial realm!"

The atmosphere was positive. Especially for those like Sword Saint who valued individual strength, the response was particularly favorable. The priority was to strengthen ourselves. That argument gained traction.

And it was good news for me too.

'Not bad, right?'

I stroked my chin.

'In a martial world, there must be many flying masters. If I die to each of them at least once... Wow. Wouldn't I gain at least one A-Rank skill?'

-Zombie, are you only thinking about gaining easy benefits?

'I've found a world I want to conquer. But with my current strength, it's difficult.'

The Sword Emperor quietly closed his mouth.

Instead, another being spoke.

[Shiny detects a presence.]

The sword on my waist suddenly vibrated.

'A presence? What kind of presence?'

[Shiny says it feels the presence of its sister very close.]

'Sister?'

Shiny, aka the Goddess of Protection, was split into five swords and sealed. One of those swords was on my waist.

Even Shiny didn't know where the other swords had gone.

'Where? Where do you feel it?'

I looked around.

The Great Library of All Knowledge. Bookshelves stretched to the horizon. Each shelf was enormous. Looking up, they were as high as towers. Naturally, I saw nothing but books.

[Shiny advises not to look around aimlessly but to focus on what's in front of you.]

'In front of me? There's only the Sword Saint in front of me... Wait a minute.'

Apocalypse.

A book containing an entire world.

'Is it inside that?'

The holy sword vibrated.

[Shiny positively responds, 'Yes, brave hero!']

[Shiny says it feels the presence of its sister in the book Sword Saint is holding!]

That moment decided our next destination.

Chapter 59: The World Without a Constellation (1)

In the library's restroom.

"Okay."

After washing my face at the sink, I said,

"Before heading to the martial world... let's start by dying once."

Silence filled the space around me. There were no humans in the restroom besides myself. However, a ghost and a sword were present, and they reacted to my words.

-What's okay?

[Shiny cannot understand your intention.]

The Guardian Spirit blinked, and the holy sword flickered.

"Leafanta Aegim. The empire's first emperor, and the one who turned the Goddess of Protection into Shiny."

[Shiny points out that you are the one who named it Shiny...]

"That guy might be unknown, but he could travel between worlds."

I put on my coat. It was a tailored suit gifted by the Black Witch before a press conference. In the mirror, I looked like a new employee ready for work.

This appearance oddly provided a sense of stability.

"Think about it. Shiny was in the world of the Aegim Empire, right? But another part is in the martial world. This means Leafanta Aegim has the ability to 'cross worlds.'"

-Hmm.

"He must be a munchkin of some sort."

I fingered the hilt of the holy sword at my waist.

"He was capable enough to establish an empire, strong enough to split and seal a Constellation, and even capable of interdimensional travel. Just diving into [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon] without a plan isn't wise."

I felt the need to be more cautious.

"I'm not invincible, after all."

Indeed.

Lately, I've been feeling a bit tense.

Is it tension about myself?

Just a bit of relaxation, and 'confidence' might turn into 'arrogance.'

"Having climbed to the 3rd hunter rank, almost single-handedly defeating the Demon King, people in the city talking only about me, and now even commanding hunters with titles..."

-So what?

"I'm just worried I might become complacent. That's all."

The Tower has 100 floors.

I've only reached the 21st floor.

It's too early to relax with my recent successes.

'The Flame Emperor also became complacent and got hunted by me.'

I had the skill [Returner's Winding Clock], which prevented

me from dying. It seemed unbeatable. But what happened to the Flame Emperor Yoo Soo-Ha, who had such an overpowered skill?

'He died.'

And after dying, he even did a full Cossack dance in front of the continent's armies.

No matter how strong a hunter, complacency is dangerous. It was a great example.

-That's more about you being somewhat devilish....

"Anyway, I won't just jump into [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon] without a plan. I need to know what kind of person Leafanta Aegim is first. Right now, I have no information."

Better safe than sorry.

Why is a fragment of the holy sword in a completely different world of martial arts and not in Aegim continent? What was Leafanta Aegim's intention in scattering parts of

[Goddess of Protection]?

I want to gather at least some basic information before entering the stage.

-Not a bad mindset, but exactly what are you planning to do? Like you said, you have no information about that Leafanta or whatever. There's no way to find out, either.

"Well, I might not know anything, but..."

I tapped the holy sword lightly.

"There's certainly a way to find out."

-What?

"This sword is the [Goddess of Protection], a Constellation, though divided into five pieces."

I grinned.

"Here's the question. If I stab myself with this sword, is it suicide or homicide by a Constellation?"

The Guardian Spirit's eyes widened.

-Unbelievable.

"Could be either. It's a fifty-fifty chance, and I don't know which it is yet... but it's worth a try."

Shiiing!

I drew the holy sword from its sheath, and an urgent voice reached me.

[Shiny urgently requests you to reconsider.]

"Why?"

[Shiny is embarrassed for others to see its past and strongly requests privacy.]

I twisted my lips.

"Ah, come on, where's the privacy between us? I'm under 24-hour live surveillance anyway. It should be fair."

[Shiny pleads desperately not to...]

Thump!

The holy sword pierced through my body.

In the next moment, I was confident I had won the fifty-fifty gamble.

[You have died.]

[The condition for your skill has been fulfilled by your death.]

[The skill of the Goddess of Protection is currently sealed and cannot be acquired.]

It was a bit disappointing that I couldn't copy the skill.

However, what I was seeking at the moment wasn't a skill.

[You are currently a D-Rank Hunter.]

[You are penalized by the skill.]

[Re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

[The level of penalty is medium. Hungry Ghost Realm.]

Woosh!

The scene I had been hoping for unfolded before my eyes.

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-You have finally completed your long journey.

A beautiful voice spoke.

-You've done well, Hero.

She was a woman I had never seen before. Yet, somehow, I immediately understood who she was.

The [Goddess of Protection], not confined in a blade.

A Constellation with her full powers intact.

-Yes.

The man addressed as the hero responded.

A silver-haired nobleman. The first emperor of the Aegim Empire, Leafanta Aegim, sat on a heavy throne. His face, resting on his hand, showed a hint of fatigue.

‘So that's Leafanta Aegim.’

The man spoke.

-It feels like just yesterday when I was suddenly summoned here. Now, I've become an emperor who unified the continent. Life is unpredictable.

-Haha. It's also surprising for me. At first, you were just an ordinary person who knew nothing. Now, you're stronger than me. In fact, most deities and evil spirits wouldn't stand a chance against you...

That's when it happened.

-Hey? What's this?

Watching the trauma scene with me, the Sword Emperor spoke out.

-That silver haired guy. He looks so familiar. He's definitely the Constellation Killer.

The Guardian Spirit remarked curiously.

I was shocked to learn that the Sword Emperor and Leafanta Aegim knew each other.

‘What's the Constellation Killer?’

-It's his alias. He's a lunatic who goes around beating up Constellations.

Beating up Constellations?

-You've seen it. The Tower is connected to various worlds. From the 50th floor, you have to compete with hunters from other worlds.

‘Really?’

-Yes. And that [Constellation Killer] is one of those crazy regulars on the 50th floor.

The Guardian Spirit explained.

-He never climbs the Tower. Just hangs around on the 50th floor and, whenever a Constellation appears, he immediately knocks them down. At least hundreds of Constellations have died by his hands.

‘So, Leafanta Aegim is a hunter?’

-Yes. I wondered from which world such a madman could have emerged. So, he's from Aegim.

Guardian Spirit murmured.

-Who would have thought I'd see an old acquaintance here.
Hmm.

‘What was your relationship with him?’

-What relationship? We had a proper fight. He was strong, but not strong enough to be on par with me.

As we talked, the trauma scene continued to unfold.

The Goddess of Protection spoke.

-What do you plan to do now, Hero? There are no more deities or evil spirits to block your path. Your long journey is now...

-Saintess.

-Yes?

-Not deities or evil spirits. Constellations.

Leafanta Aegim stood up from his throne.

-The world belongs not to Constellations but to humans.

Leafanta Aegim turned to the Goddess.

Dark red aura rose from the emperor's body.

-...Hero? Why are you suddenly...

The fatigued emperor seemed to ponder.

It wasn't long.

-I won't kill you since you've helped me till now.

The red aura engulfed the Goddess.

-Your existence will be split and sealed. This way, you'll never regain your power. And without Constellations...

His words were drowned out by a tearing scream.

The Goddess's existence was literally being torn apart.

-I'm sorry.

Leafanta Aegim spoke.

-But this is the right path.

With the Goddess's scream, the trauma abruptly faded from us.

[Trauma re-enactment complete.]

[The target's ego has remained intact.]

[Penalty Finalized.]

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“What... Who is this guy?”

Returning to the day before, I found myself mumbling in the restroom.

“I thought peering into the past through trauma would give me some insight into him... but even after seeing, I still don't understand. Hey, Shiny. Why did your old master seal you?”

[Shiny gloomily responds that it also doesn't know.]

The scene of her traumatic past had provided more questions than answers. The mystery of Leafanta Aegim and his connection to the Constellation Killer only deepened.

The Holy Sword emitted a faint light.

Was it just my imagination?

The light from the Holy Sword seemed particularly weak.

[Shiny states that the Leafanta Aegim it remembers was a taciturn but just hero. It has no idea why he sealed it away and left the empire he established.]

The mystery only deepened.

-Didn't I tell you? The higher a hunter's level, the crazier they are?

Guardian Spirit shrugged.

-Don't try to understand madmen. Gazing into the abyss turns you into the abyss. Just become strong like me, and crush any nuts you don't like, whether it's the King of Death or anyone else!

I sighed.

“True. At least knowing his face is a gain.”

And one thing became clear.

Leafanta Aegim, also known as [Constellation Killer], would be hostile towards me on sight.

After all, I was carrying around a fragment of the Goddess of Protection he had sealed.

“Hmm.”

I narrowed my eyes while looking in the mirror.

“If I'm going to meet him on the 50th floor anyway, I want to prepare in advance...”

-Forget it. With your current skills, you don't stand a chance! He might be weaker than me, but he's still among the top fighters. And if you're already worried about the 50th floor,

focus on conquering the 22nd first, weakling!

“Ahem.”

He wasn't wrong, so I quietly spent the day the same as before.

The next day, after reading all the Revelations, the hunters chose the '22nd floor'. The choice fell naturally on [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon] as Sword Saint had recommended it.

“Oh? Choosing martial arts as the first genre, I see.”

The Head Librarian watched our choice and smiled meaningfully.

“Not a bad choice! Although it may not be exactly like the martial world you know, it still has martial arts and a world of martial artists. Depending on how you lead the story, you might encounter extraordinary opportunities and gain invaluable martial arts... or in your terms, ‘skills’.”

The hunters excitedly buzzed.

The atmosphere heated with enthusiasm, and the Head Librarian immediately doused the flames.

“However, high risk brings high return! The ‘enemies’ in this Revelation will also be powerful. Of course, if you lose your life in the Revelation, you’ll actually die. And until you properly ‘finish’ the ending, you cannot escape from the Revelation!”

The hunters fell silent.

Understandable. Unlike me with my unique skill, death was always a silencer with its formidable power.

“[The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon] allows 2 to 4 people. So! Who wishes to become a character in this Revelation?”

The hunters’ gazes naturally fell on the top rankers, especially me. The reason was simple; for the past few days, I had been giving orders and instructions to the hunters as if I were their representative.

Power naturally comes with responsibility.

“I will do it.”

And I had no intention of shirking my duty.

My prompt response pleased the guild masters, who seemed to think ‘as expected,’ while most hunters looked at me in surprise.

“I will join as well.”

Sword Saint followed up.

“As the one who recommended this Revelation, I cannot be absent.”

He spoke with a stern expression, but a slight smile played on his lips. His body seemed to itch with excitement. Perhaps, as a fan of martial arts, he was thrilled about entering a real martial world?

“Good, the minimum number of participants is met!”

The Head Librarian chuckled.

“There's room for two more characters... What will you do?”

“Actually, I had another reason for recommending this Revelation.”

Sword Saint confidently continued.

“Everyone, look at the reason for its discontinuation.”

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[The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon]

Genre: Martial Arts

Difficulty: B

Required Participants: 2~4

*The serialization has been discontinued.

Description: In the world of martial arts, where martial arts are revered and utilized to reach enlightenment! Here, a Heavenly Demon appeared, aiming to unify the martial world. The Demonic Cult, united under the Heavenly Demon, and the opposing forces clashed over the fate of the world... or so they would have.

Had it not been for a sudden super pandemic.

Reason for Discontinuation: An unidentified pandemic spread, leading to the death of the Heavenly Demon. The Demonic Cult was annihilated. All other forces perished. The end.

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Revisiting the ridiculous reason for discontinuation, it still didn't reveal what the pandemic was.

The main text of the Revelation only stated, [An unidentified pandemic spread, leading to the death of the Heavenly Demon. The Demonic Cult was annihilated. All other forces perished. The end].

‘We'll only know once we enter that world.’

It was clear that the martial world was doomed due to an unknown pandemic.

Sword Saint nodded.

“As you can see, this world was destroyed by a pandemic. Naturally, we need to take not only strong hunters but also those knowledgeable about diseases. And there's one person here who knows best about diseases.”

Sword Saint beckoned someone from the same martial arts group.

“Medicine King, will you join us?”

A cranky-looking old man stepped forward.

The Sword Emperor seemed to recognize him.

-Oh! That guy!

“Who is he?”

-You know, that place. The one I first tried to take you, zombie. The owner of the pharmacy that Marcus frequents.

Ah, indeed.

-He's good at making medicine... But, well, he's good at it, but...

The Sword Emperor trailed off, but I knew the reason just as well.

“Don't worry. I'll handle most of the fighting, and if I'm not enough, the King of Death will help. And this [Medicine King] will solve the disease problem. With just the three of us... King of Death, do you have something to say?”

Sword Saint, who was confidently speaking, looked at me curiously as I raised my hand.

“Yes. There's someone I'd like to bring along.”

I lowered my hand and pointed to a hunter.

The hunter, caught off guard, was startled.

“Uh, me?”

It was the Apothecary.

I nodded.

“Yes. Right.”

The Apothecary trembled as if struck by lightning.

“Ki-King of Death... I've only had the alias for less than a week. I'm, I'm so weak! I won't be of any use if you take me. Why...”

“I know you're the most capable pharmacist and doctor among the people I know.”

“Ye-yes...?”

“And you said it earlier.”

‘King of Death, if there’s anything you need, just say the word!’

‘I’ll help with anything I can!’

I smiled broadly.

“If you weren’t just making empty promises, you’ll help, right, Apothecary?”

"....."

The Apothecary looked at me with a gaze of despair, as if staring at a demon.

Why? I helped her gain the alias.

If you've been boosted, you have to pay the price.

Chapter 60: The World Without a Constellation (2)

The hunters murmured among themselves.

"Wait, does that mean all four are here?"

"But who is that woman?"

"That's what I'm saying. I understand about Medicine King, but..."

Sword Saint looked perplexed.

"The lady from last time."

"Gasp...!"

The Apothecary hid behind me.

During the time Sword Saint mistook me for a murderous fiend, she had stood with the Paladin to confront Sword Saint. His aura was so menacing back then that just seeing him now seemed to revive those memories for her.

Sword Saint himself seemed to recall that time, clearing his throat.

"Hmm-hmm. No need to be so frightened. I've resolved my grudge with the King of Death."

"Is that so...?"

"Yes. Well... But, you see."

Sword Saint looked at me awkwardly.

"King of Death. The place we're about to go is extremely

dangerous. Didn't the Constellation say so? Dying in the Revelations means actual death. Is it really okay to take her to such a perilous place?"

"Yes."

I nodded confidently.

"She's the best Alchemist and medicine maker I know."

And probably the best currently alive.

-Ugh...

Even the Sword Emperor had acknowledged her.

Using the same ingredients, she produced items that were 15 times more efficient and more potent than what was offered at the store I originally planned to visit – the store of that guy, what's-his-name, Medicine King.

- That guy knows how to make medicine, but... he's not the

best. Not anymore. Not with her around...

"Indeed."

However, Sword Saint's expression was subtly complex.

"The best Alchemist you know..."

I opened the Character Window to read Sword Saint's thoughts.

"Hmm. Unusual recommendation from an unusual young man. There must be something special about her, but there are bigger fish in the sea... Ah, I see, Sword Emperor. Making a valid point after so long. Even a king carp in a small pond realizes it's the smallest koi in a river. Yes, I should take this opportunity to enlighten these young ones and Medicine King."

Wow.

Despite our past interactions and Sword Saint's promises made in front of me, he held back from speaking outright. Though I could tell there was goodwill behind his attitude, his

old-fashioned tendencies were unmistakably present.

The other Sword Emperor with Sword Saint, just like our Sword Emperor here, seemed to be underestimating the Apothecary based on her appearance.

And there was someone present openly displaying their old-fashioned views, without any hint of goodwill.

"Ha! The best you know!"

It was Medicine King.

"This is what's wrong with brats! Oh, it's laughable. Just like when I was young, feeling proud after overcoming a single hurdle, thinking they've conquered a mountain. Reminds me of my youth in Silicon Valley, earning a billion dollars. The same rotten attitude! And they're oblivious to it."

"Cool down a bit..."

"Ha! I've been holding back, you know. Tolerating that brat's behavior, all for the sake of Marcus. And now? You're taking some girl, who knows where from, as if she's some trophy.

Like a young billionaire from Silicon Valley flaunting their arm candy."

"Medicine King, he's not that kind of young man..."

"What do you mean he's not! You, old man! Look me in the eye and tell me! Is he really not!?"

Incredible...

What's incredible is that someone exists who can make even the great Sword Saint squirm. It seems in the world of the old-fashioned, a greater one devours the lesser.

I was astounded by this newly discovered ecosystem.

Perhaps that's why it wasn't me who retorted to the greatest of the old-fashioned.

"It's okay to call me a brat, but..."

The Apothecary squeaked out, clutching my coat.

"King of Death is definitely not a brat! He's an amazing person! To say he has a rotten attitude..."

"Ha, look at that, Marcus. She's defending her man like that. This is what's wrong with the youth today. Sigh. I suppose when I was young, I thought the same of my youth..."

"Defending her man like that..."

The Apothecary's mouth twitched, seemingly overwhelmed by the absurdity.

The Paladin stepped forward to defend the Apothecary.

"Enough. This 'Apothecary' is indeed outstanding. I came to know her through the King of Death, and she has provided the Vigilante Corps with countless effective medicines."

Medicine King snorted dismissively.

"That might be true for the standards of the Vigilante Corps."

"What did you say?"

"Plain truth. With your funding, you couldn't even afford to visit my store. You don't know the sky, so you think the ceiling is high. Not realizing that ceiling is just the lid of a box. It's exactly the same as when I was young, tsk..."

The Paladin bit her lip.

Though called one of the Five Great Guilds, the Vigilante Corps always struggled financially. The Medicine King had cruelly hit a sore spot.

The Medicine King waved his hand dismissively.

"Ah, why bother talking? Let's just stop. It's tiring for you and for me."

Hmm.

He's not wrong.

'Sword Emperor.'

-Yes?

'Isn't it enough listening to this nonsense?'

-It's more than enough. Why are you subjecting yourself to this?

I glanced around the library.

'It's not self-inflicted.'

As I've said before, this whole scene is being broadcast live to the hunters gathered in Babylon Square.

In other words, for both a [debut] and a [retirement], this moment is the perfect timing.

I spoke to the Medicine King.

"How about a challenge?"

If the Sword Saint's look was awkward, Medicine King's was immediately inflamed.

"Ha! See that, Marcus. He can't win with logic, so he goes straight for the sword. Just like his rotten mindset! Reminds me of when I became a boxing world champion in my 40s."

"No, I don't mean a fight with me."

I took out some medicinal ingredients.

"I'll provide the ingredients. Both of you make a medicine each. Then we can compare their effects and see who's really the best, right?"

"Eek...!!"

The Apothecary jumped in shock.

"Ki-King of Death! I'm really angry that that old man

insulted you... but he's known as the Medicine King! A famous person recognized by all hunters... And compared to him, I've just gained my alias less than a week ago, kyaa,"

The Apothecary shivered.

I held her shoulders firmly.

"Apothecary."

"Yes, yes!"

Our eyes met, separated only by her glasses, as I spoke.

"I believe in you."

"...King of Death."

"So, believe in yourself too."

"....."

The Apothecary took a deep breath. Behind her glasses, her eyes regained their sparkle.

Firmly gripping her fists, she nodded vigorously.

"Yes, King of Death! I'll do my best! No,"

She immediately shook her head, correcting herself.

"I will win!"

The Medicine King looked at us with a disdainful expression.

"Huh."

He shook his head in disapproval.

"Always like that, aren't they? Have to taste whether it's

ketchup or blood to be satisfied. Just like when I was about three years old. Tsk, tsk..."

"Are you tired of talking? Had enough?"

"Oh yes. Kiddo. Prepare yourself to see that girl's tears. I have no mercy for the young."

Medicine King vs. Apothecary.

A legendary contest began.

At the start of the contest, the hunters' reactions were cynical.

"Obviously, the Medicine King will win."

"That old man's medicine is so expensive, and it's booked for nearly a month."

"What's their relationship, really? It seems the King of Death

is overreaching."

"King of Death and Medicine King. Even with the same alias, experience makes a difference."

Typical responses.

"Place your bets here! Who thinks Medicine King will win? Who's betting on Apothecary?"

Meanwhile, the Countess, not missing a chance to make money, had set up a betting pool. Bookmark Maids stood quietly, holding the collection boxes.

"King of Death, are you sure? The odds are 1.08 to 47 right now."

The Witch whispered to me.

"Sounds good. Think of it as pocket money. Bet just enough on Apothecary so the odds don't drop too much, maybe?"

"...You do realize this is all being broadcast live, right? It's your doing."

The Witch looked seriously at me.

"What if the Apothecary you recommended gets utterly defeated? If that happens..."

"It'll all be broadcast in Babylon, and to the world. Right now, the internet must already be buzzing."

What would the old me have commented?

Would I have wished to be like Medicine King or something?

Lost in such idle thoughts, the Witch pressed her forehead.

"King of Death, if that happens, it'll damage your reputation. ...Are you really okay with this?"

"I do feel a bit sorry for that old man, Medicine King."

Not really. Not sorry at all.

If he's made bold statements, he should be prepared to face the consequences, right?

That's the true spirit of living and letting live.

The Witch looked at me and the Apothecary alternately, her expression indecipherable. Just as I was about to open her psychological window, it happened.

"It's done, kiddo!"

Medicine King.

He triumphantly raised the medicine he had created.

"Bow before my magnificent creation!"

+

[Epic Recovery Potion]

Rarity: Epic

Creator: Medicine King

Description: It tastes a bit bitter, but it can heal even severe wounds. Naturally, being a recovery potion, one should consider the after-effects of healing and rest safely after consumption. Nonetheless, to create such a potion is truly a remarkable feat!

+

Cheers of "Wow" filled the library.

"An Epic Recovery Potion!"

"Incredible. He actually made an Epic Recovery Potion. Truly, Medicine King. The king never dies."

"Medicine King! Would you consider selling that to me?"

"Don't cut in line! Medicine King! I have the highest reservation! I'll buy it!"

The Medicine King raised his chin, looking back and forth between me and the Apothecary. His face seemed to say, 'Now you both have provoked the tiger, and you will face utter humiliation for it.'

That's when it happened.

"Uh... I'm done..."

The Apothecary lifted her own creation.

+

[Soma Strawberry]

Rarity: Quasi-Mythic

Creator: Apothecary

Description: What? It tastes like strawberries! There's not a single strawberry in it, so why does it taste like strawberries!? And what about this effect? As long as it's well-preserved, it can reattach severed body parts without any side effects! What have you created!?

+

Silence enveloped the library.

Chapter 61: The World Without a Constellation (3)

The two looked silently at the medicines they had made.

Everyone else was speechless too. The same ingredients had yielded such vastly different results that they were all stunned.

"Heh."

The first to move was the Apothecary.

With her slender fingers, emphasizing her knuckles, she adjusted her glasses and tilted her head.

"Is this the medicine you made, elder?"

The Medicine King remained silent.

The Apothecary picked up Medicine King's potion, examining it from all angles.

"Hmm."

She tilted it,

"Heh."

and even turned it upside down.

Then, handing the potion back to Medicine King, she adjusted her glasses again.

"Is this it, huh?"

Hmm.

'Is she the type who becomes infinitely bolder when she thinks she has the upper hand?'

In other words, does she have the seed of a lunatic, like all other high-level hunters?

That can't be.

It just can't be...

While I was reaffirming my trust in humanity, Medicine King finally reacted.

"Hmm..."

The height difference between them was significant.

The woman's stature was as vibrant as the days ahead of her, long and lively, while the old man's figure had shrunk as much as the years he had lived.

Thus, the Apothecary looked down at Medicine King, and he

looked up at her.

"Could it be, elder..."

"Could it be, youngster..."

Both spoke at the same time.

"Is your skill lacking...?"

"Is it just good luck...?"

Hmm.

"What?"

As the Apothecary tilted her head, Medicine King nodded.

"Lucky, indeed."

"What?"

"Tsk. That's the problem with the youth. Reminds me of when I made about 1.7 billion dollars in Wall Street in just 10 minutes in my 30s. I thought it was all thanks to my skills."

"....."

The Apothecary tilted her head, and her glasses followed suit.

A genuinely annoyed voice came from her slightly slanted lips.

"Shall we try again...?"

"Would that be wise? Luck rarely smiles twice. Tsk, the impertinence of youth..."

Three minutes passed.

"Luck is on your side, indeed. But fortune doesn't smile

thrice. This time, my experience and years will shatter your mere stroke of luck..."

Another three minutes passed.

"Your luck is remarkable. But fortune doesn't smile four times..."

"Enough..."

Finally, the Sword Saint grabbed the Medicine King's shoulder.

"Enough, Medicine King..."

"Marcus, what are you talking about!"

"You're being disgraceful now..."

"No! This time for sure! This time, my skills! My experience will crush this novice's luck! Can't you see it, this is my victory road, as Shawn McCallister!"

"I'm sorry, young lady. You truly are the best Apothecary. It was my fault not to trust the King of Death's word."

Sword Saint bowed his head in apology.

The Apothecary, looking down at Medicine King with an expression as if seeing a water flea, cleared her throat with a 'Hmm'.

"It must be hard for you... because of your friend..."

"Well, this friend of mine... He's not completely useless. He can make medicine... not as well as you, but still..."

"Yes... Well, better than nothing, I suppose... He has the basics, so he might be usable as an assistant..."

It was at that moment when the Apothecary adjusted her glasses and mumbled to herself.

"You there!"

With the agility of a cat pouncing on catnip, the Countess of Sang-Ryun, sprang forward and grabbed the Apothecary's wrist.

"Contract!"

"What!?"

"Contract! Right now! Exclusive contract! Make a contract with me!"

"Uh, uh..."

"Top industry treatment guaranteed! I'll even let you pet a cat! No, you can roll around in a field of cats! How about that! Isn't it great?"

The Apothecary was too bewildered to respond.

But the Countess was just the beginning.

"Me too!"

"Apothecary! The King of Death has recognized you, you're the Apothecary King!"

"No, without the fake, just Apothecary!"

"Goddess of Medicine! Please provide us with your medicines!"

What I faced when I soloed the 10th floor.

Countless requests for handshakes now enveloped the Apothecary.

"Okay, everyone!"

The Apothecary struggled to push the people away.

"If you want to trade medicines with me, please go through King of Death! Ah, of course, the Paladin can continue as is! But for others! I'll only sell to those approved by the King of Death, so please... don't inconvenience him..."

With that, everyone's gaze, including the Countess', turned to me.

The Paladin alone quietly raised her hands in a victory pose, then lowered them back down.

I smiled slyly.

"Let's think about that after clearing the Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon."

"Ah! Yes, yes!"

The mention of ascending the tower always worked on hunters.

Even the Countess retreated with a bitter face.

'Good.'

Now the team was complete.

First, there was the Sword Saint.

Then, the Apothecary.

And above all, there was me.

"No! It can't be! It can't be! My experience! My years can't be mocked by a mere youngster's stroke of luck!"

Medicine King, or rather, the Jade Emperor as he was known, might be... well, as the Apothecary said, better than nothing.

"Hmm! It seems all the characters are in place."

The Holed-Up Head Librarian, who had been watching our show, spoke brightly.

"Let me remind you again. Dying in the Revelations means actual death. There's only one way to safely escape! Overcome the crisis of cancellation in any way. And face a proper [ending]!"

"What does a proper ending mean?"

"That's up to you to decide."

At my question, the librarian grinned.

"Perhaps you'll save the Martial Realm by eradicating a pandemic. Or maybe you'll use the pandemic to become the masters of the Martial Realm yourselves. The possibilities are nearly infinite! What the [best ending] is, is for you to decide."

In other words, it's entirely up to us.

I nodded.

"Okay. Then send us to the Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon right no..."

"Wait a minute!"

Someone shouted.

"Isn't the clan leader coming?"

"Yeah, if it's martial arts, it's a perfect opportunity for the Celestial Clan Master!"

The Celestial Martial Guild.

The hunters from the guild led by Viper were speaking up.

Viper, who had been quietly blending in with the martial arts group, blinked.

"Huh?"

As the Celestial Martial disciples threw in their two cents, Viper looked confused.

"It's a world made for our clan master..."

"In my opinion too. Clan master, it's your duty to uphold the martial way, right?"

"I think so too, master. You should step forward."

Viper narrowed his brows.

Then, slowly, he crossed his arms.

His thick eyebrows and the determination in his one eye showed a manly resolve.

"Alright. I was planning to step in anyway. You guys, you haven't forgotten me, have you?"

"....."

I was speechless.

Strange. That guy shouldn't be interested in a martial world.

Something felt off, so I opened his character window to read his psychological state... And, as expected.

「Damn these disciples!」

「Why are they sending me to the boonies!?!」

Viper was internally screaming.

But outwardly, he maintained composure. As if he had been waiting for his disciples to give him a push, the one-eyed swordsman spoke softly.

"Those who revere martial arts and chivalry. The world of warriors and heroes, that is the Martial Realm! Though I was born elsewhere, my heart has long belonged to the Martial Realm."

「There won't even be a modern toilet there. I suffered so much because of that in the Aegim Empire, damn it...」

Oh my.

"Why is my sect called the Celestial Martial Clan if not for this reason?"

「 So, was there something wrong with me being a 32-year-old unemployed 'Mu' (Martial Artist) before I obtained the cheat skill 'Unrivaled Under the Heaven'? I mean, it's all in the name, right? Everyone thinks it's Chun-Moon (Celestial Martial), but it was actually spelled differently. Even the sign maker got it wrong. Can't even explain this now, damn it... 」

Incredible.

"I must go."

「 I absolutely don't want to go! 」

I was at a loss for words.

It seemed that my Aura, which shared my consciousness, was also at a loss.

[Shiny reports that it too is at a loss for words.]

An entity that could leave people, ghosts, and Constellations speechless was before us.

The hunters cheered, "Woah!"

The members of the Celestial Martial Guild were especially overjoyed.

"As expected of our leader!"

"I knew the master would step up!"

"Our idol! The true hunter of this era!"

"I will follow you for life, leader!"

If I didn't have the ability to read minds... I might have been impressed too. To anyone's eyes, Viper looked every bit the devoted swordsman, just like Sword Saint.

Sword Saint crossed his arms.

"Hmm... Viper, you might indeed feel compelled to go."

"Without a doubt."

"But I see no reason for this guy to yield."

Sword Saint raised his Aura.

Viper was already in high spirits, their auras clashing. Bang! The air around them changed abruptly, like a balloon popping. Bookmark Maids either ran away or were flung around by the force.

The hunters were more thrilled.

"Sword Saint and Viper are facing off!"

"It's a battle of pride!"

A truly remarkable sight.

Knowing Viper's inner thoughts, it was a remarkable sight for a different reason.

Then, a clinking sound.

"Sword Saint. Celestial Martial Guild Leader. Let's stop this."

It was the Paladin stepping forward. The clinking came from her purse, swollen with the winnings from betting on the Apothecary.

With a gravely serious face, she said, "We can't have a sword fight here, can we?"

Her voice was earnest, always mediating fights like this.

'Wait, has it always been like this...?'

-Yeah, zombie. What if it's always been like this and we just didn't notice?

'This world is full of forbidden knowledge we're not supposed to know...'

Viper snorted.

"If a sword fight is needed, then let it be. Damn it, I'm a martial artist too. Let's fight and the stronger one goes, right?"

「Lose on purpose!」

「Lose but make it look close, so it's not embarrassing!」

「If I lose to the Sword Saint, even my disciples will accept it. Yes.」

A truly bizarre scene.

Unaware of all this, Sword Saint wiped sweat from his brow.

"Sorry, Viper... I must give my all against a strong opponent like you. Last time, it cost you an eye. I can't guarantee a different outcome this time."

"I should be the one saying that, old man. Come at me thinking of my past, and you'll end up in a coffin."

「Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!」

Viper's outward appearance was that of a valiant warrior.

My ghostly companion, Sword Emperor, also wiped sweat from his brow.

-Zombie.

"Yes, Sword Emperor."

-High-level hunters are all crazy, right? But among them, this guy, what do I say...

'He's the [real deal]...'

Sweat covered my forehead too.

'If only considering sweating from the forehead, we were all the same.' All hunters were watching this scene with sweaty foreheads.

Even those in Babylon Square watching the broadcast must be sweating.

Paladin's forehead was also sweaty, with drops falling onto her bulging purse.

"Viper, you are..."

Viper flashed a bold smile.

"A warrior has moments when he can't back down."

「Paladin, do something!」

Though his urgent heart's cry wouldn't reach him, Paladin indeed did something.

Specifically, she said to Sword Saint:

"Sword Saint... Can't you step back this time?"

「Why is she asking him to step back!?!」

'Why is she asking him to step back!?'

Ah, our thoughts overlapped.

[Shiny shivers and massages your waist with its blade.]

The Sword Emperor patted my shoulder.

While I silently received their consolation, Paladin continued to speak to Sword Saint.

"I know you always want to be at the forefront. But you've already joined the King of Death and the Witch from the 12th to the 19th floors. It would be shameless to push yourself into the 22nd-floor raid too."

Her tone was calm and logical. Her face was dead serious.

"The thing is,"

Paladin pointed to Viper and those who suggested that the leader of Chun-Moon should participate.

"The Celestial Martial Guild Leader is the head of a group. Though he may not care about face in front of his disciples, his situation is different from yours, who is alone. Can't you respect him a bit?"

"Hmm..."

Sword Saint, Marcus Callenbury, let out a thoughtful sound.

The seasoned old man furrowed, then relaxed his brows. His eyebrows moved up and down several times.

Finally, he crossed his arms.

"When has this old man ever cared about the face of your Five Great Guilds?"

Paladin clicked her tongue.

"Sword Saint, really..."

"However."

Interrupting Paladin, Sword Saint turned to look at me.

But why is he looking at me now...?

"Lately, this old man was thinking of showing a bit of discretion."

It was a good sight. The obstinate old man was bending his own stubbornness. The beauty of it made me wish that Medicine King, or whatever his name is, could learn even a tiny bit from him.

‘But why now...?’

"Understood."

Sword Saint took a step back.

His gaze, examining the Revelations, was filled with regret, but the old man cut it off and said,

"Viper. This time, this old man will yield to you."

Viper's eyes widened for a moment but soon, he smiled broadly, exuding more force. Like a gambler who had won just as he wanted.

"About time. Know your life's been spared, old man."

「No! Why the sudden yielding!? Marcus Callenbury! You're not one to yield to others! No, I don't want to go!」

It was an indescribable forbidden scene.

Paladin, too, with a face that said 'indescribable,' looked at Sword Saint. The Heretic Inquisitor, watching with bright eyes, jumped and hugged Paladin's arm.

"Amazing! Paladin, you persuaded Sword Saint!"

"Hmm. No. It's the Sword Saint who accepted my persuasion."

"Aha-ha! Is that so! Then I must hug the Sword Saint!"

"I firmly refuse."

Sword Saint put up an impenetrable wall. However, nothing stops a natural-born psycho, so Sword Saint had to endure quite a bit.

"Really... everyone is growing a little."

The Witch, touching her lips, chuckled softly, punctuating the scene.

It was as if a heartwarming story had just unfolded, and the three selected for the expedition to the Apocalypse [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon] were ready.

"Tsk. If it's decided, let's hurry up and go. Wait any longer and the day will break. Just like when I was young... Can't help it, then. Ha, really. I have to go, don't I? Earlier, I was continuously outdone by that youngster's luck, but the unrivaled, universally acknowledged greatest pharmacist of ancient and modern times is me, Medicine King."

"Eek, King of Death. I'm scared... Is it really okay for someone like me to go along? Of course, I am at least better than that old geezer called Medicine King or whatever? It's a fact as certain as Galileo Galilei's heliocentrism, though

strangely, that flea-like old man refuses to acknowledge it? But me, going along..."

"Non-combatants over there. Take care of yourselves in a fight. Losing your life, you know, happens in a flash."

「I don't want to go... Please, let's switch... Sword Saint, swap with me even now...」

I blankly stared at my fellow expedition members.

Rarely, the Sword Emperor spoke in a comforting tone.

-Don't worry, zombie. If it doesn't feel right, just die! Whether you catch a disease or throw yourself off a cliff, just reset to before this moment! I really respect this reset ability from the soul. Though I'm just a soul now.

I weakly nodded.

"Yes... let's go..."

"Good."

The Holed-Up Head Librarian chuckled and snapped his fingers. Snap! The Revelations flew from Sword Saint's hand into the librarian's. As if to say, 'I only lent it to you, but this book is originally mine,' he skillfully opened the book.

"King of Death, Viper, Medicine King, Apothecary."

Light burst forth from the book.

"I designate the four of you as new characters in [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon]. When you open your eyes, you'll be in a world 10 days before the unfortunate cancellation of the Records."

And light enveloped us.

"I hope you'll present a splendid ending."

The moment the expedition, devoid of dreams and hopes, was dispatched.

Chapter 62: The Great War of Good and Evil (1)

I've never read a martial arts novel.

Not only did I lack the habit of reading, but in our generation, [martial arts] was already a declining genre. Occasionally, old martial arts films would pop up on the internet. But due to their crude CG technology, they were nothing more than a source of laughter.

In an era that mocks all seriousness.

The places for 'Martial' and 'Heroic' were scarce.

A genre that had declined.

A world that had declined.

Snow was falling there.

"Cold!"

We, the expedition devoid of dreams and hopes, safely entered the world of the Revelations. What greeted us was a vast snowfield. The snow crunched cutely under our shoes as we stepped on it.

However, the cold that enveloped us was far from cute.

"Everyone!"

I quickly shouted.

"Raise your aura to protect your bodies!"

The harsh winter cold.

Just standing still, our toes would freeze. Immediately upon hearing my shout, Viper raised his aura. But the non-combatants, Apothecary and Medicine King, didn't manage to

do so in time.

“I... I can't... I haven't learned to use aura...”

“Ahchoo! Ah, choo! Oh, this old man's dying! Going to die of cold!”

Within just 20 seconds of arriving in the world of Revelations, the two of them had already turned pale. I, too, had struggled to master aura. How could support hunters know how to use it?

"Tsk."

I quickly took action.

“Viper! Take care of Medicine King!”

"Okay."

Viper lifted Medicine King. Whether he's the emperor of light novels or a man who lives and dies by his pride, Viper

was undoubtedly a top-ranking combat-focused hunter.

The purple aura he emitted soon enveloped Medicine King too.

“Oh, I feel much better now...”

Medicine King sighed in relief, looking as comfortable as an old man entering a hot spring. I nodded and then took Apothecary's hand.

"Miss, you'll stay with me."

“Yes, yes?”

"Give me your hand."

Aura flowed from my hand to Apothecary's. A red aura. Whether it symbolized fire or blood was yet to be determined, but it was warmly wrapped around Apothecary.

"Ah."

Apothecary bowed her head.

“Th-thank you, King of Death. But this, it tickles a bit...”

"I understand it's embarrassing. I'm embarrassed too. But now is not the time to be concerned with that."

I looked around. A dense snowstorm like a fog. We managed to temporarily solve the issue of body temperature, but that was it. Where we were, where we should go – everything was unclear.

“The Holed-Up Head Librarian easily used words like [Work] and [Cancellation] because he's a Constellation. But this is a real world, not just a book. We've come to save a world. You know that, right?”

"....."

Apothecary widened her eyes.

“...Yes. That's right. I think I took it too lightly. I-I'll do my best.”

“Everyone just needs to focus on their role. Right now, I'm protecting us with aura, but when it's time to cure the pandemic, it's you and the Medicine King who need to step up. Please.”

“Yes, King of Death.”

Whoosh...

The snowstorm brushed past our ears. We squinted, trying to discern the surrounding landscape. I recalled the last line of The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon.

「An unidentified pandemic spread, leading to the death of the Heavenly Demon」

「All other forces perished」

A brief sentence.

In those less than 50 words, there was no mention of 'skin-piercing cold' or 'snow rising up to the knees'. It only mentioned the world's demise.

Now, we had to find out.

What happened that led to the death of this 'Heavenly Demon' character?

What was this 'mysterious illness' that led humanity in this world to extinction?

"Ah."

Squeeze.

The Apothecary held my hand a bit tighter. She pointed towards the other side of the snowstorm.

"Look over there, King of Death! I think I just saw some people!"

We all looked in the direction she pointed.

She was right. It was hard to see through the heavy snowfall... but beyond the wind, shadows of people appeared.

There were many shadows, not just one or two. Dozens, maybe even hundreds.

A forest of human shadows.

"Okay."

I led the way.

"Let's head over there!"

The snow whirled around. It wasn't falling from the sky

but was whipped up by the wind. In the blizzard, people appeared only as shadows, so we stayed close to avoid getting separated.

-Zombie.

The Guardian Spirit spoke. It was looking around for me.

-Something's off. I don't hear any noise from that direction.

'Is it because the blizzard is drowning out the sound?'

-Maybe.

The Guardian Spirit narrowed its eyes towards the forest of shadows.

-But it's not just that there's no sound... those figures aren't moving at all. Not even a twitch. They're more like statues than people.

Fortunately, the windstorm settled down after a while. As the snowfall ceased, our visibility improved. But the relief was short-lived.

The sight before us left us speechless.

"...What's with these?"

Viper exhaled a white breath.

"Why are all these people frozen?"

In the middle of the snowfield.

Hundreds of people were all standing, frozen solid.

"...They're really human."

Apothecary confirmed after examining a frozen person.

She, wearing latex gloves, plucked flesh from the corpse with tweezers.

"According to the [Life Diagnosis] skill, they've been dead for 2 years and 3 months. Cause of death: death by infection. [Moving Hospital] analysis indicates it's an unregistered disease."

"How strange!"

Medicine King also examined the frozen people closely, using

skills to diagnose them, just as combat-focused hunters use skills to fight.

"The cause of death is the same for all. It's not death by freezing. They should've died lying on the ground... but they're all standing? Hmm, really. It's a crying shame. Back in Silicon Valley..."

"It's highly likely someone deliberately moved the bodies here."

Apothecary cut Medicine King off.

After hearing my earlier words, she had become serious.

"The cause of death is the same, but the dates vary. This person died 2 years ago, that one 3 years ago. It seems intentional..."

I furrowed my brow.

"Sort of a graveyard?"

"Hmm."

Viper stroked his chin.

"A graveyard, eh? From afar, it looks like an army of terracotta soldiers."

The poses of the frozen people varied. Some had their arms spread wide, looking up at the sky, while others were frozen mid-roar like beasts.

‘Character window.’

I looked at the nearest frozen person and whispered in my mind.

White letters floated up over the snowy field.

+

Name: Jang SeongPa

Favorability: -

Preferred Genres: -

Disliked Genres: -

Preferred Characters: -

Disliked Characters: -

Preferred Plots: -

Disliked Plots: -

Psychological State: 'Light.'

+

"....."

So this is what the character window of a deceased person looks like.

Perhaps the 'Light' mentioned in the psychological state was... the last thought of this person before dying. The psyche of the corpse, like an inscription on a gravestone, was fixed.

The group murmured, faced with the mystery.

"A graveyard... If this is a communal grave, why make it like this?"

"I don't know. But they all have weapons at their waists."

"Is there anywhere we can rest? I'm warm thanks to the aura but..."

At that moment.

"---Hahaha!"

Laughter echoed from a distance. Our group instinctively

crouched down. The source of the laughter, unaware of our presence, shouted at someone.

"The reign of the Demonic Cult ends today!"

"Hah. Even the passing dogs would flip and laugh at that."

There were two voices, not one.

"As long as I, the leader, remain intact, the Demonic Cult's reign will persist. Great Axe Sage, it's time for you to bid farewell to the Orthodox Faction."

Clear and resonant voices.

One belonged to an old man, the other to a young woman.

The old man shouted.

"Nonsense! Your Demonic Cult's vaunted Blood Ghost Troops have already had their heads lopped off by my axe. Even those rotten council elders had their heads severed and

sent to the netherworld! With five hundred loyalists of the martial world under my command, what sorcery could you possibly use to stop me?"

"Huh."

The woman chuckled softly.

"Such a long tongue for an old man. The Blood Ghosts merely left on my secret command. They're not weak enough to be killed by someone like you."

I raised my finger, signaling my group to be quiet.

'Shh.'

My companions blinked.

'Let's approach quietly. Okay?'

They nodded silently in agreement.

We stealthily moved through the cemetery of frozen humans, drawing closer to the voices. Soon, we could see the two of them.

"Worry about your own followers before mine, Great Axe Sage."

The woman wore a black martial outfit.

"Where have all your proud disciples vanished? The once revered old man of the martial alliance has fallen so low."

"Humph!"

The old man, draped in a white robe, retorted.

"None of your concern. They've spread across the world on secret missions!"

"There must be a lot of secret missions..."

"You've messed up the world with your needless meddling. If

not for your damn Demonic Cult, things wouldn't have become this bizarre!"

"If we are fools, what does that make you, who have handed over the martial world to such fools? The fool above fools, a supreme fool."

"How dare you, woman!?"

"Come at me, old man."

A rather low-level squabble was unfolding.

Judging from their conversation, the man in the white robe belonged to the Orthodox faction, and the woman in black to the Unorthodox faction. The old man of the Orthodox faction and the woman of the unorthodox faction pointed weapons at each other.

"Enough! I can no longer stand the sight of you, demonic leader! I shall split your head in two, offering one to the Jade Emperor and the other to the King of the Underworld!"

"Hmph. I've been longing for a decisive battle. Today, I'll

eliminate the last of the Orthodox bloodline and prove the strength of the Demonic Cult."

Despite their frivolous tones, it was a typical confrontation between martial artists.

Just as the two were about to unleash their formidable powers in a dazzling sword fight, a serious problem emerged.

-Zombie.

The Guardian Spirit muttered in disbelief.

-What are they doing with those twigs...?

Indeed.

The old man and the woman, these two martial artists, were holding slender sticks, resembling thin canes. These were their 'weapons'. The splendid weapons typical in martial arts movies were nowhere to be seen.

"....."

"....."

There was an awkward silence. The two seemed embarrassed at pointing mere sticks at each other. Finally, the woman in the black robe spoke softly.

"...Great Axe Sage, where have you hidden your prized Steel Cauldron Axe to come wielding such a twig? Your only merit was swinging that axe with such flair..."

"Shut up!"

The old man's face reddened.

"And you! Where did you toss aside your treasured Lethal Demon Blood Sword, resorting to such a cane!"

"Ah, a cane, you say."

The woman averted her gaze slightly.

"That's harsh. This is a wooden sword I carved myself. It contains the essence of a millennium of demonic teachings. I have even graced it with the name Demonic Heaven Wooden Blade."

"Putting the name of Demonic Heaven on a mere twig?"

"Hmm. Is that not acceptable...?"

"....."

"....."

Silence.

The old man spoke softly.

"Ahem. Even so, Demonic Heaven Wooden Blade is a bit much. How about calling it a simple baton?"

"Baton? That literally means a cane..."

"Literally a cane, and what you see is a cane! Foolish woman!"

The woman reluctantly nodded.

"Fine.

If you insist, I shall settle for a Demonic Wooden Baton."

"That Demonic again!"

The old man's white beard quivered.

"Why do you demonic folks obsessively attach 'demonic' to everything? Just in your followers, there's Blood Demon, Sword Demon, Hell Ghost Demon, Moon Shadow Demon, four demons! And they're collectively known as the Four Demon Lords! Did you learn the word 'demonic' before even the Thousand Character Classic!?"

"Hmm. Is there not an elegant ring to it...?"

"Ah! To think the martial world once fell to such buffoons!"

Then.

Dark clouds began to eat away at the sun. The snow-laden clouds were especially thick, casting a deep twilight over the snowfield. The world darkened as if it were early evening.

"Huh!?"

The old man flinched.

"Demonic leader, now's not the time for us to fight!"

".....!"

The two martial artists, who had been verbally sparring, suddenly stood back-to-back. The woman's forehead was slick with sweat.

"Damn it. The heavens have been unpredictable lately...."

"Woman, didn't you assure me the weather would be clear today?"

"Divinations can be both right and wrong. I only learned from Hell Ghost Demon's predictions. How can I possibly foresee the will of the heavens?"

"Ah! I've been misled by your words and ruined the plan!"

"Shut up and prepare to fight, old man. My energy's already draining."

Our group stood there, utterly bewildered.

Apothecary, sticking close to my side, whispered.

"Wh-why are they acting like this all of a sudden...?"

"I don't know either. I was about to say..."

Just as I was about to reply.

-Grumble.

Something stirred.

At first, I thought it was one of us making the noise. But when growling sounds began emanating from the left, right, front, and back, I realized something was terribly wrong.

-Growl.

-Squeak, growl.

-Grrr.

"Yikes!"

Apothecary clung to my arm in shock. Even through her glasses, her complexion looked pale.

Viper and Medicine King's faces weren't much different. My expression must have been quite grim as well.

-Squeal!

-Growl, growl.

The thousands of frozen humans.

What we thought were mere corpses began to move slowly.

-Groan.

A corpse nearby, previously frozen stiff, rotated its eyeballs. Its pupils were open, eyebrows almost gone, and parts of the iris eaten away by bugs. Yet, it stared right at us.

"....."

Our eyes met. Seeing the corpse's eyes, I realized the truth.

"Damn it..."

The Revelation named [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon].

The book clearly stated:

+

[The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon]

Genre: Martial Arts

Difficulty: B

Required Participants: 2~4

*The serialization has been discontinued.

Description: In the world of martial arts, where martial arts are revered and utilized to reach enlightenment! Here, a Heavenly Demon appeared, aiming to unify the martial world. The Demonic Cult, united under the Heavenly Demon, and the opposing forces clashed over the fate of the world... or so they

would have.

Had it not been for a sudden super pandemic.

Reason for Discontinuation: An unidentified pandemic spread, leading to the death of the Heavenly Demon. The Demonic Cult was annihilated. All other forces perished. The end.

+

What we thought were frozen corpses began to stir.

Their movements were sluggish, but the sight of corpses moving was terrifying in itself.

I belatedly realized what the 'unidentified pandemic' mentioned in the Revelation was.

"The pandemic was a [Zombie Virus]!"

As I shouted, the corpse's mouth opened.

-Ughhhhh!

The sun was obscured by clouds.

A thousand zombies descended upon us.

Chapter 63: The Great War of Good and Evil (2)

Apothecary's face turned pale.

Just as she was about to scream in terror,

"Hi-."

"Huhhhhhh!?"

A scream, far surpassing Apothecary's in volume, erupted. It was Medicine King.

The Sword Emperor's friend, quite advanced in years, could outshout most youngsters when it came to screaming.

"Run! Get away! I've never seen such a thing even in Silicon Valley! Ughhh, it's the end! The world is ending!"

"We're already in a world that has ended, you know!?"

I quickly drew out the Holy Sword and slashed at the nearest zombie. Unlike martial arts films, I was more familiar with zombie movies and dramas, and I had personally faced them on the 13th floor. Thanks to this, my blade instinctively beheaded the zombie.

-Kieeek!

The zombie's head soared through the air, still growling. The headless body continued to thrash about, lunging at me. Damn it. Was this the type that only stopped moving when the brain was destroyed? The worst-case scenario.

"Let's get out of here for now!"

"You, who are you people!?"

The two martial artists finally noticed our presence. The righteous old man and the demonic woman looked at us, just

as shocked by our group as we were by the zombies.

"...Old man, my eyes must be going crooked. I see living humans, not just one, but four of them. Is the King of the Underworld calling me?"

"I see the same. After being mocked as the supreme fool by you, it seems I've truly become one."

"Quick, run away too!"

I quickly hoisted Apothecary onto my back.

"And if possible, tell us where to run!"

The two martial artists exchanged glances.

"Good heavens. They do seem to be living humans, old man."

"Perhaps we're already dead, observing the scenery of the afterlife...?"

"Then either we've gone to The Peach Blossom Spring together or plunged into hell. Since there are no peach trees or fairies here, and zombies abound, not to mention your presence, it's hard to believe this is The Peach Blossom Spring."

"So, it's not a dream but the living world."

"Are these living humans?"

"They're warm to the touch, so at least they don't seem to be zombies."

The two martial artists were casually bantering, which might have given it away, but we were already fleeing through the zombie forest. Viper took care of the righteous old man, while I carried the demonic woman.

"Where exactly did you all come from?"

The demonic woman looked up at my face with curiosity.

"You've mastered interesting Stepping Techniques. Are you youngsters from the Outside land? Are there still barbarians

living on the frontier?"

"We are..."

I didn't fully understand what 'Outside land' meant, but I got the gist of it. Were we from outside the martial world? How should I respond to this? As I pondered, a sound from behind us answered my question.

-Kigik, kieeek!

-Ughhhhh!

It was the zombies. They had fully warmed up and were now chasing after us.

Actually, could this even be called 'chasing'?

What kind of zombies could leap ten meters in a single bound? 'Flying' was more apt than 'chasing'. Hundreds of zombies, like a flock of seagulls, flew towards us, a truly shocking and terrifying sight.

"What, what the hell!?"

Viper was astounded.

"Why are zombies flying in the sky!?"

"It's a Movement Technique I created. I borrowed it from the Kunlun riffraff and refined it."

The demonic woman boasted.

"Look at that. Beyond Traceless Snow Walk, reaching the Airy Void Path! Truly, my teachings have been well received by the Demonic Cult's elites. Even in death, they continue to use the Movement Technique, a true mark of demonic disciples."

"Hold on a second."

I interjected. Despite the bewildering array of unfamiliar terms, I couldn't overlook what was just said.

"They don't forget their martial arts even in death?"

"Huh? Being from the Outside, you're unfamiliar with the ways here."

The woman in my arms tilted her head curiously.

"Martial artists continue to use martial arts even as zombies. It's common knowledge."

"I've never heard of such 'common knowledge'!"

Indeed. Martial arts-wielding zombies!

Had this been a comedy, I might have laughed it off, but this was not a comedy. This was the world of genuine martial arts. This was no joking matter.

"These youngsters, in particular, directly received my teachings. Once they receive my teachings, even in their sleep, their bodies respond to killing intent. Ah, even as corpses, seeing them use the techniques is truly commendable."

"Huhhhhh!? We're going to be caught! We'll be caught like this, Guild Master!"

Medicine King, carried by Viper, screamed. The zombies, leaping into the air, swooped down like fierce eagles, nearly grabbing Medicine King's hair.

"Run faster! Can't you run any quicker! If I get bitten and turn into a zombie, I'll bite you first!"

"Damn, who brought these old men into the team!? And why am I stuck with old men while King of Death gets all the women!?"

"We're about to be killed by martial-arts-using zombies and that's what you care about!?"

"We're about to die! What else matters!?"

The Guardian Spirit, keeping watch behind us, yelled out.

-Zombie! Zombies!

Damn it.

"Weakness!"

I asked the demonic woman.

"Is there no weakness to these zombies!?"

"Crush their heads, and they stop moving."

"Not that, something easier!"

Truthfully, I was prepared to die at this moment. Ordinary zombies might be one thing, but zombies flying through the air and using martial arts? If they filled the world, even with Sword Saint, Witch, and Heretic Inquisitor combined, it would be a close call.

"Hmm."

The demonic woman nodded.

Then, she pointed over my shoulder.

"They stop when the sunlight hits them."

".....!"

Of course. It was simple when I thought about it.

The scene of zombies beginning to move, of them flying through the air with martial arts, was so shocking that I hadn't considered it.

"Unknown lady! And Apothecary!"

"Hmm."

"Yes?"

The demonic woman replied calmly, while Apothecary responded shakily. I concentrated Aura in my arm.

"Sorry, but I have to throw you! Please land safely!"

"Hmm."

"...Yes?"

And then I threw them as far as I could. Like an Olympian javelin thrower, with all my might.

The woman made no sound as she flew. She just plummeted headfirst into the snow. Apothecary, on the other hand, screamed grandly as she fell. Where she landed, a large 'Dai' (大) character was etched into the snow.

"Sorry!"

I apologized again, then stopped and turned back.

Hundreds of zombies were rushing toward me.

-Grrrrrrrr!

-Kiik!

-Ugh! Grrr!

Chills ran down my entire body.

I had fought zombies on the 13th floor, but these martial arts zombies swarming like mosquitoes from the sky were on a completely different level. Seriously, they were terrifying.

-We're going to die!

For some reason, Guardian Spirit was reveling in the situation.

-To think I'd see a zombie like you dying to real zombies again! Ah, this is great! Another item off my bucket list!

Was he keeping a bucket list even as a ghost?

"Not yet,"

In the middle of the snowfield, I faced the horde of zombies.

"I'm not dead yet!"

I drew the Goddess of Protection's Holy Sword.

Just as the zombies' teeth, clinging to the flesh of someone frozen solid, were about to reach me, I mentally commanded.

'Shine, Shiny!'

[Shiny responds to your call, Hero.]

'Shine brightly!'

Whoosh!

The fragment of the Constellation, the first of the five sister swords, the Idol, emitted a brilliant light. The snowfield reflected the sword's light, illuminating the surroundings brightly.

And I realized that I indeed had a talent for naming. Calling Shiny "Shiny" was a truly apt choice.

-Ughhhh!

-Groooooo.....

Hesitation.

The zombies, hit by the Holy Sword's light, froze in mid-air. Just like mosquitoes hit by an insecticide spray, they plummeted to the ground. Since the zombies didn't know how to fall safely, the snow-covered ground was punctured with holes like a beehive.

"Huhhh!"

The Medicine King, who was almost caught by a zombie, moaned. The zombie was frozen in place, still holding onto his white hair.

"Did we, did I survive again? Ahhh, if it weren't for Marcus, I wouldn't have entered this tower. Oh, my fate..."

"Is everyone okay?"

I remained on high alert. It wasn't over yet. The sky was still covered with dark clouds, and the ground remained shrouded in darkness.

Only the light from the Goddess of Protection's Holy Sword served as our sole illumination.

If the light were to go out even for a moment, those terrifying martial arts zombies would resume their activity.

"Ugh, yes, my face hurts a bit, but I'm okay... Thank you for saving me, Sword King..."

"Damn it, whether it's the Sword Saint or this guy! I want to live a life away from old people!"

Apothecary and Viper informed me of their safety in their own ways.

I nodded.

"Viper, please take care of the others while I deal with the zombies."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm planning to finish off these zombies while they're immobilized."

I aimed the Holy Sword at a zombie.

"It'll take some time to crush their brains one by one, but it shouldn't be too hard..."

"Hold on a moment, young man from the Outside."

The demonic woman stood up from the snow.

She slowly brushed the snowflakes off her martial uniform.

"I must thank you for saving me, a stranger. However, if you plan to annihilate those zombies, I must stop you."

"...Why?"

All sorts of theories crossed my mind.

Perhaps the zombies were cursed in a way that the curse would transfer upon killing them? Zombies are one of the most versatile monsters, becoming either minor mobs or formidable disasters depending on the world setting.

But the reason given by the demonic woman was utterly unexpected.

"They are all disciples and subordinates of my Demonic Cult."

"Excuse me?"

"They are my disciples and subordinates."

She was serious.

"The Great War to eradicate the Orthodox Faction is imminent. Every master is desperately needed. We're already short on numbers, so I cannot afford to lose more elites here."

What kind of nonsensical talk was this?

Our expedition team couldn't understand her words. A Great War? The world of 'The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon' was already on the brink of destruction. There shouldn't be any forces or humans left to wage war.

The Holed-Up Head Librarian had told us when guiding us to the apocalypse.

'When you open your eyes, you'll be in the world of 'The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon', 10 days before its unfortunate cancellation.'

'I hope you'll present a splendid ending.'

With only ten days left until complete destruction.

I wasn't sure how many survivors remained in this world... but after ten days, everyone would die. Neither the demonic woman nor the righteous old man could escape this fate.

Whether they knew this future or not, the two martial artists seemed nonchalant.

"The old man..."

"Head of the Martial Alliance. Call me the Great Axe Sage."

"...That old man and I have been engaged in a Great War for three years. Today marks exactly 989 days since the war's declaration. We both vowed in our names that we can't leave this place until one admits defeat."

The demonic woman spoke solemnly.

"Even though they've become zombies, if they use the martial arts of the Demonic Cult, they are still my people. I must protect my subordinates. Don't kill them recklessly. If you must kill, choose those in monk robes..."

"Absurd! How can I let the righteous warriors gathered by the Martial Alliance die!"

The righteous old man jumped up.

"Didn't you swear, demonic woman! That we wouldn't harm the zombies and that it would be just you and me who see this Great War to its end!"

"Promises are meant to be broken."

"This wicked woman! Then I too will crush the heads of those demonic zombies!"

"That's it. I've had enough."

I was dumbfounded.

"...The world is on the brink of destruction, and you're still continuing this Great War?"

"The order is wrong."

The woman addressed as the Heavenly Demon shook her head.

"The world began to destruct amidst our ongoing war."

In other words.

The righteous old man, Head of the Martial Alliance, and the demonic woman, the Heavenly Demon, were fighting a fate-determining battle. That was all fine. However, a virus suddenly spread, turning all their subordinates into zombies.

Ordinary people would have stopped the war and either fled or hid...

"But we can't delay a battle already begun!"

Martial artists are not ordinary people.

Head of the Martial Alliance and the Heavenly Demon... despite their subordinates all turning into zombies, did not stop their war.

In fact, they still regarded their zombified subordinates as their own and continued the Great War amidst the zombie apocalypse for three years.

"I will not stop until I defeat that old man. I still have five hundred zombie soldiers left. I'll lead them to crush the orthodox dogs."

"I'll say the same, demonic woman! The orthodox martial artists who fought you even as spirits are with me! I'll put an end to this wretched war that's lasted 989 days!"

Indeed.

The expedition team wasn't the only one without dreams and hope.

This world itself was devoid of dreams and hope.

Chapter 64: The Great War of Good and Evil (3)

Despite the world's destruction, the two martial artists didn't cease their war.

This was enough to baffle anyone, but a more shocking scene was unfolding.

It was the way these two were fighting.

"A scholar does not choose his pen, just as a warrior does not choose his sword."

The Heavenly Demon said to the Head of the Martial Alliance.

In her hand, she still held a wooden stick.

"Though I've accidentally left behind my Lethal Demon Blood Sword and now hold this Demonic Wooden Baton, I can easily send an old man like you to your grave."

"Right!"

The Head of the Martial Alliance brandished his stick and declared confidently.

"Let's see who will ultimately unite the martial world!"

Thus, the two warriors collided.

Perhaps 'collided' might be an overstatement.

Their struggle was nothing more than a scuffle, nothing more, nothing less.

"Heavenly Demon's Reigning Steps!"

"Hmpf! Sky Destroying Golden Axe!"

The Heavenly Demon and the Head of the Martial Alliance shouted impressive-sounding names as they clashed. However, just their words were impressive.

What they held in their hands were mere sticks, and the sound they produced as they struck each other was more playful than intense.

Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!

Soon enough, their sticks broke. Then the Heavenly Demon and the Head of the Martial Alliance lunged at each other, eyes bulging with fury. The Heavenly Demon grabbed the Head of the Martial Alliance's beard, and he, in turn, yanked her hair.

I was speechless.

"This is just..."

A situation beyond words.

While we all stood dumbfounded,

-Well, that's strange.

The Guardian Spirit had an unusual reaction.

-They have the right stances. Those guys.

'What?'

-Their techniques and breathing are spot on. Even in my world, they would be considered top-notch masters.

I looked again at the duel. The Head of the Martial Alliance was attempting to poke the Heavenly Demon's eyes, who hurriedly covered her face with both hands.

'That?'

-Don't you see the subtlety in that? The eye poke embodies the principle of the Azure Dragon's claw snatching the pearl from the Evil Dragon, which could be named Double Dragon's Battle for the Orb, and the face covering reflects the compassionate Buddha embracing the faces of all sentient beings, which could be called Thousand Face Covering Buddha...

The Sword Emperor continued with his lengthy explanation.

I raised a hand to stop him.

'But why are they fighting like children in a brawl?'

-That's what's so strange. If their form is that developed, their energy should follow suit, and thus their intent should be full as well, but...

There's no energy, no Aura in their movements now. Even if their dantian was destroyed, it shouldn't be like this...

As Guardian Spirit shook his head in confusion, I thought of a possible, perhaps the only possible, explanation.

'Sword Emperor, are you just teasing me?'

-Oh, zombie. I'm not such a prankster to jest about such things.

Guardian Spirit indignantly retorted.

-Oh come on, can't you really see it? If only you hadn't spent all that time in secluded training focusing solely on Aura, you would understand. Tsk tsk. Although, that training was precisely what you needed at that time...

Despite referring to the years I spent fighting the Demon King of Autumn Rain as secluded training, the Sword Emperor was serious.

And someone else became serious too.

"That old man and woman... they are quite skilled."

Viper squinted his eye.

"The technique in that bite, and in that sweeping away move, there's the principle of Earth King, and the grace of a leisurely passing dragon..."

-Aha, see, zombie? Unlike you, he has the eye for it. Like a giant snake, a graceful bite, and a dragon-like sweep! Did you see that?

I wordlessly opened Viper's psychological window.

The Head of the Martial Alliance crossed his arms, pondering deeply.

'According to the derivative techniques in my Unrivaled Martial Fighter skill... Indeed, it matches. Their movements. ['Cerberus of Earth,' reincarnated as the royal guard of the 'King'dom of Hell, sandwiched between a troublemaker and class president, also reincarnated, and how that bothers 'me'], and also ['Online' high school warrior decided with his younger classmate, a popular comic artist, to become a true 'Dragon' warrior together]. It's all there. No doubt.'

The Guardian Spirit was at a loss for words.

Unaware of the situation, Apothecary tilted her head in confusion.

"That... just looks like a child's fight, doesn't it, Guild Master?"

"Damn. If everyone could see it, what would be the difference between a master and a novice? Only someone like me can see such depth."

'Amazing. How many branches does the derivative technique tree have? Those two are way above the Sword Saint. Maybe

I'll level up just by watching. I've got something to teach my disciples when I return.'

Hmm.

'Sword Emperor.'

-Yes, zombie...

'What about the technique of Returning to the Origin, like multiple formulas for the same answer? For Viper, it's all about the martial arts perspective.'

-Yeah, thanks...

Faced with the Head of the Martial Alliance and the Heavenly Demon engaging in a childish fight, and seeing the Emperor of Light Novels gaining enlightenment from it, and above all, comforting the Sword Emperor in this bizarre situation, fortunately, didn't last long.

"Achoo! I'm freezing to death here!"

The Medicine King suddenly shouted.

"You kids! How long are you going to keep fighting! Don't you see us standing right in front of you? Tsk, tsk, such narrow vision! Just like me when I was young, exactly the same!"

The Medicine King's scolding even made the Great Axe Sage pause.

The Head of the Martial Alliance scratched his head awkwardly.

"Well, since we have guests, indeed, this isn't proper etiquette."

The Heavenly Demon also coughed lightly.

"For now, let me guide you to the cave where I reside."

Soon the clouds dispersed. There was no longer a need for me to illuminate the surroundings with Shiny.

The zombies, now exposed to sunlight, stiffened again, and we safely escaped the snowy field.

"Huu. Huuuuuuh..."

"Hack, huff... Hufff...!"

However, the Heavenly Demon and the Head of the Martial Alliance's poor stamina became a hindrance.

They were not ordinary martial artists but the leaders of the Demonic Cult and the Righteous Faction, the most powerful figures in this world. Even the Sword Emperor and Viper confirmed their martial prowess.

Yet, somehow... both had abysmally low stamina.

They were panting after just a bit of walking in the snow.

"Hm."

Seeing this, I cautiously offered.

"Would you like me to carry you?"

"Ah, please. Today, for some reason, I can't properly use my Breathing Technique."

Eventually, I ended up carrying the Heavenly Demon, and Viper carried the Head of the Martial Alliance.

Viper seriously said.

"King of Death. That's not right."

"Yes?"

"This is how it should be."

This time, Viper carried the Heavenly Demon, and I ended up carrying the Head of the Martial Alliance.

"It looks more fitting this way."

"Yes..."

We agreed to proceed this way, lacking the energy to argue further.

Then it struck me.

'Wait a minute?'

As I was carrying the Head of the Martial Alliance, I felt a peculiar sensation.

'Something's odd.'

The Guardian Spirit tilted his head.

-What's odd?

'It's warm.'

-Huh?

'...His body is incredibly warm. You know how cold it is right now? We'd freeze if we didn't draw upon our Aura... But this person, his body is warm.'

-.....

The Sword Emperor was silent, lost in thought. I followed suit, pondering.

Could they be using their internal energy, their Aura, to keep warm? But, we hadn't felt any such energy during their battle.

'This doesn't add up.'

Something was off.

However, unable to pinpoint exactly what, we continued across the snowfield.

"This is my residence."

The Heavenly Demon led us to a cave not far from the snowy plains.

There was a huge hole in the ceiling, allowing the sunset light to pour in brilliantly.

"Wow..."

Apothecary gaped, her eyes sparkling behind her frosted glasses.

"Oh, is that a hot spring?"

Indeed, there was an open-air bath in the cave.

A deep pool formed on the cave floor, with steam rising from its surface. The natural hot spring countered the harsh cold of the winter, creating a comfortably warm environment. With the sunset above and the flowing hot spring below, it was truly a breathtaking sight.

"This is a sanctuary I found long ago."

The Heavenly Demon smiled contentedly.

"Never thought I'd entertain guests from beyond our realm. Go ahead and bathe first. I'll join the old man in searching for something to serve as a meal."

"Eh? Do we have anything else besides the nutrient pills?"

"That's why I'm saying let's search. Old man, have you gone deaf with age?"

"Always calling me old, but there isn't much age difference between us!"

"Then why don't you undergo a Bone Transformation too?"

The Heavenly Demon and the Head of the Martial Alliance bickered as they disappeared into the cave.

We remained by the hot spring, looking at them with mixed feelings.

"It's, it's amazing. They were ready to fight to the death just moments ago..."

"They've been fighting for three years. Maybe they've developed a strange bond."

The Medicine King grumbled.

"Still, it's warm and nice here. Eh, it's embarrassing to have been holding men's hands since we got to this world. Now, let's have some distance, Head of the Celestial Martial Guild."

"Why did the Sword Saint befriend such a man?"

"Hey! Watch your words. It was me who befriended Marcus!"

"Whatever... Birds of a feather, I guess."

So, we took a break in the hot spring.

After our bath, the two martial artists served us food.

"I'm sorry we don't have much to offer."

"Here are the nutrient pills. Eat plenty."

The Heavenly Demon and the Head of the Martial Alliance presented us with thick pellets. They were pills.

They looked like larger versions of a heart-soothing pill.

"I used to find prey like wolves to hunt, but these days, it's hard to find any animals. I don't even know how the world got to this state."

"No, thank you for your hospitality."

I accepted the plate politely. It had been three years since the world's destruction. It was unlikely to find any real food.

We cautiously nibbled on the nutrient pills.

"Yuck!"

"Ugh."

Viper and the Medicine King couldn't hide their disgust. I almost grimaced myself. It tasted like chewing on stale coffee beans – hardly palatable.

"Have you been surviving on these alone?"

Apothecary inspected the nutrient pill curiously.

"Mostly, yes."

"For how long?"

"Hmm."

The Heavenly Demon looked at the cave wall, where countless marks were etched. They seemed to have marked each day since they started living in the cave.

"It's been over two years just on these."

"Two years..."

Apothecary was speechless. They had been living off these pellets for over two years.

"It's unbelievable. How could you maintain proper nutrition? Without the right balance of carbohydrates, fats, proteins, vitamins, and minerals, the human body..."

"Hmm? I don't understand what you're saying, but we're still holding up."

"I can't take this anymore!"

The Medicine King stood up abruptly and rummaged through his spatial bag, pulling out a burner, meat, seafood, and other items.

"Move aside! You've been eating this stuff, no wonder you can barely walk. The human body is 70% water, you need proper water to stay healthy, not snow. Tsk."

Lighting the burner, the Countess poured bottled water into a pot.

Master Alchemist was surprised.

"Isn't that Bling H₂O? That's expensive..."

"What's expensive about it! I use it for cooking. Back outside the Tower, I wouldn't even glance at it. Tsk. If it weren't for Marcus..."

Watching the unexpected cooking scene unfold, the Sword Emperor was puzzled.

-Zombie, what's Bling H₂O?

'Maybe like Evian?'

-What's Evian? Like Gongcheong Suyu?

'What's Gongcheong Suyu?'

-Extremely expensive water.

Then it must be something similar.

Chapter 65: The Great War of Good and Evil (4)

While Guardian Spirit and I were chatting, the Medicine King boiled water using what seemed like an Evian-like bottled water. At the same time, he effortlessly laid out a frying pan and a cutting board, beginning to cook.

A savory aroma filled the cave.

“Hm, huh.”

The Medicine King was quick with his hands. In just 15 minutes, he had prepared a variety of dishes: a soup with mussels, a crispy fish steak on asparagus, a stir-fry of some unknown fish and long shellfish garnished with parsley, a cream-topped porridge with diced shellfish and mushrooms, and even a whole roasted leg of lamb. He served them up with a flourish.

“Here you go! It’s not much, but eat up. You should eat well

when you're young. Tsk tsk.”

The Head of the Martial Alliance’s eyes widened at the array of dishes laid out in front of him.

“Well, the Heavenly Demon and I are quite old, but...”

“Did you two also consume some kind of elixir of immortality? Ah, if it were Silicon Valley, you would have patented it by now! Forget it, if you’re old, eat well! That’s how you keep your body going.”

While serving a large bowl of mussel soup, the Medicine King’s demeanor was like a feisty old man.

I too received a bowl of mussel soup. The aroma was promising, but I didn't expect much from a mussel soup. However, the moment I tasted it, I was shocked.

‘This is incredibly delicious!?’

Was it because we had just been eating those nonsensical Wall Barrier Pills?

First off, there was no fishy taste. The soup wasn't just boiled in water; it had a reddish hue, probably from some blended red vegetable, giving it a slightly tangy yet umami flavor. The mussels were perfectly chewy, their juices mixing exquisitely with the broth.

Absolutely delicious.

For someone like me, who lived modestly even after winning a huge lottery and considered a White Mocha Frappuccino Venti Quad Java Chip with Extra Chocolate Drizzle as the height of luxury, this was a revelation.

Apothecary, who had also lived humbly, seemed equally amazed. Her eyes widened in astonishment.

“Incredible. It’s so delicious...”

Apothecary began to describe the flavors.

“This shrimp is plump and firm. It tastes exactly like shrimp, not fishy at all... How can it taste like this? And this dessert, the mille-feuille, it’s like a baron being promoted to a duke, with a refreshing passion fruit juice infused yogurt ice cream underneath...”

The Medicine King's pride was evident.

“Well, I did receive a Michelin three-star rating as an owner chef in my 50s! Ah, if only I had a proper kitchen instead of this burner, I would have really made your bellies burst.”

Was the Medicine King, who talked about Silicon Valley and Wall Street, actually a genuinely remarkable person?

“Why did such a great person come to the Tower?”

Viper, curious too, asked while slurping seafood porridge (which seemed to be officially called Abalone Truffle Risotto).

The Medicine King scoffed.

“Why, can't a person like me come? Marcus came to the Tower too in his later years!”

Indeed.

“So, you knew each other from before?”

“Know him? He was just an annoyingly rich brat from a wealthy family. To someone like me, who made my own way in Silicon Valley, he was just lucky. Then in his later years, he suddenly got unlucky, took up a sword, and came to the Tower...”

His voice trailed off with a snort.

Apothecary, Viper, and I all looked at the Medicine King with renewed respect. Perhaps embarrassed by our gazes, he stirred the pot as if shooing a bird.

“Just eat, will you!”

So, we ate. And it was incredibly delicious.

That moment marked the appointment of the Expedition to the Heavenly Demon Records’ official chef.

“Truly a sublime taste.”

Even the protagonist of the Heavenly Demon Records, the Heavenly Demon, couldn’t stop shoveling the food into her mouth.

“Could you be a royal chef? No, this is different from Central Kingdom’s cuisine.”

The Head of the Martial Alliance also slurped his cream pasta.

“I’ve tasted various cuisines as the Head of the Alliance, but this is a first for me.”

“This richness and the elegance of the dishes... where exactly are you from, and why have you come here?”

“Could it be that you’ve found a cure for the zombie disease?”

Both martial artists’ eyes shone with hope.

Understandably so. We were the first humans they had met in years, and they wondered if we had discovered a cure.

I felt a pang of regret but shook my head.

“No. We’re still searching for a cure too.”

Their faces fell with disappointment.

“After all, every doctor and monk in the martial world tried to cure the disease, but no one succeeded.”

“The experts of the Maoshan School, who specialize in zombies, even gave up. So, it’s unlikely things would be different even in the outside world...”

“Was there really no cure at all?”

I inquired.

“Hm? Wait here.”

Shortly afterward, the Heavenly Demon and the Head of the Martial Alliance brought in a large coffin.

Opening the coffin, we saw a zombie lying inside.

-.....

Just like when we discussed the warmth of the Head of the Martial Alliance's body, the Sword Emperor fell silent, furrowing his brows.

The zombie, once as docile as if basking in the sun, was now bound with chains, and large pins were stuck in its joints.

I looked up.

“What's this?”

“The Sect Leader of the Wudang Sect.”

The Heavenly Demon spoke calmly.

“After being bitten by a zombie, he asked us to use his body for research. But the only method we found was to block all the body's meridians with needles.”

She reached into the coffin.

“Be careful.”

She pulled out a needle from the zombie's neck.

-uhhhh!!

Instantly, the previously docile zombie opened its eyes.

“Eek!?”

Apothecary jumped back in fright. The zombie tried to bite her, but its chains prevented it from moving.

“As you can see.”

Thump!

The Heavenly Demon reinserted the needle, and the zombie closed its eyes again, returning to a calm state. “Blocking the cervical meridian can suppress the zombie. But it’s a temporary solution, not a cure.”

“Once bitten, the body is infected with corrupt energy through the meridians and Ki channels.”

Corrupt energy. Could this be referring to the virus?

“No matter how much they meditated or practiced Ki circulation, it was unstoppable. Even those cultivating demonic energy or possessing the purest Ki would end up as zombies. The body heats up like fire, and soon they become zombies.”

The Heavenly Demon closed the coffin.

“The Shaolin Temple’s Head Monk lasted the longest after being bitten. He maintained his sanity for a year. But that’s an exception. Even the strongest usually don’t last more than two weeks.”

She sighed.

“Young ones from the outside world, can you really find a cure?”

"....."

Apothecary couldn't respond. Even the usually talkative Medicine King was silent.

As none of us could reply, the Heavenly Demon let out a bitter laugh.

"Alright. We thought we were the only ones left in the world, but meeting living people like you is a blessing from the gods. Stay as long as you like."

The Head of the Martial Alliance nodded in agreement.

"We'll prepare a place for you to sleep. There's much to discuss, but let's continue tomorrow."

On our first day in Revelations, we spent the night without any significant achievements.

"I can't eat anymore..."

"Marcus, you left me to forever be second best..."

During the night, the team murmured in their sleep, comfortably wrapped in their dreams.

We laid our beds near the hot spring, slightly damp but warm enough to fend off the cold.

-Why aren't you asleep, Zombie?

I looked up at the sky. The open ceiling of the cave offered a clear view of the dark night.

"I have something to check."

The Sword Emperor didn't press further, probably guessing my intentions.

As I pretended to be asleep, the night deepened.

Someone approached quietly. Two people, in fact. I remained still, feigning sleep. The footsteps lingered near us, then whispered softly.

"...Are they asleep?"

"...Seems so."

"...Then let's do it quickly."

The voices of the Heavenly Demon and the Head of the Martial Alliance.

Their footsteps receded toward the hot spring. I seized the moment.

Whoosh!

I sprang up and dashed towards the hot spring. Through the thick steam, I saw the Heavenly Demon and the Head of the Martial Alliance in simple robes, enjoying the bath. They were startled by my sudden appearance.

"Huh!?"

The Head of the Martial Alliance hurriedly submerged

deeper into the water, his face showing surprise.

Just as I thought.

Observing their bodies, I confirmed my suspicions.

“What is this? You were asleep!”

The Heavenly Demon narrowed her eyes, quickly grasping the situation. She sighed softly and stared at me calmly.

“...You're quick-witted. When did you realize?”

“From the start, I thought something was off.”

I spoke up.

“Despite the freezing weather, you both wore light clothing. One in a simple robe, the other almost bare.”

In the biting cold, their attire seemed like they were nearly naked.

"You must be circulating Ki to keep warm. That means you're proficient in using Ki, but then why the trivial scuffles or getting tired from a short walk? It's strange."

I continued.

"There's only one explanation. Both of you are [focusing all your Ki elsewhere]."

"When you mentioned being bitten by zombies, it clicked."

I faced them squarely.

"Both of you have been infected, haven't you?"

Silence fell over the hot spring.

Splash.

The water rippled, and soon, the Heavenly Demon stood up.

"D-Demon. You..."

"Enough, old man. We've been found out."

She turned away from me.

The Heavenly Demon's pale back.

"We were bitten by zombies three years ago."

There, a purple, rotten wound was visible.

The Head of the Martial Alliance showed his neck as well.

"But you're wrong about one thing."

A similar rotting wound marked his neck, but it stopped at the spine.

“We’re not suppressing the corrupt energy.”

Rather, their faces were as normal as ever.

“We’ve blocked our cervical meridian with Ki to cut off the corrupt energy.”

The Sword Emperor clicked his tongue.

-Fucking insane. It's Ki Telekinesis.

‘Ki Telekinesis?’

-You know about the Flying Ki Sword Technique, right?

‘Yes, where you wrap a sword in Ki to make it fly... Are you saying?’

Exactly that.

-They've blocked their cervical meridian, losing sensation below the neck, becoming paralyzed. In other words, they are now moving every part of their body [with Ki].

Guardian Spirit added.

-Even the heartbeat.

Every beat of the heart.

-Even breathing.

Inhaling and exhaling air.

-Moving an arm, controlling joints, extending a leg, and managing the waist, knees, ankles, and feet.

In short, everything necessary for living and moving.

-They are controlling everything with Ki.

To prevent the zombie virus from spreading to the brain.

The martial artists had placed their own brains in a state of seclusion.

I remained silent.

-So, they've been essentially using the Flying Ki Sword Technique 24/7. No wonder a few steps tire them out. Crazy...

As if echoing Guardian Spirit, the Heavenly Demon spoke.

"That's how we've been fighting the Great War of Good and Evil."

The Head of the Martial Alliance added.

"And it's been three years since."

Chapter 66: The Heavenly Demon (1)

Lord Heavenly Demon,

This cannot continue.

...Lord Heavenly Demon, half of the Blood Ghost Troops have been annihilated! The elders declared martial law and dispersed across the world, but their whereabouts are now unknown. This is not the time to fight with the fools of the Orthodox Faction. It's a crisis for our sect, perhaps even for the entire world. The beggars from the Beggars' Sect are spreading rumors...

...Lord Heavenly Demon, as you ordered, we've built a medical facility without discrimination. The leaders of Tang Sect have arrived, along with the masters of Maoshan School. We've captured several zombies for experimentation, so we should see some results soon...

...Lord Heavenly Demon, even the Moon Shadow Demon and the Blood Demon have fallen. We eliminate a hundred zombies today, but a thousand more appear tomorrow. We

can't cope with this plague! At the medical facility, they say blocking the Anmen and Chongmai meridians with large needles can subdue the zombies, but beyond that...

...Lord Heavenly Demon, please retreat to Nakdo Island. If you go into seclusion on the island, even if there are millions of zombies, they won't be able to cross the sea. Surely, the martial world is not limited to this place alone. Wherever our cult's banner is raised, that place becomes the martial realm...

...Lord Heavenly Demon, what does the great war promise matter now? It was a vow made before the world fell into chaos. With the ways of heaven changing, human morality cannot remain unchanged. Forget the oath made with the Head of the Martial Alliance and please make a triumphant return...

Lord Heavenly Demon.

Lord Heavenly Demon!

"How did you endure it?"

After a long silence, the first question I asked was this.

How did they survive all this time?

In a world where humanity has fallen and turned into corpses, even they have become half-dead. How did they endure three years, risking their hearts stopping if their internal energy flow was blocked even for a moment?

“.....”

The Heavenly Demon and the Head of the Martial Alliance hesitated to answer. They exchanged a glance that I couldn't understand, then nodded together.

"Follow us."

They left the cave.

I followed them.

There was silence as we left the cave, being careful not to wake the others. Thus, we walked in silence for a long time.

The silence was broken only as we emerged outside.

"People will eventually die."

Dawn was breaking.

"A fascinating tale is told in the martial world. Once there was a master who reached the zenith of Perfect Poison Immunity and Indestructible Iron Skin. He was impervious to any poison and immune to any blade."

The Heavenly Demon let out a long breath.

"Truly invincible. Impervious to internal harm, immune to external injury. How could one kill someone who can neither be poisoned nor harmed by the sharpest sword?"

The dawn sky was turning blue.

"In ancient stories, one thing is never tolerated: invincibility."

In the dim light, the world was just a pale shadow.

"Indestructible individuals cannot exist."

As they walked through the shadowed world, only their footsteps distinguished heaven from earth.

"Child from another world,"

The Heavenly Demon glanced back at me.

We were walking back to yesterday's snowfield, surrounded by martial arts zombies.

"Can you guess how that master died?"

"How did he die?"

"He was killed by a Lustful Demon."

The Lord Heavenly Demon smirked.

"Erotic pleasure is neither poison nor a blade."

"But excessive pleasure is a kind of poison, isn't it?"

"Correct. Hence, the Lustful Demon didn't start with a storm of pleasure. It was cunning, gradual, starting with the slightest pleasure and eventually leading the master to indulge in the most fatal pleasures. The master was tamed and re-tamed."

Dawn broke.

The snowfield became slightly brighter.

"During their intercourse, what the master perceived as palm strikes were not pain. The Lustful Demon's whips became pleasure. Even a small glance became a source of happiness for the master."

The Heavenly Demon raised her hand.

"In the end,"

She caressed her own neck.

"Just lightly, the Lustful Demon simply strangled the master."

"....."

"The master died engulfed in ecstasy. He was immune to poison and blades but not unhappiness."

In the middle of the snowfield.

There lay the bodies. Dead yet undead, frozen still in the dawn light. They were motionless, like a forest made of shadows.

"The lesson is simple."

"Don't get entangled with Lustful Demons!"

The Head of the Martial Alliance grumbled.

"It wasn't just a story; it really happened. The Tang Sect nurtured a master, and he was assassinated by a Lustful Demon sent secretly."

"Haha."

Zombies lay scattered in the snowfield, seemingly remnants from their pursuit of our group the previous day. The Lord Heavenly Demon approached these zombies.

"Youngsters entering the martial world often have this misconception. They think the goal of a martial artist is to reach invincibility, and the purpose of learning martial arts is to achieve immortality and eternal life."

With a grunt, the Heavenly Demon lifted a zombie.

"Move."

The Heavenly Demon and the Head of the Martial Alliance began moving the zombies.

"Those who reach Perfect Poison Immunity will die from something other than poison. Those who attain Indestructible Iron Skin will perish from something other than a blade. Understand this. Choosing a martial art isn't just about selecting a technique to learn."

The Heavenly Demon struggled to move the zombie.

"It's about deciding what kind of warrior you want to be and, at the same time, deciding how you will die."

Her movements were slow and labored.

Like a postman delivering heavy parcels, the Heavenly Demon took breaks, breathed deeply, and resumed moving the zombies.

"People will eventually die."

She continued this process.

"We understand this. How can we resent the fact that we die?"

The zombies had roamed around the night before. The Heavenly Demon and the Head of the Martial Alliance gathered them one by one.

"But we did not wish for a death like this."

It took a long time.

Their strength was minimal, and there were too many corpses.

"Being assassinated is fine. Being poisoned, too. Falling into a trap or being ambushed, or even being struck down by the monks of Shaolin is acceptable. Betrayal or death in a duel, all are welcome."

Midday.

By the time they finished placing the zombies back in their positions, the sun was at its zenith. Footprints filled the snowfield.

"However, such a death is intolerable."

The Heavenly Demon gasped for breath and looked at me.

"You asked how we endure?"

“.....”

"We just wish to die as we desire."

The old man of the Orthodox Faction lined up hundreds of corpses.

The woman of the Demonic Cult did the same.

The zombies appeared as two armies, poised to clash.

I remembered then.

"The causes of death are the same, but the dates are different."

When we first encountered the zombies upon entering this apocalyptic world.

‘Our observation that someone had intentionally moved the bodies.’

‘A kind of grave?’

‘A grave, yes. From a distance, it looks like a terracotta army.’

Zombies move on their own at night.

Yet thousands of them were gathered in one place in the snowfield.

"Indeed."

Unless someone intentionally moved them to that spot.

"Not many strayed far today."

Five hundred from the Demonic Cult.

"The moonlight was clear last night. It's not as strong as sunlight, but the moonlight affects zombies too..."

Five hundred from the Orthodox Faction.

The Lord Heavenly Demon and the Head of the Martial Alliance moved their respective followers. It was a whole day's work, but they did it silently.

As if it were a natural daily routine.

"We have been waging this Great War of Good and Evil for three years now."

The snow fell.

"The Orthodox martial realm will not fall to mere zombies."

People died.

"The destiny of our cult will not end being devoured by corpses."

The Ten Sect Alliance and the Five Noble Clans disappeared.

"Our Orthodox Faction will only fall by the treacherous hands of the Demonic Cult."

Even as all martial arts libraries gather dust unread.

"If our cult is to vanish, it will only be at the hands of the Orthodox Faction."

This world has not yet perished.

For it to end, two more people must die.

Even if a billion people exist, and all but one die of the plague, the cause of death for that world would not be illness, but simply suicide.

At least, that's how the Head of the Martial Alliance and the

Heavenly Demon of the Demonic Cult saw it.

"The Head of the Martial Alliance. Supreme Leader of the Namgung Cla,. Namgung Woon."

The old man assumed a formal martial salute.

"I'm the Great Axe Sage."

"The leader of the Heavenly Demonic Cult. So BaekHyang."

The woman also saluted.

"And I'm the Heavenly Demon."

The sun passed midday.

Years had gone by with only two people left in this world.

Their only task during those years was to decide the cause of

death for this world.

"I challenge you to the 990th duel."

Will the demise of the Demonic Cult be at the hands of the Head of the Martial Alliance?

"Is it a life-or-death duel or simply a duel to the death?"

Or will the Orthodox Faction perish by the hands of the Heavenly Demon?

"A duel to the death."

"Accepted."

The two martial artists dropped their salutes.

Five hundred from the Orthodox Faction and five hundred from the Demonic Cult faced each other in the middle of the snowfield, with the Head of the Martial Alliance and the Heavenly Demon charging at each other.

I still couldn't comprehend the martial arts they displayed. To me, they were barely stepping forward. Laboriously. Barely extending their arms.

Their movements were so slow that even a child couldn't have failed to catch them.

Their actions were so weak they couldn't have crushed a single tangerine.

“.....”

A genre in decline.

A world in decline.

This apocalypse had been slowly dying over 990 days.

"This can't be..."

I spoke up.

Watching the duel from afar, I muttered unwittingly.

"This isn't right."

My heart was throbbing.

"It's unfair."

“.....”

"It's an insult to them."

In a world ravaged by an incurable plague, the two martial artists were strong enough to cling to life. But they were too weak to take each other's lives.

"The Heavenly Demon and the Head of the Martial Alliance are mere shadows of their former selves, incapable of anything beyond childish brawling. They roll in the snow, flail aimlessly, grab each other's beards and hair."

"To you, the Sword Emperor, this may appear as a grand

battle. Yes, I'm just a novice in swordsmanship. But no matter how profound the principles hidden in this scuffle, no matter how magnificent the logic behind it..."

The day turned to evening.

The Head of the Martial Alliance and the Lord Heavenly Demon did not cease their struggle for a moment.

"It's a mockery."

The sun set.

Yet again, no victor emerged today.

"It's an insult to both of them."

In this declining world.

In a world where people were decimated by an unstoppable plague, the two martial artists were strong enough to barely cling to life. But too weak to take each other's lives.

"We can't let it end like this."

A world where one cannot choose how to be born is cruel.
What then is a world where one cannot choose how to die?

An incomplete ending.

A life abruptly cut short.

-What are you planning to do?

The Guardian Spirit asked quietly.

-Are you going to kill the Heavenly Demon and the Head of the Martial Alliance yourself? Yes, that could be a merciful gift. I would do that. But remember, whether it's me or you, we're just 'outsiders.'

"I know."

The two martial artists don't wish for suicide.

If they must die, their only hope is to be killed by the other's hand.

The Demonic Cult should not perish from a mere plague but fall to the Orthodox Faction.

The Orthodox Faction should not succumb to a disease but be destroyed with the rise of the Demonic Cult.

Such an end.

A proper conclusion.

An acceptable terminus of life.

If I intervened and killed them, it wouldn't be an 'end' or a 'conclusion'. It wouldn't even be a merciful gift.

That would be nothing more than a 'doodle' scribbled at the back of a fairytale book by a child.

It can't end that way.

"I will,"

I told the Guardian Spirit.

"I'll conclude this world in my own way."

-And what is that way?

I didn't answer Guardian Spirit's question.

Dusk fell.

"Already evening, huh? Old Demon."

"Winter days are short... huh. Tomorrow we'll definitely settle this."

"We'll see who's talking..."

Evening deepened.

The 990th day of the Great War of Good and Evil naturally came to a ceasefire.

The Heavenly Demon and the Head of the Martial Alliance stopped fighting, looking more exhausted than the day before, and returned to the cave.

"Where have you been?"

The group greeted us.

Viper stood guard at the cave entrance, while the Apothecary and the Medicine King busied themselves researching the zombie, the Sect Leader of the Wudang Sect we had encountered yesterday.

"We were observing the patient. We couldn't yesterday due to the circumstances..."

"Any progress?"

The Medicine King and Apothecary looked at each other. The Medicine King sighed first.

"Not yet."

"It's, uh, a new virus for us..."

Understandable.

The Head of the Martial Alliance and the Heavenly Demon headed further into the cave to rest. I watched them walk away, then turned to the Apothecary.

"Miss Apothecary."

"Yes?"

"Be honest with me. How long do you think it will take to develop a cure?"

"Ah. Um, uh."

The Apothecary hesitated.

"To be completely honest... at least 120 days."

"Could be twice or thrice that. Schedules for these things should be set generously. Even then, it usually falls short."

The Medicine King added tersely. The Apothecary looked dejected.

"In the worst-case scenario..."

"Shortest, 100 days. Longest, 300 days, correct?"

"Uh. That's..."

The Apothecary lowered his head.

"We might not be able to develop it at all. The facilities and environment are too poor. I can't make any promises right now. I'm sorry, King of Death. After you trusted me and brought me to this stage... It's impossible to develop a cure within the time limit."

Time limit.

The Head Librarian had said when sending us to this apocalypse.

"If your eyes open, you'll be in a world 10 days before the tragic cancellation of 'The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon.'"

"Looking forward to a splendid ending."

Meaning, no matter what happens.

In 10 days, the world will truly end.

The Heavenly Demon and the Head of the Martial Alliance will die.

That ten-day period was what the Apothecary referred to as the time limit.

"I'm really sorry..."

"No."

I shook my head.

"That's enough."

"Ye-yes?"

"Don't worry, Miss."

I fondled the hilt of the dagger at my waist.

"I'll handle the time issue. Don't give up and continue researching."

“.....”

"Do you remember what I said when we first landed in this world?"

This isn't just a book.

It's a world.

We came here to save this world.

“.....”

The Apothecary cautiously nodded.

"We shared a certain look."

"...I, I remember. Of course, I do, King of Death..."

I nodded back.

"My words remain the same as yesterday. Forget all worries about the time limit or failing to complete this stage. I'll do my best in my position, and you do your best in yours."

"Forget all distractions..."

"Yes. I promise. I'll handle everything else."

I said.

To the one who would eventually be known as the Master Alchemist.

"Trust me and do your job."

Chapter 67: The Heavenly Demon (2)

The Apothecary closed her eyes tightly.

After a moment, her lips parted.

"If it weren't for the King of Death, I'd still be in the slums, stripped of my equipment. I can't even imagine what would have happened to me."

Slowly, the Apothecary opened her eyes.

Through her glasses, her gaze was much clearer than before.

"Yes. I want to repay the kindness the King of Death has shown me. I'll focus solely on developing the cure, without any distractions.But when I'm engrossed in my work, I really don't pay attention to anything else. I might come across as very rude. But still....."

"It doesn't matter,"

I nodded.

"Please exert your skills to the fullest."

Now wasn't the time to worry about trivial manners.

What was needed was the future Master Apothecary.

".....Understood."

The Apothecary adjusted her glasses.

She turned to the Medicine King.

"Old man."

"Huh? What?"

"Please support me with all your strength from now on."

The Medicine King furrowed his brows, his wrinkles as deep as his stubbornness.

"Support? Support, eh? What a cheeky request. Kid, there's a hierarchy even in cold water! Where does a greenhorn like you get off telling this Medicine King to merely 'support' you...."

"Skill card open."

"...Huh?"

Skill cards emerged from the Apothecary's hands.

One golden card and three silver cards.

Skill cards that even an ordinary Hunter would struggle to obtain, she had four, all above grade B.

The Medicine King's eyes widened.

"What, what is this? Are you showing off your skills to me? These young ones think skills are everything. True power is..."

"You can look if you want."

"What?"

"You can see what my skills are."

The Medicine King was flustered, unable to respond immediately.

Understandably. A Hunter's skills are their secret weapon, never to be revealed to others. Showing one's skills is akin to confessing one's strengths and weaknesses.

In short, a foolish act.

"Or should I just show you myself?"

The Apothecary was bold.

"This skill is 'Moving Hospital'."

She flipped the card herself to show the Medicine King.

"I can perform everything from blood tests to brain scans in real time. I can also use the medicines I've stored in advance. However, there's a 2% chance of misdiagnosis. This one is 'Life Diagnosis'. I can understand a patient's condition down to their genetic makeup. I combine these two skills to minimize the risk of misdiagnosis...."

"Wait, wait! Hold on!"

The Medicine King finally snapped to his senses.

"Kid! Why are you showing me your skills? What if I blab about them to the Apothecarys Guild or my colleagues!"

"It's okay. I've decided not to worry about such things."

The Apothecary spoke.

"You can share them if you want. But please support me thoroughly until we develop the cure."

"But why are you..."

"I need you if we want to advance the development even by a day."

"....."

"Do you find me unbearable?"

The Apothecary looked at the Medicine King with an indifferent gaze. Once always flustered, she now wore a completely expressionless face.

"Do you hate that a young thing like me is out of line and annoying? Does it irk you that I have talent? That I have more days ahead than you, and that I'll be revered longer?"

"....."

The Apothecary's voice was unique, unlike any animal. It reminded one of insects.

A humming of fire ants.

"If you help me with all your might this time,"

She adjusted her glasses.

"I'll give you all the medicine recipes I've developed. I won't claim they're mine. Take them. Use them. Tell people you invented them---."

Suddenly, the Apothecary's glasses slid off and fell to the ground.

The Medicine King had slapped her.

“.....”

The Apothecary picked up her glasses and silently wiped them with her sleeve. A red mark from the slap was on her left

cheek. She put her glasses back on and quietly looked at the Medicine King.

The Medicine King trembled with rage.

"Despicable thing..."

"I'll analyze the zombie virus."

"You'll realize there's a higher level above you."

"Just do what I tell you."

"You'll rot from your wounded pride."

"I'll write down what I need and give it to you."

"Someday, you too,"

"You find it for me and bring it to me."

The Medicine King and Apothecary spoke simultaneously.

"Will meet someone better than you."

"And give it to me."

Then, both Hunters fell silent.

The Apothecary sat on the left and the Medicine King on the right of the zombie's corpse. The Apothecary muttered something and the Medicine King noted it down. Surrounded by a monochrome atmosphere, the two, more like a still life than a portrait, engaged only in business-like conversations.

"King of Death, I'm sorry but please leave."

The Apothecary muttered as she positioned a scalpel near the zombie's head.

"Your breathing is distracting. Very. Very distracting."

"Bring back six more zombies on your way out."

The Medicine King examined the dark mouth of the zombie. He pinched the purple and black tongue with tweezers.

"We need more samples. A child. A young adult. An elderly person. Different genders for each. And if I say I need a certain herb, fetch it for me."

I nodded.

"Leave it to me."

From that day on.

We entered a state of emergency.

Even meal times felt wasteful. Bathing was a luxury. Despite the hot spring nearby, the Apothecary and Medicine King didn't bathe. Day and night, the two Hunters pored over the zombie's body.

"The atmosphere has certainly changed."

The Heavenly Demon looked perplexedly at our group.

"Seeking enlightenment, young ones?"

"Are you not cooking conch soup or doryphor risotto anymore?"

The Head of the Martial Alliance lightly teased the Medicine King.

"In my time at the palace, even the royal chefs couldn't match your skills. If only the world were normal, I would have appointed you as the head chef of the Namgung clan."

"Get lost if you're busy."

The Medicine King retorted without looking up, throwing a bottle of Bling H2O.

"If you're hungry, fill up on water."

The Head of the Martial Alliance sighed, catching the bottle

skillfully.

"Old Demon, let's not bother busy people. Let's go."

"Alright, alright. My body isn't listening to me these days."

The Head of the Martial Alliance grumbled tiredly.

"How far have the zombies scattered today..."

"Don't bother, just come."

"Fine."

The Head of the Martial Alliance grumbled and left the cave with the Heavenly Demon.

They were probably going to gather the zombies as they did yesterday, for the 991st day of the Great War of Good and Evil.

Another day passed.

The world moved closer to its end.

And another day.

One day.

One more day.

We were counting...

The days we spent waiting for doom.

The world was still like a music box that hadn't stopped yet.

"Hmm."

A week.

It had been exactly one week since we fell into the Apocalypse.

That day, the Heavenly Demon looked up at the cave ceiling.

"...It seems we can't go outside today."

A blizzard was raging outside. The wind whipped the snow around so fiercely that the sky and the ground became indistinguishable.

The world was nothing but a dark snowfield.

It was then that I realized that even white can be dark.

"Well. Such days happen."

The Heavenly Demon shrugged nonchalantly.

"It's rather fortunate that the weather has been clear these past few days. At its worst, the snowstorm lasted over 30 days. We couldn't move a step without sunlight."

"Then the zombies will keep moving, won't they?"

I asked.

"Is that okay? If they go too far, you can't collect them back."

"If that happens, we can't help it. We lose them."

The Heavenly Demon sighed.

"Originally, three years ago, my cult's forces numbered a thousand. The younglings that the old man brought from the Orthodox Faction were about the same. But over time, zombies that went too far to be found started to appear."

Naturally...

They had a lot of missing corpses. No, not missing, but lost. During each snowstorm, the Heavenly Demon and the Head of the Martial Alliance must have lost several corpses.

"That must be the scariest part for you."

"Hm?"

"Waking up and going out to the snowfield, only to find that yesterday's zombies have disappeared."

"....."

The Heavenly Demon looked at me quietly.

"Do you think I, the Heavenly Demon, would feel fear?"

Her pupils were dark as ink.

Her hair. Even the uniform she wore.

Her entirely black appearance seemed like a desperate resistance against this world that had turned into a white snowfield.

"Yes. I think you would."

"The world has indeed turned upside down. Normally, anyone who dared to talk like that would have lost their head by now. Young man from the outside world, you should be thankful the world has ended."

"The Heavenly Demon and the Head of the Martial Alliance are great masters. I'm embarrassingly far behind in martial arts compared to you."

I quietly shifted my gaze.

The Head of the Martial Alliance was sleeping near the hot spring.

"But even the greatest masters don't have infinite Ki."

"What are you trying to say?"

"When will your Ki run out?"

Hesitation.

"You're blocking the cervical meridian with Ki. Heartbeats, breathing, moving limbs, you're doing it all with Ki."

It was like using the Flying Ki Sword Technique 24/7.

I shook my head.

"No matter how much Ki you have, it's impossible to continue such an extreme act forever."

"Let me ask again. When will your Ki run out, Heavenly Demon?"

She once said,

"People will eventually die."

There was a resonance in those words. The resonance of someone who had realized something.

There is only one way for humans to realize something.

To experience it firsthand.

"...Really."

The Heavenly Demon groaned.

"Really, such a keen young man."

"How many days do you have left?"

"...Let me correct myself. You're annoyingly observant."

This world.

How does [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon]
reach its demise?

Upon reflection, it was surprisingly simple.

"When your Ki runs out, you both won't be able to move."

"Yes."

The Heavenly Demon looked up at the sky.

Through the opened ceiling of the cave, a snowstorm raged.

"First, the toes and fingertips will become numb. Then the calves and wrists. Knees. Shoulders. Waist. Gradually, we won't circulate Ki to those parts, and the parts without Ki will eventually rot."

Literally necrosis.

Like a building stopping operation gradually as fuel runs out.

At some point, they would become immobile.

"Heart. Lungs."

The Heavenly Demon pointed to her chest.

"Cerebrum."

And tapped her head.

"Except for these three parts, all other parts will rot. No. Other parts are left to rot."

"..You already knew."

"Yes. A monk from Shaolin Temple stayed with me for a year."

The Heavenly Demon smirked.

"To think he was a monk, he lay down and passed away. In his last moments, hmm, he was hardly different from a zombie. His body was blackened everywhere... He couldn't even chant Amitabha as his last words."

“.....”

"Do I fear death? Yes. I do."

Her voice was like a falling petal.

"I fear running out of Ki. I fear depleting my vital energy. I fear the snowstorm, the absence of sunlight, and the thought of my followers, once my followers, disappearing when day breaks. Every breath makes me worry about how many more I have left. Each heartbeat, how many more times will I feel it, I fear."

The Heavenly Demon sighed.

"I fear failing to kill that old man. I fear that he won't be able to kill me. I fear the day we both lie in bed, unable to move, just waiting for our Ki to dry up."

A meaningless death.

That even their last struggles become meaningless. Dying. Dying and disappearing into a world where only snow keeps falling, leaving nothing but a monochrome landscape.

"Ah."

This was the ending of [The Veritable Records of the

Heavenly Demon].

The ending of the world.

"The world is such a fearful place."

Another day passed.

The eighth day since we fell into the Apocalypse.

Only two days left until the world's end.

"Demon."

Lying in bed, the Head of the Martial Alliance muttered.

"I can't move anymore."

The Head of the Martial Alliance was smiling.

And crying.

"I'm sorry."

A soft whisper.

That was the sound of a world heading towards its end.

Chapter 68: The Heavenly Demon (3)

"I'm sorry."

The Apothecary said.

"With the current state, he can't be treated."

She was examining the Head of the Martial Alliance. Throughout the examination, her expression was faint. She seemed like a doctor who was examining a patient just to say 'there's no hope,' even though she already knew it.

“.....”

The Heavenly Demon silently looked down at the Head of the Martial Alliance. Perhaps she hadn't even expected treatment. With an expressionless face, she spoke.

"Stand up."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not asking for your apology. Stand up. Head of the Martial Alliance, Namgung Woon."

In the dark cave.

The Heavenly Demon's breathing quieted down.

It was as if a poisonous fragrance was emanating from her mouth.

"Didn't we make a pact? You boasted that you would challenge the Demonic Heavens and raise the banner of the Orthodox martial realm. You planned to gather the Ten Sect Alliance and the Five Noble clans for a decisive battle. Such a person like you cannot die in bed. That's not possible."

"I'm sorry."

"Stand up."

The scent of poison grew stronger.

"Stand up and take up arms. You don't even need your favorite axe. Just grab a wooden sword, a cane, a bamboo stick, anything. Hold it. Hold it and face me in battle."

"I'm sorry."

"I said stand up."

"Demon."

The Head of the Martial Alliance took a breath.

He had aged more in just one night.

"I'm sorry that I am weaker than you."

“.....”

"I've tried to hold on for one more day, but it's difficult now. You must have felt it too. I was already using the innate true energy. My Ki has run out. My vital energy has worn out too. Maybe you could last another year, but this is it for me."

There was silence.

"I was weaker than you."

The old man muttered as he lay.

"Kill me."

“.....”

The Heavenly Demon's face contorted.

"I don't want to end up like the Monk from Shaolin. Kill me before my body rots and crumbles. Once turned into a zombie, even if I see, I don't really see; even if I live, it's not really

living. So..."

"So, you want me to kill you while you lie in bed?"

The scent of poison reached its peak.

"You dare say that now?"

The Heavenly Demon was small, but from her small body, black flames rose. Ki took form and blazed.

Killing intent.

The Ki burned, emanating a scent of soot. It was the scent of the life she had lived, the life she had endured. The Heavenly Demon's fragrance was as pungent as crushed weeds.

"Is this the end you promised for the great war? Is this it?"

“.....”

"You should have chosen mutual destruction long ago, why hold on for glory? You should have ordered all the disciples of your sect and the orthodox faction to commit suicide together, why stubbornly hold on for a glimmer of light?"

The Head of the Martial Alliance couldn't respond. Tears that had dried on his wrinkled face now formed new trails.

"I am..."

"Namgung Woon. You were born with the Heavenly Martial Body, coveted and envied by many since you were a young master. You reached the peak realm at a young age and became the leader of the Namgung clan. When the Heavenly Demonic Cult rose, you were nominated as the Head of the Martial Alliance. All the essence of the Orthodox Faction resided in you, all their grudges lingered with you. Yet, you willingly offer your neck to my demonic claws?"

“.....”

"Fine. I'll kill you."

The Heavenly Demon got up.

"But you won't die peacefully."

She walked somewhere. After she disappeared, the smell of burning lingered. It was suffocating. The Apothecary and the Medicine King, especially, looked in agony, not adept in aura.

Shortly after, the Heavenly Demon returned.

In her hand, she held an axe.

"Namgung's old man. This is your beloved Steel Cauldron Axe. You haven't forgotten it, have you?"

"So BaekHyang..."

"Speak."

The Heavenly Demon raised the axe.

"Martial arts have forgotten chivalry, and chivalry has lost martial arts."

“.....”

"Say it. Say it and I'll kill you as you wish."

Martial arts have forgotten chivalry.

Chivalry has lost martial arts.

It signified the end of the Orthodox martial realm.

The leader of the Demonic Cult declared it. The Head of the Martial Alliance himself had to acknowledge the demise of the orthodox realm. Only then would she take his life. And with his beloved weapon, no less.

"Speak."

"Why can't you say it!"

The old man's lips quivered. His mouth opened, his teeth showed, but nothing was visible beyond them. He couldn't continue. It was as if he had lost his tongue. His mouth opened

several times, and each time his tongue lost its way.

"I can't."

The old man exhaled.

"I can't do it... I can't say it..."

Tears again formed on the dried tracks on his face. Layer upon layer of tears accumulated on his old skin.

"I can't say it..."

“.....”

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, BaekHyang..."

The Heavenly Demon swung the axe.

The blade did not cut the Head of the Martial Alliance's neck.

It just struck the hard ground.

Right next to the old man's face. There, the axe struck. The hard rock of the cave floor easily split like tofu. How much Ki the Heavenly Demon must have used to split the rock, I could hardly guess.

"Did you say living as a zombie is not living?"

The Heavenly Demon muttered.

"It doesn't matter. Right now, you are neither living nor dead. What's the difference between a life that is not life and a death that is not death? I can't see the difference. Meaningless. It's all meaningless..."

She turned her back.

"The world has become emptiness."

The next day.

Namgung Woon, the Head of the Martial Alliance, died at dawn.

It was a disease-related death.

Ten days since we fell into the Apocalypse.

The day the world was to end had arrived.

"...I've obtained valuable samples."

The Apothecary said.

"Only analyzing the virus from those infected for 2 or 3 years had its limits. This sample allowed us to observe the infection in real-time. This is a significant breakthrough."

In front of her lay the Head of the Martial Alliance.

A lifeless body.

The old man's body was tightly bound with chains.

"Death doesn't immediately turn them into zombies... There seems to be a slight delay before awakening. I guess it takes time for the infectious agent to spread throughout the brain."

"The research findings are compiled by me."

The Medicine King handed over a file.

He clicked his tongue.

"She may be good at making medicine, but she's terrible at explaining it to others. Really terrible. Ah, these self-absorbed types..."

"We did our best to research."

Unfazed by his criticism, the Apothecary continued.

"But it was impossible to develop a cure after all."

"Was there not enough time?"

"Yes. At least 90 days. Preferably around 120 days..."

Clang!

-Goooo.

The chains clanged, producing an unpleasant noise. We all turned our heads simultaneously. The body of the Head of the Martial Alliance was shaking violently.

-Grooo... Eugh, Uooo...!

For a while, we silently observed what used to be the Head of the Martial Alliance.

It kept flailing with its mouth wide open.

“.....”

It was then that the Heavenly Demon approached.

Thud.

The woman approached with quiet steps. The Heavenly Demon, clad in black with black hair, black martial attire, and black eyes, held a dark sword in her hand. Her sword was even darker than her shadow.

"---How pitiful."

The Heavenly Demon looked down at the body of the Head of the Martial Alliance.

"Decades of time, all in vain."

Instinctively, we stepped back from her.

The intensity of her poisonous energy was incomparable to yesterday.

Her Ki was surging, enveloping her entire body.

"In the end, when a layer is peeled off, humans are like this. What's the difference between us and beasts? Eating, consuming until the body can no longer move, and then disappearing. Martial arts have forgotten chivalry, and chivalry has lost martial arts."

The Heavenly Demon extended her left hand.

"Eat."

The zombie opened its mouth and bit her hand. Crunch! Blood splattered. Flesh tore, and bones shattered. The Heavenly Demon looked down at the Head of the Martial Alliance, now ferociously gnawing at her own hand, with an indifferent gaze.

"Hey, hey."

The Viper, shocked, took a step forward.

"Look. What are you doing? If you keep this up, you'll turn into a zombie too...!"

"Don't come closer."

I grabbed the Viper's shoulder to stop him.

"Huh?"

"It's already over."

"Over? What do you mean..."

A squelching sound of flesh echoed. Thump! The gruesomely violent noise made everyone flinch.

Slowly turning to look, there stood the Heavenly Demon with her hand torn to shreds.

And the Head of the Martial Alliance, now headless.

The Heavenly Demon had burst his head with her Ki from inside his mouth.

"Huh."

As we all lost our ability to speak,

"Heheh... Hahaha... Ahahaha!"

The Heavenly Demon began to laugh.

It was a manic laugh.

The blizzard continued to howl outside the cave ceiling. However, the Heavenly Demon's laughter swallowed the sound of the snow, reducing it to a mere background noise. The laughter filled the cave, echoed in the sky, and devoured the world.

-Zombie. Be careful.

The Guardian Spirit whispered softly.

-It's spiritual deviation.

At that moment.

The Heavenly Demon turned her head and looked directly at us. Gently, she wore a bewitching smile. A strange voice flowed from the gap in her lips.

"Oh?"

A chill ran down my spine.

"Have you come to assassinate me, righteous ones?"

Her eyes were no longer looking at us.

"Good. Come at me. Let's cross swords."

"Everyone, run!"

As I shouted, the Heavenly Demon swung her sword. Swish! A fountain of blood erupted. It was the Medicine King's blood. His head was precisely sliced off without even a chance to scream.

He died instantly.

Realizing his comrade was killed right before him, the Viper belatedly drew his sword.

"Damn it....!?"

He couldn't read her sword movements with his eyes. No, he couldn't even see her movements. It was just that [the Heavenly Demon swung her sword] and at the exact same moment [the Medicine King's head was sliced off]. There wasn't even a split second in between.

-She's gone mad.

The Guardian Spirit groaned.

-She's surpassed the stage of an Enlightened Demon. She must have exhausted all her Ki and even her vital energy... Right now, she is, even if temporarily, in the realm of life and death. Even if I were in my prime and came back to life, I'd lose 4 out of 10 times against her.

That was the Heavenly Demon.

Before she weakened due to the zombie infection.

The once supreme being of this world.

"Ridiculous."

The Heavenly Demon hummed.

"Monk of Shaolin, do you think such tricks can stop me? Taoist of the Wudang, do you really think you can bear the karma of my sect?"

The Heavenly Demon took one step, then another, towards us.

"The sorrow has overflowed in the world, submerging Mount Song. The grudges have flared up in the world, burning Mount Wudang. The Demonic Cult rules the martial realm, and I am the ruler of the Demonic Cult. Do you even have the right to discuss the heavenly realms?"

"Damn!"

The Viper raised his sword and charged.

"King of Death! Take the Apothecary and run!"

I was already doing so.

I picked up the Apothecary and ran. Though it was likely futile, I still ran. To struggle until the very end. To not accept this ending and this death as inevitable.

"You're not enough! You lowly minions of righteousness!"

The Heavenly Demon's laughter followed us from behind.

"Namgung Woon!"

Once, twice, thrice.

The sound of swords clashing resounded.

"Where is Namgung Woon!"

Then, no more sword sounds followed.

The Viper had perished after enduring three exchanges.

"Bring forth the Head of the Namgung clan, the Supreme Head of the Martial Alliance! No matter how dense the forests of the martial realm or how vast the heavens, there's only one person in this entire world who can receive my sword! Four Demon Lords! Bring Namgung Woon before me at once!"

Her laughter was persistent and unyielding.

With every step I took to escape, her laughter caught up tenfold. We stood no chance. Eventually, when the laughter almost reached my back, the Apothecary in my arms spoke.

"King of Death."

She looked up at me.

"I still believe in you."

And then.

Something sliced through both of us.

Piercing us.

"-----"

The sky tilted. The ground tilted. I lost my footing, losing everything below my waist, and fell into the snow with only my upper body.

That's right.

It was a white snowfield.

We had escaped the cave.

“.....”

A bit further away, the Apothecary lay fallen. Where she fell, the snowfield was unusually red. It looked like bingsu with strawberry syrup, I thought in my dazed mind.

"Ahaha. Heh, hahaha!"

Snow was falling.

"Ahahahaha! Ah, ahahahaha..."

As the snow fell, the sky and the earth became indistinguishable. A dark white. Only a cool and pale shadow was visible.

Someone was walking away in the snowfield, leaving footprints.

As footprints were made, the sky and the earth seemed to separate momentarily. However, the blizzard raged ceaselessly, burying even the last remaining footprints.

Silently.

Without a trace.

Without any scent.

The world that had scorched people and the people scorched by the world, buried and hidden until only the white snowfield remained. The blizzard of no color , no smell , and no sound continued forever.

The world had ended.

[You have died.]

But that was it.

For me, the end did not mean the end.

[You will return 24 hours back in time.]

Now.

Let's save your world.

Chapter 69: A World Where Constellations Died (1)

On a winter day,

So BaekHyang followed her mother across the snowfield.

The day was overcast. Snow poured from the cloudy sky. In the swirling blizzard, a person was barely a shadow.

Her mother's figure too, was like a faint shadow.

So BaekHyang raised her voice.

-Mom!

Suddenly, So BaekHyang felt afraid. The sound of the snow was too loud. Her own voice seemed to be drowned out by the noise of the snow.

-Mom!

Her mother's shadow remained distant.

So BaekHyang grew anxious.

She had to walk faster to follow her mother. But the faster she walked, the more breathless she became. The faster she walked, the quieter her voice got. What should she do?

-Uh...

Should she stop shouting and walk faster to catch up with her mother? Or should she stop walking and shout with all her might?

The young Heavenly Demon didn't know.

While she was uncertain, the shadow grew even more distant.

-Mom!

Finally, So BaekHyang stopped.

-Mom!

When she stopped, her voice gained a little more strength. Until now, she had been stealing the space for her voice with her footsteps. So BaekHyang thought now her mother would turn her head and look at her, and the shadow would become as distinct as that.

But why?

The shadow grew even more distant.

While So BaekHyang shouted, it grew more distant.

Eventually, her mother's shadow was buried in the blizzard,

becoming indistinguishable from the snowfield.

-.....

Did her mother abandon her?

Was it a natural goodbye under the pretext of crossing the blizzard?

Or did her mother genuinely lose her?

So BaekHyang didn't know.

She couldn't know.

[You have died.]

When I closed my eyes and opened them again,

It was a space that was endlessly dark.

[The condition for your skill has been fulfilled by your death.]

[Randomly copying So BaekHyang's skills.]

My hell.

[Creating skill cards.]

Cards floated in front of her eyes.

But my immediate concern wasn't the skill cards.

I sighed and spoke to the Guardian Spirit.

'Sword Emperor, did you memorize the file?'

-Well, to some extent.

The Guardian Spirit scratched the back of his head.

The file containing the desperate research findings noted down by the Apothecary and the Medicine King was crucial. In the chaos caused by the Heavenly Demon's spiritual deviation, I hadn't been able to calmly memorize the contents of the file.

-If we combine what you remembered and what I remembered, we'll more or less piece it together. But we need to go back before we forget...

'Okay. Then let's quickly select the skill.'

-Um.

The Guardian Spirit moved in the air and read the backs of the cards to me. The Heavenly Demon had many skills, but one in particular caught our attention.

+

[Demonic Heavenly God Art]

Rank: A+

Effect: The Demonic Cult. They hate and curse the principles of heaven. They not only hate and curse but formed a sect and ultimately established a doctrine. Demonic Heavenly God Art is a martial art containing the essence of this doctrine.

Those who comprehend the Demonic Heavenly God Art can tear apart the heavens and crush mountains! However, one must deeply understand the hatred and curses contained in the techniques of the art.

The more you hate and curse the world, the more colorless the heavens will become. The one who attains the ultimate state of Demonic Heavenly God Art, that person will be the true Heavenly Demon, capable of overturning the heavens.

*However, using the art makes it difficult to maintain one's self.

+

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

A name as mad as any, but I couldn't scoff at it.

‘...This must be the martial art we saw earlier, right?’

Because it was indeed that powerful.

The Medicine King's head fell off with a swing of the sword from afar. The Viper couldn't even withstand three exchanges and died. Even I, who prided myself on having trained quite well fighting the [Demon King of Autumn Rain], couldn't follow the sword path of the Heavenly Demon with my eyes.

Truly the greatest technique of the martial world.

-It's typical of demonic arts.

The Guardian Spirit frowned.

-It all comes down to how you deal with the world, whether it's martial arts or formations.

‘Deal with the world?’

-Yeah. Those who accept the world generously are usually orthodox sects. Those who try to scratch at the world are demonic cults. So, martial artists of orthodox sects craft their bodies into vessels to accept the world, while those of the demonic cults shape their bodies into claws to scratch at it...

Hmm, the Guardian Spirit crossed his arms.

-Let me give you a simple example. Take the downward slash, a typical move where you bring the sword down from above your head. In some sects, this move is called Tiger Stance Sword Strike, likened to the posture of a tiger pouncing.

Whish!

The Guardian Spirit posed and swung his arms.

'.....!'

For a moment, I flinched. I truly felt the momentum as if a ferocious beast was charging at me.

He was strong.

Despite his demeaning manner and appearance, the figure before me was the Sword Emperor. A martial artist who almost conquered the tower wielding just a sword.

-Well, it doesn't really matter if it's a tiger, a bull, or whatever. What's important is slightly 'imitating' a tiger or a bull.

Imitating. Mimicking.

Thus, turning something of the world into one's own.

That's what the Guardian Spirit meant by 'accepting the world'.

-But demonic arts are different.

He assumed the same stance again.

-When teaching this technique, the demonic cults say this:

He stomped his foot.

-Remember the rage you felt when a thief stabbed you in the gut.

The empty air seemed to split.

Faced with it, I involuntarily stepped back.

His face.

It was the Sword Emperor's face that caused this reaction.

A frigid anger lingered in his expressionless face.

As if he had become a completely different person.

-Remember the moment your sister was taken by the commander. Remember your impotence. Recall standing numbly in front of the office all night long, only to be returned to your sister's cold corpse at dawn. Paint that image of your sister's face in your mind.

The Guardian Spirit performed a sword dance.

Even without a sword in hand, I somehow saw the Guardian Spirit's sword. That sword was as dark as the space we stood in.

-Recall digging your sister's grave. Was it winter? Was the ground so frozen that it was hard to dig? Did you finally scoop out the earth with your fingertips? Did your fingernails break? Did blood flow from your broken nails?

'.....'

-Did you eventually lay your sister's body in a barely dug hole? Did you bury her starting from her feet? Did you pile cold mounds of earth on her body? At the end, unable to bury her face, did you take the earth in your hands and sprinkle it over her, handful by handful?

I gasped for breath.

As the Sword Emperor's sword dance continued, the endless space seemed to shrink inch by inch. It was slightly dizzying. Despite being mere gestures, the Sword Emperor's resentment vibrated.

-Feel the texture of the soil. Grasp the sword with the hands that dug out the earth. Swing the sword with the same motion

you used to sprinkle dirt on your sister. Lament your helplessness and curse the cruelty of the world.

I murmured as if groaning.

‘Claws to scratch at the world...’

-Exactly.

The Guardian Spirit retracted his arms.

Finally, I could breathe again.

-It's a method of using Ki, I guess? Literally, a way to stir up and intensify emotions. Whether you're a martial artist or a hunter, it all comes down to how well you use Ki or aura.

He shrugged nonchalantly.

-Basically, it's a battle of momentum. Demonic arts just have a bit more intense momentum.

'.....'

-Anyway, there's no need for you, a zombie, to learn it.

I quietly looked at the silver skill card.

-No, there's no need for you to learn any other martial arts. Who am I? The Sword Emperor, right? The greatest martial artist in this universe! You might not know it, but you're already slowly learning my technique! Demonic Heavenly God Art, whatever that is, compared to my martial arts, it's just garbage...

'I want to learn it.'

-.....What?

The Guardian Spirit blinked.

'I want to learn it. This. The Demonic Heavenly God Art.'

-Uh, uh... uhhh...

Blink. Blink.

It took about 3 seconds for the Guardian Spirit to find his words.

-Why!?

‘Because I want to.’

-My martial arts are superior, this is just trash compared to mine!

He began to rant.

-Don't tell me, zombie, you were tempted by that Heavenly Demon's swordplay!? Oh my god. That was just her pouring out her real energy for a momentary entry into the realm of life and death! It's a high, a real energy high! Zombie, a true martial artist must never be intoxicated with real energy highs!

I smiled faintly.

‘Are you jealous because I want to learn someone else's martial art, not yours?’

But this wasn't the first or the last hell I would cross.

[You have entered the Hungry Ghost Realm.]

I would have time to calmly describe the landscapes of the hells I had crossed.

After returning to the day before, I committed suicide eight more times to return to the 'first day' we fell into the Apocalypse.

"---It's cold!"

Just like the previous loop, Doksa exclaimed in surprise. Apothecary and Alchemist instinctively hugged themselves, overwhelmed by the fierce cold.

The blizzard howled fiercely. The Apothecary started coughing almost immediately.

"What's with this cold? Wasn't this supposed to be the martial realm?"

"Yikes. Is this some Siberian wasteland...?"

It was a white snowy field.

A scene I had grown accustomed to over the past ten days.

However, the others panicked and shuffled around, while I silently held Apothecary's hand.

"Ah."

She shyly bowed her head.

"Th-thank you, King of Death."

"....."

A recent memory flashed through my mind.

「I still believe in you.」

Apothecary's upper body scattered in the snowy field, turning it bright red. I thought of the snowfield stained with her blood.

"The reign of the Demonic Cult ends today!"

And...

"Hah. Even the passing dogs would flip and laugh at that."

I heard the voice of the Heavenly Demon too.

"....."

I held my breath and moved towards the direction of the voices. The snow crunched under my boots. The closer I got, the clearer the memory of the Heavenly Demon confessing her feelings became in my mind.

「I'm scared.」

"As long as I, the leader, remain intact, the Demonic Cult's reign will persist."

「The world is so terrifying.」

"Great Axe Sage, it's time for you to bid farewell to the Orthodox Faction."

「Bring forth the Head of the Namgung clan, the Supreme Head of the Martial Alliance!」

The most powerful being in the world.

The strongest in this world, and therefore, the last to survive to the end.

In a tragic sense, the person who achieved true supremacy in heaven and earth.

"Hmm."

That person was still smiling.

Still proudly laughing, standing in the middle of the snowy field, defying the world.

Like a single point in a blank canvas.

"Nonsense! Your Demonic Cult's vaunted Blood Ghost Troops have already had their heads lopped off by my axe.... Hm?"

I just hoped.

That single point would turn into a line.

"Who are you...?"

Heavenly Demon's eyes widened, unable to believe the sight of me walking towards her. For her, seeing a living person after many years must have been unbelievable.

"Ah, ahem. Am I seeing things right now? It looks like a

living person is moving..."

"Heavenly Demon."

I reached in front of her and slowly knelt down.

The soft snow gently compressed under my weight.

"?"

"From a far land, I heard of your majesty, Heavenly Demon, and came searching for you. I have long admired the fame of the greatest of all times since ancient days."

No matter how long it might take, I was ready.

I called out to the Heavenly Demon.

"Please accept me as your disciple!"

"....."

The Heavenly Demon's mouth gaped open as if she had seen a ghost.

Chapter 70: A World Where Constellations Died (2)

‘It’s cold.’

In the midst of a snowy field, So BaekHyang thought.

Buried in the white snowfield, the world became colorless, odorless, and silent.

The world was merely a cold blank page.

‘It’s cold...’

The flesh was cold. The bones were cold. Even the blood was cold.

So BaekHyang thought.

‘My stomach feels frozen.’

‘Mom?’

‘It feels like my internal organs are filled with ice.’

‘Mom.’

‘It’s too cold here.’

Thoughts piled upon thoughts. As they multiplied, the insides seemed to freeze more. Eventually, even the head that thought these thoughts turned cold.

A world that was cold and only cold.

The disappearing back of a mother.

How much time had passed?

-...Ahem.

The silence was broken.

-How peculiar indeed. Truly peculiar.

The odorlessness was next to break.

-It's been ten days since the snow started and stopped falling here. Judging by the thickness of the snow covering everything, it should be about 5 feet. How is this child still breathing?

Finally, the colorlessness also broke.

So BaekHyang looked forward with young eyes. An old woman stood there. He had been digging through the snow, making noise. She had grabbed her wrist, bringing the scent of an old woman. The old woman's eyes looking at her were black.

-You're not an ordinary child.

The old woman was an elderly master of the Demonic Cult.

-Born with the Glacial Body. The cold of the world is your inner energy, your Ki. Peculiar, indeed peculiar. A child surviving more than ten days in a snowy field on snow alone, it's like the Extreme Yin Body mentioned only in texts!

-.....

-Child, what is your name?

So BaekHyang opened her lips.

-I don't know.

She couldn't remember his name.

-How old are you?

-I don't know.

-How did you end up buried in this snowfield?

-I don't know.

-.....

She couldn't remember anything.

It was cold. Thoughts froze, and the head that held these thoughts froze, making it seem like all the words stored in his head and heart had also frozen.

-Poor thing. Already buried in the Creation Realm at such a young age...

The old master sighed.

-But, you are a perfect vessel for learning martial arts. If the palace lord of the Northern Sea saw you, he would try to take you even if it cost him a fortune. What a peculiar fate! But

what kind of fate is it? Will our cult be the fate for you, or will you be the fate for our cult? It's difficult to guess with my old eyes.

So BaekHyang didn't understand. She couldn't understand what the old woman had been saying since a while ago. The person in front of her only spoke difficult words.

The old woman stroked So BaekHyang's head.

-Child, will you follow me?

-.....

-I will feed you and give you a place to sleep.

Those were easy words to understand.

Slowly nodding, the old woman spoke.

-You have no scent and no known origin; you must be a child born from the snow. I will give you my surname and call you

BaekHyang, the fragrance of snow.

The fragrance of snow.

-From now on, you are a disciple of the Demonic Cult, So BaekHyang.

So BaekHyang was silent for a while.

Then she spoke.

-Where will I be taken?

The old master smiled.

-To a place where children like you gather.

"---It is impossible!"

The Heavenly Demon spoke.

"In my life, I have never taken a single disciple. Even though the world has degenerated to this state, the laws of our cult remain unchanged. A disciple? Preposterous!"

The Hot Spring Cave.

We had left the snowfield and arrived at the heart of the last survivors in this world. The Heavenly Demon and the Head of the Martial Alliance were surprised to find 'someone who has still survived...' but they welcomed us as guests.

But only as guests.

They had no intention of accepting us as disciples.

"Hey, Demon. Why be so stingy?"

The Head of the Martial Alliance chewed on his herb snack.

"It's admirable that these children from the Outside have

survived. Not only did they survive, but they also made their way through this perilous martial world to seek your teachings. That's worth some praise and admiration. Why be so rigid like in the old days?"

"Admirable and cute, indeed."

The Heavenly Demon huffed.

"Nevertheless, the laws of master and disciple are strict! Our sect does not rashly accept anyone. Only those abandoned by their parents and the world can enter our Demonic Cult."

"Tsk tsk. They always call us old-fashioned, but they're even pickier than us."

The Head of the Martial Alliance shook his head.

"Child. So it is. Now that it has come to this, why not abandon that pretentious Demonic Cult and consider me as your master? I am Namgung Woon, the great head of the Namgung clan and the leader of the Orthodox Martial Realm. If you become my disciple, I'll shower you with love..."

"Why won't you accept me as a disciple, Lord Heavenly Demon?"

Ignoring the old man, I asked. The Head of the Martial Alliance seemed a bit shocked, 'Why! Has my name not spread in the Outside...!?' he exclaimed. It was a bit pitiful, but let's leave it at that.

The Heavenly Demon narrowed his eyes.

"Didn't I just say it? Only those abandoned by the world can enter."

"The world has changed."

I spoke.

"People have turned into zombies because of a mysterious disease. The martial sects and clans were destroyed. Since humanity has abandoned us, we are now all forsaken by the world. Whether we like it or not."

"Lord Heavenly Demon. Doesn't that automatically fulfill the condition for entry?"

The Heavenly Demon closed his lips.

Perhaps because my words were true.

Above all... I was a hunter. An orphan who abandoned the outside world to throw himself into the tower. It was a bit embarrassing to say I was abandoned by the world, but I could say that I had abandoned the world. The [entry condition] the Heavenly Demon spoke of should be sufficiently met.

".....Fine."

The Heavenly Demon stood up.

"If you are so confident, try displaying the Triple Calamity Sword Technique."

She looked down at me intently.

"Whether you are worthy of inheriting our sect's teachings, I will discern with my own eyes. It's obvious you'll only spout fancy words."

"....."

I also stood up.

"Thank you for the opportunity."

I drew my holy sword. Swoosh! The sound of the sword echoed in the wide cave. People were looking at me, quietly waiting to see what swordsmanship I would demonstrate.

Of course, I had no intention of showing the Triple Calamity Sword Technique.

[Activating skill.]

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

I had acquired this technique just for this moment.

"...Hoo."

As the divine technique activated, numerous movements unfolded in my mind.

Strange and miraculous Sword Paths.

But seeing the path before me and actually driving on it were two entirely different matters. I had yet to deeply comprehend the Demonic Heavenly God Art. If I showed off my swordsmanship as it was, I would end up torn apart, like a quail chasing a crane.

'If I'm going to be torn apart anyway.'

Thus, I remembered.

'I should be properly torn apart.'

The [Trauma] landscapes I had experienced up to now.

I drew them one by one in my mind as I swung my sword.

To unfold the Demonic Art.

Throughout my ascent of the tower, I had witnessed, unintentionally, groans and screams. Groans and screams were always raw and vivid, as if I had just heard them. I remembered these groans and screams, staining my heart with their voices.

「 "Please save me." 」

「 "Please, I'm so hungry. Something to eat, please." 」

In the basement of a certain mansion.

I remembered the voices of the children who were tortured there.

「 "I want to live." 」

The children were chained. When the mansion caught fire and burned. The children, seeing the flames rising before their eyes, were trapped in chains

My sword grew faster and faster. The Demonic Heavenly God Art I acquired through death took form. The trauma transplanted into me through death pulsed with intent.

Although I occasionally felt like I was losing my way, I drew upon my aura to forcibly connect my sword path.

-Look at this kid...

The Guardian Spirit said that demonic arts were like claws scraping the world.

But the more I executed the Demonic Heavenly God Art, the more my thoughts changed.

It was perhaps closer to screams and wails than to claws.

-Wow.

My sword path continued, eventually becoming a sword dance.

If I was born in the Martial Realm, he would have definitely joined the Demonic Cult. Now that I see it.

My sword dance was never beautiful. It was immature.

Clumsy. It didn't carry the fragrance of flowers, only the smell of burning flames. If swordsmanship had a face, mine would be that of a person with severe burns.

Only screams.

No matter how wondrous the principles of yin and yang, the world born from it is just sorrowful.

No matter how profound the writings of the Four Books and Five Classics, they cannot surpass the wail of a lowly human.

A sword technique containing the world's sorrow is sharper than one containing the yin and yang.

A sword swung following a single scream is stronger than one moved by profound principles.

The deeper the sorrow, the more wretched the scream, the stronger the sword becomes.

That is why we are strong.

The strong survive.

That was the teaching of the Demonic Cult.

「 "Speak." 」

「 "Martial arts have forgotten chivalry, and chivalry has lost martial arts." 」

「 "Say it and I will grant your wish to die." 」

The Heavenly Demon, that was the sky of such teachings.

The highest sky.

The Heavenly Demon must know all the screams of the cult members and should be able to unfold them into a sword path. Every line of the Heavenly Demon's sword path must be a scream towards the world.

Thus proving that somewhere in this world, there were those who screamed and wailed.

「 "The world has turned into emptiness." 」

「 "Decades of time, all in vain." 」

Even such a sky.

Even the Heavenly Demon screamed in the last moment.

「 "Ahaha. Huh, haha!" 」

When she laughed madly.

「 "Uhahahaha! Ha, ahahaha..." 」

With that laughter in my heart, I swung my sword.

"Stop."

I swung my sword.

"Stop it."

I swung my sword.

"Didn't I tell you to stop!"

Eventually, my sword came to a halt.

Not because I wanted to stop. A cane. The Heavenly Demon held a wooden stick, blocking my blade. My profound internal energy surged around the cane.

"You..."

The Heavenly Demon murmured softly.

"Where did you learn our secret techniques?"

Her eyes were pitch black.

"You can't fool my eyes! No matter how crude and immature it was, what you just used was undoubtedly the Demonic Heavenly God Art. The only ones who can master this art in this world are the demonic cultists, and I have never seen your face before."

"Speak. Where did you steal it!"

Only then did I realize I was more exhausted than I thought. I was out of breath. My whole body was drenched in sweat. The holy sword in my right hand felt as heavy as a rock.

I looked around. Not only the Head of the Martial Alliance but also our companions were silently watching me. Through the gaping hole in the cave ceiling, the stars of the night sky were pouring down. Maybe more time had passed than I had realized.

"So am I....."

I struggled to open my mouth.

"Worthy... or not?"

"....."

The Heavenly Demon was silent.

After a long silence, the woman turned her back. She walked towards the far end of the cave. Her back was that of someone rejecting others, and no one could follow her.

If I had just a bit more energy left, maybe I would have chased after her...

"K-King of Death?"

Thud.

My knees gave out.

"King of Death! Are you alright, King of Death!?"

My consciousness was blurry. I thought, with a dazed mind, it was because I had used too much aura at once. I would probably faint for the whole night like this.

I tried to smile at the Apothecary to reassure them, but even that was difficult. My vision was already dark.

-Tsk tsk.

Just before I fainted. I heard the voice of the Guardian Spirit.

-Unsuitable martial arts lead to early death. You're just a young sparrow. This is why I always say one must build from the basics.

Guardian Spirit sighed.

-Well, but still...

And then.

-Not a bad sparrow, though. A commendable little one.

I lost consciousness.

Chapter 71: A World Where Constellations Died (1)

Winter.

So BaekHyang had entered the mountains.

It was an event from when she was eleven years old.

-A child.

-No one will force anything upon you.

The main base of the Demonic Cult.

The place the old woman took her to was like heaven. Food was served morning and evening without asking. A warm bedding was provided. There was no whipping from the local officials.

-Eat whenever you want to. Sleep whenever you feel like it. Play whenever you wish.

-.....

-BaekHyang, just live as you wish.

So BaekHyang was bewildered.

Perhaps this was the legendary Peach Blossom Spring.

-Everyone here is so kind!

Children of her age smiled brightly.

-They don't make us do anything.

-Are they raising us as slaves?

-Idiot! It's been a year since I came here, and nothing like that has happened.

The Demonic Cult had many orphans besides herself. A lot, indeed. By a rough estimate, there were over 2000. Every day, one or two kids would join. During some years of famine, dozens came in a single day.

Were there so many orphans in the world?

-.....You guys.

So BaekHyang opened her lips.

-How did you end up here?

Silence.

The children looked at her intently.

Then, suddenly, they opened their mouths.

-The crops failed terribly!

-My mom worked in a brothel....

-I don't want to talk about it. Why should I tell you?

-Yeah. At night, thieves with knives rampaged through our village!

-Suddenly, people in the village got sick.

-They kept beating me. I ran away.

Hunger. Prostitution. Illegitimate birth. Thieves. Epidemics. Abuse.

Each time the children opened their mouths, poison flowed out.

-.....

So BaekHyang felt dizzy. The poison of hunger stung sharply. The poison of prostitution's resentment was sore. The poison of illegitimate birth was harsh. The poison from knife wounds inflicted by thieves was chilling. The poison born from epidemics was nasty. The poison marinated in abuse and beatings was rotten.

-You guys.....

What kind of poison in the world was this mixed? Were all the world's stings, sores, harshness, chills, nastiness, and rotten smells gathered here? If so, where was this place? Could this be heaven?

So BaekHyang recalled.

-Are you happy now?

The jar of Concentrated Poison.

-Are you okay now?

Into the jar, one would put toads, vipers, poison spiders, centipedes, fire ants, wasps, and various venomous insects. Then, they would seal the lid. The vipers would bite the toads, the toads would eat the poison spiders, and the venomous insects would devour each other until, finally, only one survived.

To boil down.

To create a single, extreme poison.

-Yes!

The children smiled brightly.

-We can eat every day.

-I don't have to work in place of my mom.

-I'm always okay.

-Yes. There are no thieves here, right?

-Even if we're sick, the doctor heals us.

-No one hits us. It's nice.

Toads. Vipers. Poison spiders. Centipedes. Fire ants. Wasps.

Though the children opened their mouths to smile, in So BaekHyang's eyes, her peers appeared as nothing more than venomous beasts and insects. Yes, this place was not something like heaven. It was merely a jar meant to cultivate a single Concentrated Poison.

-.....

So BaekHyang quietly placed her hand over her chest.

It was cold.

Something that could not be warmed with a hot morning porridge, evening soup, or thick blankets. An ice that would never melt, already embedded deep in her heart. It was her own heart.

Her mother was leaving.

Snow was falling.

Her mother did not stop leaving.

Therefore, the snow did not stop falling.

-.....

From that day on.

So BaekHyang no longer mingled with the children of her age.

「 Eat whenever you feel like eating. 」

Every morning and evening, she reduced the food she ate.

「 Sleep whenever you feel like sleeping. 」

She went to bed early and woke up even earlier.

「 Play whenever you feel like playing. 」

She didn't play. While other children ran around the hills laughing, neutralizing their venom with laughter, So BaekHyang did not join them.

The children whispered.

-So BaekHyang is strange...

-She only plays with the farmers!

-It's weird.

-Yeah. She deliberately doesn't eat.

-Why does she hang out with the farmers?

-I don't know.

She ignored them.

"Just live as you wish."

Time passed.

One day, an old woman came. She was the elder of the Demonic Cult who had brought her here. Although much time had passed, the old man had not changed since that winter day.

-It's been a long time, BaekHyang.

-Yes. It's been a while.

-I've come to ask you something.

Tap, tap.

The elder tapped the ground with his staff.

-I hear you don't mingle with children your age.

-Yes.

-I hear you help the farmers and harvest your own food.

-Yes.

-I hear you make your own clothes and bedding.

-Yes.

-Why?

The old man tilted his head.

-You could live in abundance here if you wished. This place is like the Peach Blossom Spring. Adults farm and pick fruits

for you. You're just a child, why work by yourself?

So BaekHyang spoke.

-The Mao family, farming below the mountain, lost their two daughters to the county magistrate.

-Hmm?

-Choi, who works in the orchard, had his second son die after being summoned to build the city walls. Out of injustice, he filed a complaint but was interrogated and lost his eldest son too. After burying both sons in their hometown, Mr. Choi and his wife sought refuge here.

-.....

So BaekHyang recounted each story.

The farmers who brought crops to the orphans were all hurt by the world. Not a single one was without a grievous story.

-This place is not heaven.

After recounting the farmers' plight, So BaekHyang said.

-They're not fools to feed and clothe us for free.

-Then?

The old man asked.

-Why do you think you eat and sleep here for free?

-Hoping for someone to avenge on their behalf.

-They are too resentful. Unable to forgive the county magistrate and local officials who ruined their lives. They want revenge but have no power to avenge. So BaekHyang said.

-I've heard that martial arts must be learned and practiced from a very young age to be mastered. These farmers, the people who feed and clothe us, are already too old to deeply

refine their martial arts.

However...

-But they can farm for [children who can learn martial arts].

-We're not eating and sleeping for free.

That was the reality of this paradise.

-We are here to avenge the world on their behalf.

It was the headquarters of the Demonic Cult.

The old woman fell silent.

After a long silence, the elder asked.

-BaekHyang.

-Yes.

-Do you have something to say to the world?

So BaekHyang nodded.

-Yes.

About the coldness.

About a blizzard one winter. About a mother who followed her child across the snowy plains. About the mother who hastened her steps despite hearing her child's screams. About the child left behind. About the coldness.

About someone's heart.

-Yes.

About hunger. About a child born in a brothel. About an illegitimate child. About a child who lost their family to bandits. About a child whose village disappeared due to a

plague. About a child who suffered abuse and beatings.

About their venom.

-There's a lot.

The world was vast.

-So much.

What needed to be said was infinite.

The old woman quietly closed her eyes.

-Is that so..... It must be so.

It was quiet.

-Then, the world must listen to your words.

The elder opened his eyes.

-I am one of the Seven Elders of the cult. I am the Demonic Buddha.

-Is there a Buddha in hell?

-What use would Buddha be if he were not in hell?

Despite So BaekHyang calling this place hell, the old woman did not grasp his book. Instead, he replied as if it were obvious. It was then that So BaekHyang realized she had set foot on the right path.

-BaekHyang, you have passed the initiation test. You did not waver even in the face of abundant food and a cozy bed. Undoubtedly, your poison is clear. Take me as your master, and call me master when addressing me.

Master.

-From now on, your sword will cry out in place of countless screams.

The elder picked up her staff.

And placed it on the young Heavenly Demon's shoulder.

-Perform the Nine Bows Ceremony. My disciple.

That day.

So BaekHyang was initiated.

It was when she was thirteen years old.

“Wake up.”

I awoke in the early dawn.

A voice whispering in my ear.

When I opened my eyes, the face of the Heavenly Demon was

right in front of me.

“Oh my. Can’t you get up?”

"....."

She was really close. So close I could clearly see the Heavenly Demon's eyelashes. When she blinked, they fluttered like a curtain of black.

I was lying on the ground. The Heavenly Demon looked down at me intently.

“There. Heavenly Demon.”

Maybe it was because I had just woken up. My mouth felt dry.

“If you keep standing there, I can’t get up. I think I’ll bump my head.”

“Hmm. Seeing you talk eloquently right after waking up,

your body must be fine.”

The Heavenly Demon stood up.

“Go bathe in the hot spring. You must cleanse your body and mind with all your heart.”

“What?”

“I will wait at the entrance of the cave.”

The Heavenly Demon turned and walked away. I had no time to say anything. Her small back disappeared into the distance.

Left in the cave were me, standing dumbfounded, and the sleeping party.

“Umm, ugh...”

“Oh, hmm...”

“Heh...”

Perhaps they were immersed in virus research until late at night? The Apothecary and Medicine King, surrounded by tools, were sleeping soundly. The Viper was smiling contentedly, arms crossed.

What kind of dreams are they having that they sleep so sweetly?

I checked their psychological windows once.

"Yes, I'm right. Why do I even have to explain this simple thing? Even if I explain, you won't understand. Just do as I say. I'm going crazy with these dimwitted fools.... Ah, no, everyone, that's not what I meant to say.... Just try to think a bit harder, I mean, can't you understand this simple logic? Ugh, sorry sorry sorry...."

"Hmph, with this, I have secured my 100th victory, Marcus.... And as a bonus, I even achieved my 999999th victory against that Apothecary kid or whatever. Oh, is there no one who can block the victory road of this Shawn McCallister? I've achieved a lonely, unparalleled existence in the most sorrowful sense...."

"Mwahaha! Pffft hahaha!"

Hmm.

'I shouldn't wake them.'

Especially the last one, I shouldn't touch.

I carefully washed and came out. Shiny and the Guardian Spirit remained silent throughout. Dawn mixed with the cold wind, the white sky looked down upon us....

As I left the cave, a snow-covered world greeted me.

The Heavenly Demon stood in the middle of the snowy field. She crossed her arms and scrutinized me from head to toe.

"Did you scrub every corner?"

"Yes, I feel cleansed even in my heart."

"I dislike those who speak too well."

The woman frowned in displeasure.

"And you, you speak too well. Your tongue is too light, too light indeed. More like a swindler than a man of great character. It's worrying, like a mountain of concern."

"Oh."

Is that so?

I never felt particularly talented in speaking. Yet, the second-ranked Witch would nag me whenever she had the chance, saying I 'speak well.' Could it be an unknown talent I was born with?

Lost in thought, the Heavenly Demon furrowed her brows, seemingly displeased.

I also opened her psychological window once.

「Sly yet foolish-faced, a simpleton through and through.
You remind me of a Haomunju painted in a picture.」

What's a Haomunju*?

*Low-class Sects, they're small and comprise of people from low classes of society but are cunning.

"Follow me."

I followed the Heavenly Demon through the snow.

Crossing the snowfield, the Heavenly Demon said,

"To wear the Demonic Cult's robes, one must pass numerous tests. Even though you've proven your qualifications, it doesn't mean you've passed the tests. The first test of our sect is..."

"[Test of Comfort], right?"

"....."

Her footsteps faltered slightly, or so I felt.

"Free lodgings, clothes, and food. Those who are content and complacent become part of the outer sect, raised as farmers, artisans, and messengers."

They handle the livelihood of the Demonic Cult.

"However, passing the [Test of Comfort] leads to a different path. One is recognized as a disciple of the inner sect. Only the inner sect disciples are formally taught the demonic arts. This is when one truly joins the Demonic Cult."

"...How do you know that?"

I saw it as a trauma when you killed me in the last round.

I couldn't say that, so I just smiled.

"I know quite a bit."

"Oh, heavens are so heartless! To think the last connection

brought to me would be such a sly one. To accept such a low-class scoundrel as a disciple of my sect..."

Guardian Spirit nodded in agreement.

-Yeah, this zombie guy really does have a low-class charm! The Heavenly Demon has a good eye for people.

‘No, what are you talking about...?’

-It's one thing if you were just a scoundrel, but you're intriguingly active at times, making it hard to ignore. That's what makes you even worse!

Is that a compliment or an insult? When others praise or curse me, I tend to take it as a compliment.

In a cold era, stingy with praise, shouldn't I at least receive people's words graciously? Yes, even if it's from someone as eccentric and bizarrely negative as a Guardian Spirit....

-That's exactly why you're like a scoundrel! Dumb bird!

I don't understand what he means. Really.

"---This should be far enough."

The Heavenly Demon led me to a pit. A huge pit. Like a colosseum, the center was deeply recessed, dark as night since the dawn's light couldn't reach.

"Rejoice."

The Heavenly Demon turned to face me.

"I wish to accept you as my disciple. In the world of demonic arts! As long as one is qualified, heaven does not refuse a disciple."

"Oh! Then..."

"However, I cannot yet accept you as a formal disciple."

What.

"No, Heavenly Demon, this is too much! I came all the way from the outside lands to become your disciple. I've shown you I'm qualified. And yet you say I'm still insufficient to be a formal disciple, what does this mean!"

".....Your words are highly suspicious."

The Heavenly Demon scrutinized my face.

"Even your claim of coming from the outside lands is dubious. Whether your admiration for me since ancient times is true is also questionable. According to my intuition, it all seems false... But your nature doesn't seem too malicious, so I let it be."

No.

Why is this martial artist's intuition so sharp?

"Honestly, considering only your nature, it seems almost saintly, which is truly bizarre. Yes, you are indeed a strange fellow. It's hard to say at this moment whether you will become a destiny for me, or I will become one for you."

"...What is the test?"

"Over there."

The Heavenly Demon pointed to the bottom of the pit.

"Down there, I have thrown a zombie. A once promising and notable figure in our Demonic Cult, a peerless expert who made a name in the martial world. Defeat that zombie. Do so, and I will accept you as a disciple of the Inner House. However,"

The Heavenly Demon, arms crossed, added a condition.

"Fight while feeling hunger."

"Pardon?"

"Exactly as I said. Battle the zombie, but your heart must be filled only with hunger. Only the agony of starvation should reside in you. I will not allow any other emotion or thought to creep into your heart."

The Heavenly Demon's voice resonated.

"Do you think you can do it?"

"....."

And then I realized.

She already considers me her [disciple].

Whether she says I'm not yet an official disciple, or that I am not her disciple at all, it's all meaningless. In the heart of the Heavenly Demon, I am a disciple destined to receive the teachings of the Demonic Cult, the successor of the Demonic Heavenly God Art.

"Every stroke of your sword must emanate from hunger."

The Heavenly Demon advised.

"Imagine the voice and groans of a starving person, their arm movements, footsteps – everything. Embed these in your

heart. Make it your single-hearted resolve. Relying on this resolve, wield your sword driven solely by starvation."

"Only then will the Demonic Heavenly God Art reveal its true power."

I looked down into the pit.

-Groooarrr!

From the bottom of the pit, a zombie was howling. Dressed in black martial arts attire – tattered and worn but undoubtedly the garb of the Demonic Cult.

A pit resembling hell itself.

Perhaps this zombie could be considered my martial senior.

"If I can..."

I spoke up.

"What happens if I can swing the sword driven only by hunger?"

"You'll be able to cut down those who have never experienced starvation in a single strike."

The Heavenly Demon spoke calmly.

"With this, half of the orthodox martial artists will become mere one-move opponents."

Thus, it was said.

Claws that tear through the world.

"First, master the Art of Starving Death. Next, the Art of Parched Death. One must know how to swing the sword driven only by thirst and thus be able to cut down those never twisted by dehydration in a single strike. Following that, the Art of Submerged Death. You will learn nine sword arts in total, and with these nine swords, you shall have enough to cover the entire world."

I gripped the sword hilt tightly.

"That is..."

My heart raced.

"That sounds quite enticing."

The corners of the Heavenly Demon's mouth lifted.

This seemed to be the first smile I've seen from her in this life.

Perhaps my fighting spirit had pleased her.

"So why hesitate? Fall into hell without further ado.

And then.

I leaped into the zombie pit.

Chapter 72: The Reaper of Death. (1)

What word least fits with the concept of [zombies] in the world?

It's an odd question, I know.

But in a world overrun by zombies, where I suddenly found myself training in martial arts while fighting against them, I couldn't help but contemplate about zombies. And I just realized the word that least fits with them.

-Groooarrr!

That word was [Palm Blast].

-Woah, ahhhhh!

A zombie in black martial attire gathered its hands and shot a Palm Blast.

This is no joke. It's real.

Let me repeat. A [zombie], who lived as a martial artist before death, let out a strange yell and fired a Palm Blast at me.

"Damn, this is crazy---"

Whoosh!

The Palm Blast lightly pushed my body away. I floated in the air like a stick. The series of events had already stunned and overwhelmed me, but unfortunately, it didn't end there.

-Woahhhh!

The zombie stomped on the ground. A mysterious Stepping Technique. Smooth Movement Techniques unfolded, as if its body was filled with helium. The zombie soared into the air and swiftly flew right in front of me.

Crazy.

"Hey! Wait, this isn't right!"

I frantically swung my Holy Sword, but before I could slash the zombie, a voice halted my blade.

"Wrong! Don't swing your sword recklessly."

It was the voice of the Heavenly Demon.

She was watching my battle from above the pit.

"Didn't I tell you? Remember the hunger, the agony of Starving Death. Only ponder the sensation of starvation. Just swinging around will make the Demonic Heavenly God Art nothing but a shell."

"But, but!"

The zombie opened its mouth wide in front of me. Clack! I barely twisted my body to avoid its teeth. Without time to

properly land, I fell to the ground. As I dodged, the zombie seemed angrier and lunged at me again.

"I'm not particularly hungry right now!"

"You are foolish."

The Heavenly Demon shouted, sounding frustrated.

"Just because you can't see the color red before you, can't you imagine it in your mind? Just because you're not hungry now, can't you recall the feeling of starvation?"

Grooooarrr!

Even as the Heavenly Demon spoke to me, the zombie ceaselessly swung its claws. If I got hit even once, it would be the end. I would be infected by the zombie virus, becoming a true Kim Zombie.

Clang! Clang!

The zombie's claws fiercely struck my sword. I could only defend myself, unable to attack. It was a dire situation.

"If you can't do it, it's because you're not yet familiar with the sensation of hunger. You must be stuffed to the brim. One who learns the Demonic Heavenly God Art must freely recall sensations!"

The sensation of hunger.

The memory of starvation.

"Recall the longest you've ever been hungry. Chew over that feeling. Where were you at that time? What did you most want to eat? How long did you starve?"

"The longest I've been hungry was maybe 3 to 4 days..."

"What? Three to four days?"

The Heavenly Demon was incredulous.

"...You're saying the longest you've ever starved in your life is just around three days? That's unbelievable. The world has long been in chaos, and famines occur with each changing season. Unless you're a child of a noble family, how could you have only starved for just three days?"

"Well, the place we lived in, the Outside Land, was much more prosperous than the Central Plains..."

Naturally, the Tower was more abundant than the martial world where martial artists roamed. It was, after all, a place enjoying modern civilization. Probably many hunters haven't even starved for more than two days.

"Oh, dear. Tsk, tsk."

The Heavenly Demon sighed.

"It seems we are not on the same page. Starvation is the most urgent sensation. It's a pain that cannot be skipped even for a day, an agony that no one can ignore. After all, the purpose of human existence is to alleviate hunger. The hunger felt by an emperor and a commoner is no different. How can you awaken the Demonic Heavenly God Art if you don't even understand this?"

No.

I've also starved quite a bit, living over 10 years as an F-Rank Hunter.

When I bought tteokbokki outside, I used to count the number of rice cakes in a single serving, only buying from places that gave four extra pieces.

"That's it."

The Heavenly Demon turned her back.

"It's my mistake! I had some hope, but it turns out you're just a glib talker."

I was at the bottom of the huge pit. Hence, the Heavenly Demon's figure quickly disappeared from my sight. Clang! Clang! As I barely blocked the zombie's teeth and claws, I shouted towards the Heavenly Demon, who had already moved away.

"Heavenly Demon!"

There was no response.

"Heavenly Demon!?"

Again, no response.

The Heavenly Demon, she was a resolute martial artist.

"Wait a minute, please! It's not an honor to be starved! How does it make sense that I can't learn martial arts because of that! Hey!?"

The Palm Blast zombie opened its jaws wide.

Ah.

"Damn it."

Crunch!

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

"---Damn!"

I stomped my feet, having returned to a day earlier. I saw the Palm Blast zombie's skill card, experienced the trauma, and even received the system's confirmation that the target's ego remained intact. But none of that mattered right now.

"I've had my fair share of hardships!"

I fumed.

Anger. Competitive spirit.

Only these two emotions blazed like red and blue flames in my heart, burning fiercely.

-Wow.

The Guardian Spirit was calm by my side.

-Teaching in the traditional way, huh? Well, she's imparting a secret technique, the only one of its kind, so it makes sense. Zombie, humans become raw themselves when they always try to eat others...

"Fine. So this is how it's going to be!"

I ignored the Guardian Spirit and left the hot spring cave.

"You think I'll cower and surrender just because you act like this? No way. I'm someone who has died burning before! Burned from the head down! And you think I can't die of starvation!?"

-Uh...

The Guardian Spirit looked flustered for once.

-Zombie? What's wrong? Hey. Instead of learning from that Heavenly Demon or whatever, learn from me. I'm a more forgiving teacher...

"Let's see how long I can starve then!"

-Damn.

The Guardian Spirit muttered.

-This is serious. He's lost it. Ah, when this guy gets angry, he really becomes blind to everything else. This will set us back dozens of days... From that day, I entered the Hell Path.

'I'm going to find the item needed to clear this stage.' That's the lie I told my companions. And I left.

I went as far away as possible from the hot spring cave, settling in a mountain covered with snow.

Doing nothing. Just staying put.

-You crazy...

Did he know what I was planning?

The Guardian Spirit looked at me with cold, withering eyes.

-Are you planning to stay here until you starve to death? Is that it?

"Yes. What about it?"

-Oh, my.

The Guardian Spirit lamented.

-Everyone should know how crazy this guy is, not just me. Oh, my! I'm the only one who knows, oh my. Being a ghost after death is such a regret, such a regret.

Too noisy.

-Zombie. No, Gong-Ja, I beg you. It's fine if you are immersed in training out of anger, but why must I, who has done nothing wrong, keep watching over you?

"Ah, you're so noisy."

-Let me ask just one thing. How long do you plan to endure this?

I sat in a small cave on the snowy mountain, different from the cave where the Heavenly Demon and her group stayed. There was no hot spring, no wall carvings here. Just a dark, cold cave.

"I don't know. At least beyond 112 days."

-What?

"I saw it in the Heavenly Demon's trauma. She once endured for 111 days without eating anything, surviving solely on energy circulation. So, I plan to endure at least 112 days."

-This is utterly crazy....

The Guardian Spirit swore for about a minute. But it was futile. No matter what he said, it couldn't shake my resolve. I had already assumed a meditative posture.

-You won't last more than 100 days!

The Guardian Spirit shouted.

-Look at the weather. It's freezing! If you don't wrap yourself in Aura, you'll freeze to death right away. How do you plan to maintain your Aura for 100 days straight? Even with all your effort, 20 days is the limit.

Failing with curses, the Guardian Spirit tried to persuade me.

-Plus, Gong-Ja. Enduring more than 100 days isn't just about hunger anymore. You've never starved for more than 100 days, right? If you haven't, then don't talk about it.

"Have you starved before?"

-Yes. I also practiced fasting in my youth following the elders. For a few days, you feel like dying of hunger, but mostly, you don't feel hungry at all! It's not about starving; it's about mental cultivation. Mental cultivation!

"Then the answer is clear."

I spoke calmly.

"After starving for 15 days, I'll just keep repeating the 15th day.

-.....

The Guardian Spirit was speechless.

-What did you say?

"I won't eat anything for 15 days. I'll endure until hunger reaches its peak. Then I'll commit suicide and keep staying on the 15th day. Hunger will remain constant."

I looked at the Guardian Spirit.

"I'll repeat this until it reaches 112 days. What do you think? The Aura won't drop, and the hunger will continue. A perfect solution."

-You... are insane....

The Guardian Spirit was appalled.

-Just learn from me... Don't take that strange cult leader as your master. My martial arts are better, you know? Why are you driven to such madness?

"I will perfectly learn the Demonic Heavenly God Art."

My heart blazed.

"Do you know why the Heavenly Demon despaired of the world? Why this world, the 'The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon,' came to an end? Because she felt that living further was meaningless."

When the Head of the Martial Alliance lay on his deathbed.

The Heavenly Demon murmured to herself.

「The world has become empty.」

That was the end. If the world is considered a work of art, that was the last line on the final page.

Meaninglessness.

No matter what the characters say or do, where they go, what they feel, none of it carries any meaning. Hundreds of lines of dialogue, thousands of descriptions – all pointless.

It's just like a blank page.

Then the work dies, and so does the world.

Destruction.

That must be what the Head Librarian meant by [Serialization Cancellation].

-.....

I, for one, do not wish for this world to perish in such a way.

I never want the character of the Heavenly Demon to end like this.

"...Living like the Flame Emperor is easy."

I looked outside the cave. The white snowy landscape stretched out.

"I could have the thug skills, thinking I'm the best around. If I win, it's all due to my skill. If others, inferior hunters compared to me, lose, it's because they're fools. There's no need to care about such fools, so I could just choose the stages I find easy, mock and scorn whatever happens..."

As I sat in a meditative pose, I circulated Aura throughout my body.

"It might look cool to be that way."

And so, I began.

"Cynicism isn't childish, but living cynically is."

I starved.

"Being principled isn't childish, but living by principles isn't either."

I starved for a day.

"I'm human too. I need to live."

I starved for two days.

"So, the answer to how I should live is quite clear."

I starved for three days.

And kept starving.

Chapter 73: The Reaper of Death. (2)

Starvation.

What is starvation, really?

On the seventh day of my fasting.

"Hmm."

The first and second days were the hardest. After three days, the pain seemed to recede. The movement in my intestines slowed down. My thoughts became sluggish. My very life seemed to have diluted.

If a person's life is likened to a river, the flow had diminished. Like the shallow stream of a famine year, it had dried up significantly.

Drought.

Quietly drying up and vanishing. The stream diminishing and diminishing, until the stream of pain, of thoughts, of life itself, dries up completely.

Is this what [starvation] is?

Is this what the Heavenly Demon wanted from my training?

"...No."

I released my meditative pose and stood up.

"This isn't it."

I muttered softly.

"Just sitting still would be pointless."

I drew my sword. In my mind, I visualized the sword movements of the Demonic Heavenly God Art and swung my sword aimlessly.

-What are you doing?

"Exercising."

Winter was cold. I breathed in the cold air. Perhaps due to drinking snow for seven days, my breath seemed as white as snowflakes.

"I was wrong. The [starvation] that the Heavenly Demon spoke of isn't simply about 'not eating.' It's definitely not about just sitting in meditation and fasting."

As I moved my body for the first time in a week, I quickly became short of breath.

My muscles trembled. My breathing was rough.

"Starvation is about 'wanting to eat but being unable to eat.'"

Clumsy swordplay.

But I was sweating. Different from just sitting silently. My body started to come alive. The amount of sweat flowing from my body was probably equal to the amount of life in me.

"During this past week, I thought about a starving farmer."

What is starvation?

"What farmer wouldn't go to the fields just because he's hungry? Regardless of being hungry or not, whether he has eaten or not, he has to work. But there's nothing to eat even while working."

Perhaps that is starvation.

"He swings his hoe. He digs the earth. But due to the famine, due to the hard times, no matter what he does, the land bears no fruit. It's truly fruitless."

I swung my sword.

"Because there is nothing he can do—"

And then I closed my eyes.

The earth.

I visualized the dry, parched earth.

"—that's why he's starving."

A farmer struck the parched earth with his hoe. Thud! The soil would crumble like an old cookie breaking apart.

"It's been over half a year since the last rain."

-.....

The reservoirs were empty. The village well had dried up. Not a drop of water in the fields. In the daytime, an old man would sit at the edge of the village. Silently. Even the wrinkled face of the grandfather was dry.

"It's a drought."

The sun was hot.

Some villagers had already given up on farming. They abandoned their fields. Having abandoned their work and workplace, they had less reason to keep their homes. They took their children and left for the coast.

"But this farmer hasn't given up yet."

-Why?

"Because he thinks it won't be different at the sea. Because he doesn't know how to catch fish. People have to live on the thievery they've learned, and the farmer only knows how to steal from the land. His father, his father's father, and his father before him..."

One day.

Two days.

Three days.

The farmer goes to the fields. Without any reward, he goes as if commuting to work. In the evening, he climbs the back mountain and peels what's left of the edible tree bark.

"Now, there's not much bark left."

The villagers had stripped most of it.

Descending the mountain and looking back, the trees on the back mountain were all bare. From afar, it looked like a forest of birch trees.

Starvation turns the world white.

"But."

The farmer swung his hoe at the barren land.

And I swung my sword in the air.

"I can't eat these tree barks."

He has a family.

"It's been over a week since I even tasted the bark."

He has a child.

-So what?

As the hoeing and sword movements continued, the Guardian Spirit asked.

-So what will you do?

"I'll first go to the village well."

He scoops up a small bucket of water from the dried well.

"I'll boil the bark scraps with that water. Add some small

leaves... and boil it."

The fresh scent of leaves.

The musty scent of the tree bark mixes with the steam and wafts through the air.

The farmer swallows his saliva.

'I'm hungry.'

I, too, swallow my saliva.

'I want to eat.'

I want to bite and tear the bark.

The tree bark boils. The bark, imbued with the scent of water and leaves, seems sweet. I want to bite and chew it. A rich broth would flow out, tasting of earth. A brownish meal.

Tree bark is edible soil.

'I want to eat.'

But I restrain myself.

'I have to give it to my children... Even this. I have to give it.'

The children whine. They cry.

The bark boiled by their father. The bark he didn't eat and barely brought back, the children dislike it. They throw tantrums. They complain while eating.

They spill it.

'Ah.'

Unknowingly, the farmer slaps his child's cheek.

Like the farmer swinging his arm, I too swung my sword.

'This isn't me.'

The farmer turns his back on his children.

'This isn't who I am.'

...I'm not someone who hits my children. I'm not that kind of person. It's just that the famine is so severe. It's been too long since I've had proper food, my nerves are sharpened. I'm overly sensitive. It's too much....

'This isn't the life I've had.'

The farmer picks up the tree bark.

What is starvation?

Since the world began, there have been numerous famines.

And with each, there have been farmers, farmers, farmers, countless of them.

Countless starvations.

「 Fight while feeling hunger. 」

Is there a gesture in starvation?

「 Every stroke of your sword must emanate from hunger. 」

Yes.

There is a gesture in starvation.

「 Imagine the voice and groans of a starving person, their arm movements, footsteps – everything. 」

That gesture was the farmer slapping his child.

That gesture was the farmer kicking out the tree bark and abandoning life.

That gesture was the farmer returning to give his children the bark again.

「 Embed these in your heart. 」

Since the world began, some farmers must have slapped their children, others gently caressed their cheeks and whispered apologies. Some farmers might have even killed their child in anger. Some survived until the next year, while others died with their children.

And so it has been, and so it will be.

「 Make it your single-hearted resolve. 」

But there was no gesture unassociated with starvation.

「 Relying on this resolve. 」

「 Swing your sword driven only by starvation. 」

I swung my sword with the gesture of slapping a child in anger and frustration.

I swung my sword with the gesture of throwing the tree bark to the ground, thus abandoning life.

I swung my sword with the gesture of giving the bark back to my children.

「 Only then will the Demonic Heavenly God Art reveal its true power. 」

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The First Form.

Sword of Starving Death.

""

I slowly opened my eyes.

The white daylight of the snowy plains had turned into a pitch-black night.

I was drenched in sweat. Only then did I feel hungry, starving. A desperate hunger gnawed at my stomach lining, as if it were a bug with sharp teeth, incessantly nibbling at my insides.

'This is hunger.'

It was painful.

'This is starvation.'

Demonic Technique.

The claws that scrape the world.

On the walls of the cave, marks of clawing were rampant. It looked as though a violent storm had passed through. My

sword strikes were clearly etched into the stone walls. Stalactites and stalagmites had been cleanly sliced.

The stone walls and pillars were cut by my blade.

Despite hardly using Aura.

'But... it's still not enough.'

I had just grazed the edge of the technique.

I felt it distinctly.

The sword forms in my mind. The mental image I had drawn. The sensation, the feel of it, was undoubtedly caught at my fingertips.

That's how I knew.

"I'm still clumsy."

Where my fingertips barely touched.

That place was not the pinnacle, but merely the entrance.

-The madman...

The Guardian Spirit looked at me with an exasperated face.

"Ah, why are you calling me mad again? I'm properly training this time."

-Properly? You'd be better off practicing Color Technique like those lascivious monks.

The Guardian Spirit sighed heavily.

-This is why ignorance is scary. You, little bird, are a one-of-a-kind madman. Your heart belongs to the Orthodox path, yet you practice the techniques of Demonic cult. Ah, this is crazy.

"Uh, I still don't quite get the martial arts terminology. What's wrong with that?"

-This uninitiated kid...

The Guardian Spirit muttered.

-How bizarre it is, yet he has no clue. Ah, I'm going crazy.

"Explain it in a way I can understand, will you?"

-To put it simply, an expert of the Orthodox Faction is using Demonic techniques. Want more specifics? [An orthodox expert who only knows how to use demonic techniques]. You see? It's mind-boggling and unbelievable, isn't it?

"Hmm."

I covered my nose with my left hand.

"Seems like it's blocked?"

-This guy has gone nuts after a week in the cave... No, he was already nuts... What did I do in my past life to be possessed by such a lunatic...

The Guardian Spirit lamented.

-Due to this guy, I'm getting irritated for no reason. Ah, how am I supposed to teach him my martial arts? If I teach him the way I taught Marcus, it'll be a mess. What am I to do...

Ah. I'm hungry.

I want a Choco Pie.

A Choco Pie that tastes of chocolate when you bite into it, with chewy marshmallow inside. Drinking warm milk and slowly enjoying a single piece of Choco Pie.

What is starvation?

Kim Gong-ja says, starvation is a Choco Pie.

Delicious and good for the body, Choco Pie-.

---Hey. Are you daydreaming?

“No? I’m thinking about martial arts.”

-Don’t lie. You’re obviously thinking something stupid.

How does this guy know me so well? Is he a stalker? After all, the Guardian Spirit always follows me around. Translated to English, he would be a Ghost Stalker. Thinking about it that way made me feel a bit upset.

Such an annoying stalker.

"Really. Really really. Did you spend your life being deceived and then die?"

-Then tell me. What were you thinking about martial arts?

The stalker pressed on. Just like a stalker, nagging about trivial matters. Despite being as big as a gorilla. Hurry up and achieve enlightenment, Ghost Gorilla Stalker.

I put on a solemn expression.

"I was thinking of descending the mountain for a bit."

-Descending? Why? Are you finally going to show the Heavenly Demon what you're made of?

"Ah, no."

I waved my hand.

"I've just reached the threshold of the Demonic Heavenly God Art. If I commit suicide now and return to the Heavenly Demon, it wouldn't achieve much. I'll just get a response like [Hmm, seems like there's some potential]."

-So? Isn't it fine to be acknowledged?

"That's not enough."

I walked out of the cave.

"Do you know how humiliated and hurt I felt when the Heavenly Demon dismissed me for never truly experiencing

starvation? I hold grudges. Just being acknowledged won't heal my wounds."

-This guy is upset...

"I want a reaction of [astonishment]."

The shock on their faces.

I want to see the Heavenly Demon in awe of my swordsmanship.

"[Incredible talent. Overflowing talent, even exploding! I failed to recognize you as my fateful disciple. My eyes must have been clouded, I apologize.]"

Hmm.

Just imagining it feels good.

The Heavenly Demon's face will be as sweet as a Choco Pie.

"How about that? Sounds good, right? Even Sword Saint would agree, right?"

-Such a distasteful lunatic...

I descended the snowy mountain and headed towards the snowy plains.

"While unfolding the Demonic Heavenly God Art, I realized something. Ah, compared to the people of this era, I really haven't experienced true starvation. While imagining a farmer boiling tree bark, I couldn't precisely picture which bark. I didn't know exactly how to boil the bark."

Because I've never done it.

"The clearer my mental image, the more powerful the technique becomes. The reason why my martial arts are still weak despite having learned the [Demonic Heavenly God Art] skill is simply because my mental imagery is clumsy. So...

I stopped on the snowy field.

"From now on, I'm going to fill in what's lacking in my

imagination."

-What will you do? Boil tree bark for real?

"No. There's a much better way."

I smiled.

"Ghoul Reincarnation."

The moonlight shone. The snowy plains were silver.

Suddenly, clouds covered the moon. What was cloud in the sky became shadow on the ground. Little by little. The shadow, like a bug with teeth, bit into the snowy plains.

The moon swallowed by the shadow.

[Activating skill.]

After a while, the clouds cleared.

But the shadow cast on the snow did not disappear. Even in the moonlight, the snow was no longer silver. As if the moon once swallowed could never return, numerous shadows were strewn across the snow.

"My lord."

One of the shadows spoke.

"Did you summon me?"

Preta knelt on one side. The snow crunched under her knee. Behind her, thousands of skeletons stood.

"Hmm."

I nodded.

"Preta. I have a task for you."

"Your command?"

"This world is on the brink of destruction. Humans have become spirits and corpses, wandering aimlessly. Perhaps it's somewhat similar to the Aegim Empire you once destroyed."

"....."

Preta bowed her head a bit more.

"My order is simple. Disperse. Spread out and gather starving corpses."

"Starving corpses... what do you mean...?"

"Yes."

I looked out at the vast snowy night.

"There must be villages and rural areas somewhere here. Find them. Look for those who died of starvation and bring them here. The corpses will resist, but you are over four

thousand. Overwhelm them with numbers."

"How many?"

Preta cautiously asked.

"How many corpses shall we bring?"

"112."

Starvation-traumatized humans. I will learn from their hunger.

Once I learn and master their starvation,

I will finally draw closer to the Heavenly Demon.

Chapter 74: The Reaper of Death. (3)

"My lord..."

Preta looked up at me cautiously.

"Bringing back 112 dead is excessive. You've become noticeably emaciated in just a few days..."

"Why? Has your loyalty grown to the point of worrying about my body?"

Preta hesitated. It seemed she was pondering how to respond.

Should she flatter or lay bare her true feelings?

"...If you disappear, my lord, I too will cease to exist."

Preta spoke up.

"I will no longer be able to dwell in my small paradise. My life, memories, meaning, everything will vanish. Everything depends on you, my lord. I worry about myself, hence I worry about your well-being too."

"I appreciate your honesty."

I smiled.

"How is it? Living well these days?"

"Excuse me...?"

"You're living in Ester's village now, aren't you? The people you treasured more than your life have also returned. How are you getting along?"

After gaining exclusive rights to the 20th floor, I had let Preta stay in the village. Except for times like now when I needed her, she would continue to reside there.

Preta answered nervously.

"I am... living well."

"Any troubles?"

"If you mean troubles... Ah."

Preta blinked.

"Hunters stormed in once, claiming there must be a secret behind the sudden surge in the King of Death's power, or a treasure hidden by the Five Great Guilds... However, the Witch you brought and the hunters following her intervened, preventing any major disturbances."

As expected of the Black Dragon Guild. Their after-service is reliable.

"No more meddling from the petty lords of neighboring kingdoms. They are dealing with epidemics brought by the nomads they invited... Even if not, both the empire and the temple have declared my village a holy place. Occasionally, Lizardmen and Elves come bearing gifts..."

It seemed things were progressing smoothly in this world.

"But, since I have lost my powers..."

"Hmm."

"Patients seeking my fame and pilgrims hoping for miracles, especially after the declaration of the holy place, have been coming. For now, the Heretic Inquisitor and the cleric hunters are taking care of them..."

"Don't worry, I have plans in mind."

I intended to establish a new branch of the Apothecary's pharmacy on the 20th floor.

'I've got the Apothecary's word that they will only accept new clients through me.'

Once this expedition concludes, the Apothecary's position will solidify.

'I need to manage the traffic properly.'

With patients continuously visiting, the Apothecary will gain a wealth of experience in various diseases.

'It won't be possible for the Apothecary to handle the workload alone. Hiring staff is inevitable. Attaching Preta as an assistant or accepting aspiring hunter pharmacists as apprentices could work. As the pharmacy grows, it'll naturally become a major branch...'

It wouldn't take long for the new pharmacy to be recognized as a branch of the Alchemy Castle and eventually evolve into a headquarters.

'I should take care of my people.'

I smiled.

"Anything else?"

"Nothing specific... Ah, Dajenna, a child from my village, has taken a liking to tteokbokki brought by the hunters. And Garchev, he's an old man guarding an orchard; he's been

sharing fruits with the Black Dragon hunters guarding the village, and in return, they bring fruits from your world---."

The wind blew.

Snowflakes fluttered, and under the moonlit night, Preta's voice flowed like the snow. I listened to her story to the end under the moonlight.

Preta bowed her head.

"---That's the situation."

"Sounds like you're living well."

Preta cautiously replied.

"Yes, it is bearable."

I nodded.

"The people of this world should start living well too."

"....."

"Go and gather the corpses."

Golden hair cascaded down my shoulders. Preta bowed deeply. Her voice leaked from her pursed lips.

"I shall obey your command."

There's a saying about the right person for the right job.

Summoning Preta to collect the dead turned out to be a very good decision.

The Fallen Constellation, once known as the [Demon King of the Autumn Rain], who at one time brought destruction to this other world. She knew well how to harvest death.

"I will start with villages or cities that have offices."

Preta commanded thousands of skeletons with a gesture.

"There should be maps where the administrators work. They might be crude, but they should be sufficient for cross-referencing the geography. I plan to gather fragmented maps to pinpoint remote farming and fishing villages."

Three days into the search, zombies began to be delivered. They were not corpses of martial artists, but ordinary farmers and commoners. The corpses of people who once were just that.

"An instance where a mother, unable to bear watching her starving children, hung herself along with her children... I will bring her corpse."

The skeletons' bones were white. The white bones brought the corpses in a line. In the middle of the snowy plain. The whiteness of the bones and the snow was hard to distinguish. From a distance, it seemed as though the corpses were moving toward me on their own.

"In the morning, children who wake up to find their mother's corpse. Those who cried beside her until they died like wilted wildflowers... I will bring their corpses too."

The procession of corpses continued.

Deaths were lined up.

"Villagers who cursed the mother for failing to fulfill her duties as a parent."

"Those who hid under the well to avoid the pandemic but couldn't come back up."

"Prisoners who starved to death without ever getting a chance to escape."

Preta carefully and selectively offered the impoverished.

Like a vassal presenting only the most precious things to the emperor.

When a week had passed, Preta kneeled again on the snowy field.

"I have brought them, my lord."

I looked out over the snowy plains.

-Groooo...

-Ugh, ugh!

-Kiwooo...

Numerous deaths were lined up.

The corpses, once released from the skeletons' grip, rushed in. Instinctively. Toward the place where the scent of flesh was strong.

Toward where I stood.

"Alright."

I smiled.

"Come all!"

Wham!

A young corpse leaped at me. It bit into my calf. As the agonizing pain was about to surge up my leg, it was interrupted by an old corpse tearing at my thigh. The pain from my calf was cut off at my thigh, then intensified again in my abdomen.

"-----."

I must have screamed. But I couldn't hear it myself as a corpse had torn my ears.

My lips were devoured. My tongue was devoured. Unable to hear, unable to speak, I just watched as numerous shadows burrowed into my body.

[You have died.]

I looked up at the night sky.

The moon seemed eternally snow-covered.

[Re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

The last night sky an old man saw was probably just like this.

He had spent his life fishing in the river. When the old man was bitten by a zombie, he didn't panic. He calmly steered his boat.

-Lying on this boat as I die won't be a burden to the world.

Near the riverside village, the old man's boat gently rocked.

He lay on the boat. As comfortably as if in a coffin. It would have been fine to die, capsized by the waves. To die as if falling asleep... The old man considered it a blessing to be born in the river and die in it.

The last moon he saw was peaceful.

[Re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

How the world had come to such a state was a mystery.

The young castellan walked the city walls at night, pondering. He was never a local official. He was a scholar who ran a scriptorium. But the castellan died, and the castellan's subordinates died, and their servants died.

Death followed death. At the end of the trail was himself.

-Lord of the Castle.

A soldier approached. He too wasn't originally a soldier but a reputable innkeeper. Though rough, he had a quick mind and was useful.

-What is it?

-The granary is empty. In a fortnight, there won't be a single grain of millet in the storehouse. Fishermen occasionally catch fish, but it's not enough. What should we do...?

-Reduce the rations given to the elderly first.

The young castellan ordered.

-The zombies are numerous. We must conserve those who can still fight. Reduce the food for the old and children to one-third.

[Re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

The young castellan was ruthless. Sometimes he seemed colder than the zombies. How the village scholar, who used to only recite scriptures, developed such resolve was sometimes baffling to the soldier.

-There will be much resistance...

-Reduce the food for the young by half too. If everyone cuts back together, it'll be bearable.

-But won't there still be complaints?

-I will fast first.

The castellan spoke shortly.

-I won't eat anything. If the leader abstains, the complainers will lose their strength.

---Are you sure?

-This place won't last long anyway. What difference will a few days of fasting make?

The moon viewed from the city walls was tranquil.

[Re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

-We'll all starve to death at this rate!

A little girl frantically shouted. She was a beggar, and now that the distinction between rich and poor had vanished, she became the leader of children her age.

"The lord forbids the children from eating. It's like he's telling us not to live!"

"So, what should we do, sister?"

"We should eat something before we die, even if it means dying. Only then can we become good-looking zombies."

The kid spoke energetically.

"I know a recipe I learned from Beggars' Sect. It's called 'tohwa' (earth snack). It's literally a mud snack."

"A mud snack...?"

"It's a snack you can make with just mud."

The kid's eyes sparkled.

"Listen up! Kids who can swim keep catching fish. Don't offer them to the adults, let's just share among ourselves. The rest go to the riverbank and scoop up soft mud."

"What are we going to do with it?"

"Let me show you."

[Re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

The children scooped up mud from the riverbank. The mud was mixed with sand. They sifted the mud through a sieve several times, removing the gravel.

"Roll this mud and spread it on a mat."

The kid leader busily worked her hands. She rolled the mud into a ball and thumped it on a mat. Then she spread the mud out wide like kneading dough.

"Good. It's done!"

"Done? What do you mean?"

"Just let it dry in the sun. Then you'll have mud snacks."

The children were incredulous.

"It's just sun-baked mud!"

"How is this a snack?"

"Quiet. It's a secret recipe passed down in Beggars' Sect. Just watch and learn."

The kid leader pulled out a pouch. It contained salt. Salt, already precious, became even more valuable since the rations stopped. To the kids, each grain was as valuable as gold. The kid mixed a little salt into the mud dough.

"Alright!"

After half a day, the mud dried up.

"Now it's done. Try eating one! But be careful. If you eat too much at once, it tastes bad! Just nibble it sparingly."

The children bit into the mud snacks with skepticism.

[Re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

"...Surprisingly, it's edible?"

One child nibbled at the mud snack with his front teeth like a hamster.

[Re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

"The saltiness makes it good."

Another child licked the mud snack. His eyes widened, savoring it like licking an ice cream. The edge of the mud snack turned soggy with his saliva.

[Re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

"It's tasteless..."

Another child simply looked sad.

The kid leader giggled.

"It's fine. As long as we can eat. From now on, we have to take care of our food. Normally, we'll eat tohwa, and when we catch fish, we'll eat that too. Got it?"

"Yeah, sister..."

The children comforted their hungry stomachs with mud.

The human mouth is deceitful. Mud imbued with saltiness was accepted by the children's esophagus as food.

To swallow the mud, the saltiness had to deceive the tongue. So, the children didn't bite into the mud snacks right away. They licked them first, savoring the salty taste.

"Don't lick too much! The taste will be gone. You need to nibble while licking."

The children kneaded mud every day by the riverbank.

"Huh?"

The riverbank.

"Look over there. A corpse."

It was the same river where an old man had drifted away in his boat.

The old man, born from the river, died in it. He considered it happiness. He thought dying in his boat, turning it into a coffin, would be a way not to bother the world.

He hadn't thought about one thing. Sometimes, drowned corpses drift to the riverbank.

If dying in the river was the old man's happiness, then being washed up on this side of the riverbank was his misfortune.

And everyone's misfortune.

"Looks like an old man drowned."

"Poor thing..."

"Maybe a fisherman."

The children approached the old corpse with fear and curiosity.

"Huh?"

It was early dawn.

"Wait, just a minute!"

"Hmm?"

"It's a zombie! Not just a corpse!"

The children ran away as the corpse, smelling their tender scent, began to wriggle.

"Run!"

Some children managed to escape.

"Ah..."

And some couldn't.

[Re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

That was the end.

[Re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

A castle by the river, cut off from the imperial capital and nearby villages, perished that way. The old man died. The last lord died fighting. The soldier trying to flee the city gate died. The kid leader died protecting her younger sibling.

[Re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

They fought to live.

[Re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

They struggled.

[Re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

They endured hunger because they wanted to live.

[Re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

The children's fingers scooping wet soil by the river, their hands spreading the mud dough on the mat, and their fingertips tightly clutching the dried mud cookies.

[Re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

112 deaths.

Among them, not a single gesture was free from hunger.

[Trauma re-enactment complete.]

[The target's ego has remained intact.]

[Penalty Finalized.]

I slowly opened my eyes.

"....."

The snowy plain was silent.

In the quiet night, my murmuring voice softly flowed.

"I thought about learning how to boil tree bark, but..."

Reality surpassed my imagination. In a world heading towards destruction, was tree bark not even worth being a trauma? Pushed to the brink, humans could eat even mud.

"Yeah. That's possible."

I stood up and started digging through the snow. I wrapped my bare hands with aura and dug through, reaching the frozen soil beneath the perennial snow.

The first ground I saw since falling into this world.

"Let's see..."

Digging up years-old frozen soil wasn't easy. I had to use aura. I scooped up a handful of soil and heated it with aura, mixing it with the perennial snow as if boiling a broth. After a while, the soil granules began to soften.

Literal mud.

I carefully sifted out the sand and gravel. I followed what I saw in the dream. I rolled the mud into a ball and spread it wide on my overcoat used as a mat.

"Hmm."

Time passed. The morning and noon sun baked the mud cookies. I carefully picked up the mud cookie, which looked like dalgona, with both hands.

".....I'll enjoy this."

I nibbled at it.

The sound crackled in my mouth.

"....."

I licked the edge of the mud cookie with my tongue. It softened a bit. But as I received the crumbling mud cookie with my tongue, the soil granules stuck to the roof of my mouth. My entire mouth crackled.

"....."

After a while, I got the hang of it. This food wasn't meant to be chewed with molars. It was to be nibbled with front teeth and then slowly swallowed. The warmth of the sun and the scent of the soil, a food that contained only these two elements, I slowly devoured.

Hmm.

".....It tastes bad."

I bit it.

"It's tasteless."

I nibbled it.

"Really, it's tasteless."

I swallowed.

"....."

My shoulders trembled.

My heart trembled.

An indescribable emotion enveloped my body. Was it anger? Sadness? Or perhaps hatred? Humans, originally born from the earth, why can't they eat the earth? Why are the scent of the earth and the texture of the soil so miserably poor?

Why.

"....."

Before I knew it, my right hand was tightly clenched. Whether it was anger, sadness, or perhaps hatred, the emotion clenched in my hand. That's when I realized. Emotions that can't be spoken are meant to be clenched in hands.

Not to be expressed but to be swung.

Martial arts was simply swinging what remained in one's hand.

"....."

Let's go back.

I drew the holy sword. I aimed the tip at the center of my neck.

I'll return and show my sword to the Heavenly Demon. No, not my sword. The sword of the nameless old men, soldiers, lords, and children who died.

I've never read a martial arts novel, so I don't know the subtle principles of yin, yang, and the five elements. If there is any principle in my martial arts, it's just their screams. If there is any heavenly principle in my blade, it's just the gestures of humans abandoned by the heavens.

Because it's resentment and grudge, it's Demonic.

Because it's the sky looked up to in mere resentment and grudge, it's Demonic Heaven.

I stabbed the holy sword into the center of my neck. Carrying the deaths of 112 people in my heart, I returned. What I had to do was no different from the previous loop.

I requested the Heavenly Demon to accept me as a disciple.

Just like before, the Heavenly Demon pondered for a night.

After one night, the Heavenly Demon presented me with a test.

"What is the test?"

"There."

The Heavenly Demon pointed to the bottom of a pit.

"I've thrown a zombie down there. A late-stage Ki master who was a rising star in our cult, a supreme expert who had made a name for himself in the martial world. Defeat that zombie. Then I will accept you as a disciple of my inner sect."

However, the Heavenly Demon added,

"Fight while feeling hunger. Fight the zombie, but only hunger should reside in your heart. The pain of hunger alone should occupy your mind. I forbid any other emotion or thought to infiltrate your mind. Can you do it?"

I didn't respond.

There was no need to articulate what couldn't be spoken.

Instead, I quietly jumped into the pit.

-Grooooooar!

A zombie charged at me.

I looked at the zombie with an indifferent gaze.

"....."

The scent of mud in my mouth.

The feel of a lump of earth in my gestures.

Only the hunger of the children encapsulated in my heart.

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The First Form.

Sword of Starving Death.

I swung my sword.

With one strike, I severed its legs.

With a second, its arms were cut off.

With a third, I beheaded the zombie.

In each movement, not a gesture was free from hunger.

The former supreme expert of the Demonic Cult lay silenced
at the bottom of the pit.

"....."

I looked up.

The Heavenly Demon's mouth was agape. She was staring at me with an expression even more astonished than when she first saw our group. Her eyes wavered. After such wavering, her heart must have been tumultuous.

The meaning of life she thought she had lost forever.

She saw it beginning anew before her eyes.

Becoming visible.

"Heavenly Demon."

I slowly opened my lips.

"What kind of death shall I present next?"

Volume 4 – Chapters 75-99

Chapter 75: Song of Light and Shadow (1)

"The Demonic Heavenly God Art originally consists of nine sword techniques," the Heavenly Demon commented after watching my duel.

"The Sword of Starving Death you demonstrated is the first form. You must be aware of that."

"Yes."

"After the Sword of Starving Death comes the Sword of Parched Death."

Sword of Parched Death.

"Hunger from thirst."

"Indeed. You, the child from another world, have displayed the Sword of Starving Death quite decently. Thus, if you devote yourself to training, you might become a worthy disciple...."

"Just a moment."

I raised my hand.

"Please wait."

Sorry, but I couldn't bear it without raising my hand. The person sitting cross-legged before me seemed to be glossing over something important, but that wall, in my view, was quite high.

"...What is it?"

"What did you just say? 'Quite decently'?"

The Heavenly Demon's lips pressed tightly together.

“Strange, I thought I did quite well. To the Heavenly Demon, it was just decent.... Oh! Sorry. Suddenly, my pride vanished and my confidence started to wane. You know, when your spirit just gets crushed.”

“This brat....”

The corner of the Heavenly Demon's mouth twitched.

“...Alright, I admit it. You displayed the Sword of Starving Death skillfully. Just don't go around boasting that you've mastered the Demonic Heavenly God Art.”

“What? What did you say? 'Skillfully'?”

“Are you trying to mock me with wordplay!”

The Heavenly Demon exclaimed.

“Do I have to bow my head and offer you the Nine Bows Ritual for you to be satisfied? Really, such an impudent child! Just become the master yourself! I'll be the disciple.”

Okay. I've got a bite.

I acted nonchalantly, like a fisherman.

“So, you're saying that I've been acknowledged as your disciple, right? That's right, isn't it? Not an outer sect disciple, but a true, direct, personal disciple.”

The Heavenly Demon couldn't immediately respond.

One second. Two seconds.

After a slight pause, she finally opened her mouth.

“Refrain from digression. Child, I will now impart my teachings, so be attentive.”

Hmm.

‘As I thought.’

Just now, the Heavenly Demon deliberately ignored my words. Stubbornness comes from determination, and determination comes from sincerity. I could see where her hesitation stemmed from.

‘She won't outright say she'll take me as a disciple.’

The bond between master and disciple.

She had internally marked me as her disciple. However, she adamantly, absolutely refused to say aloud, "I accept you as my disciple."

I often failed to notice due to the bickering with the Sword Emperor.

For martial artists, especially the Heavenly Demon, the bond between master and disciple is that significant.

‘A heavy bond... can sometimes turn into a terrifying one.’

Therefore, the lady of the Demonic Cult refrains from declaring a master-disciple relationship.

She hesitates.

To take in a character like me, whom she had just met and who isn't even from the central martial realm. To allow such a child into her heart.

To hold a bit more hope in her life.

The Heavenly Demon, So BaekHyang, was wavering.

“Listen well. If you can execute the Sword of Starving Death to such a degree, at least you deserve to stealthily overhear and steal the teachings of our sect. But.....”

Despite her outward appearance of utter calmness.

‘Character Window.’

The inner feelings revealed to me were entirely different.

Name: So BaekHyang

Favorability: 51

Preferred Genres: [Martial Arts]

Disliked Genres: [Classics], [Mythology], [History], [Fairy Tales]

Preferred Characters: [Commoners], [Rivals]

Disliked Characters: [Oppressors], [Deceivers], [Playboys]

Preferred Plots: [Full-strength Battles]

Disliked Plots: [Escape], [Forgetfulness], [Meaningless Death]

Psychological State: 'A disciple, huh. It's time for me to make a decision. Ah, no, it's a terrible thought! I should be content with my rivalry with Namgung Woon. Thinking of having a disciple at this late stage in life, it's overreaching! It's a shameful old age.'

+

Yes.

I smiled inwardly.

‘Please contemplate.’

The Heavenly Demon's dilemma.

It was a green light for me.

‘Please waver more deeply.’

After all, I was the one who presented her with this crossroads.

To continue hopelessly with the martial alliance and the Great Orthodox-Demonic War, or to take a single disciple, ensuring the continuation of the Demonic Cult's teachings to the next generation.

Which exit truly leads away from a [Meaningless Death]?

‘Don't let go of life just yet.’

Words are light.

Vain.

How hollow it is to say, "Live."

'Even if the world falls to ruin and you're the only one left in the martial world, I still wish for you to live. It'd be good if you were alive.'

Does piling up words lend any weight to them?

'I hope to be a reason for you to continue living a little longer.'

Empty and vain words.

I didn't utter these thoughts aloud.

The Heavenly Demon didn't declare a master-disciple relationship for the same reason as me.

The lightness of words must be counterbalanced by the weight of actions. Only then can they be grounded.

Neither the Heavenly Demon nor I had yet put in enough effort to carry the weight of the words we wanted to speak.

"The time for a decision has not yet come," the Heavenly Demon thought to herself.

'I haven't yet managed to draw out that decision,' I thought to myself.

"....."

"....."

The Heavenly Demon and I faced each other.

“You, the child from another world. You don’t seem to be paying attention. Are you listening well to what I am saying?”

“Yes.”

Watching carefully.

“Of course, I’m concentrating. What are you talking about?”

“It seems to be a genuine concern.”

“Of course. I swear to it, whether it’s to the Jade Emperor or to the King of the Underworld.”

Our eyes met, interlocking yet diverging. Eyes, unlike hands, meet and miss at the same time. That’s why eyes are somewhat like human hearts.

After several missed connections, the Heavenly Demon spoke.

“Good. Seeing your overflowing confidence, you seem ready

for the next test.”

The Heavenly Demon stood up and brushed off her eyes.

She left abruptly.

“Do not follow. I am in a hurry.”

With that, she left. Walking on the snowfield, she left no footprints, only her slender shadow gliding over the ice. She showed me the meaning of Printless Snow Walk, a term I heard on my first day in this world.

Then, suddenly.

-I want to fight.

The Guardian Spirit spoke up.

-I want to duel, even if it's just for one round. Seriously.

I involuntarily turned to look at him.

‘What?’

-I said I want a real fight, a duel.

And then, for the first time, I witnessed the Sword Emperor with such an expression.

-Dammit. Damn it all, damn!

The Sword Emperor was genuinely aggrieved.

-You know, zombie! In the martial world where I was born, the Demonic Cult was ridiculously weak! The only pleasure was to trounce those demonic lackeys! There was a guy pretending to be the Heavenly Demon, but ever since I planted his butt into the ground, he changed his title to Earth Demon! Damn it! Among all the so-called martial heroes I roamed around with, I must have changed the surname of hundreds. Ah, seriously!!

It was different.

It wasn't the same expression he had when he lost a bet to me.

Even though he was upset and struggling back then... The expression on the Guardian Spirit's face now,

-I'm so envious of the Martial Alliance Leader born in this world!

Was much more intense.

-If it were me, you know what? I'd fight a duel to the death with Life and Death Boundaries! Hey, let's see if this death is yours or mine and split the difference! After that, I'd climb up any snowy peak, gulp down a bowl of rice wine, and chew on a piece of boiled meat, and man, that's the real taste of looking down on the martial world!

Ambition. Pride. Fighting spirit.

His face was as vivid as raw meat.

-If only I weren't a ghost! Really!

"....."

I quietly closed my mouth.

Without realizing it, I had fallen into deep thought, supporting my chin with my hand as my head bowed. My mind was so filled with thoughts that I needed to support it with my hand.

-Huh? Zombie, why are you making a zombie face again? Are you upset because I'm calling you a sparrow instead of a zombie lately? Hey, should I just call you a 'zombie sparrow'?

".....That's it."

-Huh?

"That's exactly it."

I abruptly lifted my head.

"The Apothecary creates a cure for the zombie virus. I get

officially recognized as the Heavenly Demon's disciple. All that's great. But... I felt something was missing. A finale, if you will? But just now, you gave me the final shot I needed."

-Uh....

"Nice play. Well done, Sword Emperor sir."

I grinned.

For some reason, the Sword Emperor backed away when he saw me smile.

"What's wrong?"

-No, it's just... every time you make that face, I get struck by bad luck. As if my dignity and status are about to be smeared.

"You know how much I respect you in my heart, right, Sword Emperor?"

-Thanks. Now, should I just throw up on your face?

“Hmm.”

I gazed at the distant sky with my hands behind my back.

“We have an unsettled debt between us.”

-.....

The Guardian Spirit hesitated.

-...Debt? What debt? I've never lived a life in debt to anyone. Eh, this young master is trying to cast some curse with his mouth again. Don't do that. Oh! You'll get hurt doing that!

“[Let's bet how many times I die before reaching the 19th floor].”

-.....

“You bet that I would die over 100 times. I bet on 99 times or less.”

-Well....

“Right?”

My smile became a bit more innocent.

-That's... How long ago was that...

“If my memory isn't failing, that bet concluded with 97 times, didn't it?”

-.....

“If my calculation is not wrong, 97 is less than 99. Right?”

-.....

“Sword Emperor.”

-Why do you keep doing this to me....

“Could you do me a favor?”

The Guardian Spirit made a sulking face.

-Fine, you wicked brat. Do whatever you want with me....

A complete surrender.

The Heavenly Demon returned.

When she left across the snowfield, she was alone, but not when she came back. She carried a zombie on her shoulder. Like the Palm Blast Zombie, this one was also dressed in black robes.

"In our sect, there is a unit called the Blood Ghosts, composed only of elites. They're the finest practical unit made up entirely of assassins. They exist solely to fulfill my orders."

The second sparring partner had arrived.

I took up the Holy Sword and assumed my stance.

"Last time it was a highly-regarded late-stage practitioner, now it's an assassin from an elite squad? The difficulty sure is escalating."

"Don't worry. I've brought someone suitable for your level."

Probably, the Heavenly Demon really did find [the perfect opponent] for me. Searching across the snowfield, checking hundreds of zombies one by one.

It was a thoughtful gesture.

A gesture filled with effort.

I gratefully accepted it as a compliment.

"What you have to demonstrate today is no different from this morning. Fight the zombie, but..."

"In my heart, only thirst. Only the pain of thirst must be present."

"Hm."

The Heavenly Demon smiled.

"Indeed. Allow no emotion or thought other than thirst to reside in your mind!"

"Understood!"

I charged in exuberantly.

"I'll show you something again this time...."

[You have died.]

[Returning 24 hours to the past.]

"So damn strong! Damn it!"

I did show something.

The fastest ultra-speed death scene in the universe.

Whatever.

"Medicine King, Miss Apothecary. The research on the zombie virus cure should proceed like this...."

"Good heavens! It's as if I did the research myself! No, it's like my research got dressed up and knighted, like it received a baronetcy or something!"

"What is this? Are you a Silicon Valley native too? This is organized just like how I would've done it...."

First, as always, I updated the research results on the cure.

"Ghoul Reincarnation!"

I decided to seclude myself in the snowy mountains for meditation again.

I summoned Preta and the skeletons to collect deaths, which

was similar to before. Although the request was to find thirsty corpses instead of hungry ones, the command wasn't much different.

"Scatter. Scatter and gather corpses of those who died due to dehydration."

"Yes, my lord. Your command shall be obeyed."

But...

"There's one more task I have for you."

Here's where it differed from last time.

Preta tilted his head in curiosity.

"What would you have us do, my lord...."

"There must be zombies skilled in martial arts scattered around."

I wasn't talking about the 'Forest of Corpses' I witnessed upon falling into this world. In the last three years, the Heavenly Demon and the Martial Alliance Leader fought a lonely Great Orthodox-Demonic War, gradually losing corpses in the chaos.

When blizzards blew incessantly for days and nights lengthened, leaving no daylight. During those times, the Demonic Cult and the orthodox faction slowly lost their strength and went missing.

The 'zombies' I spoke of were these 'missing' people.

"Find them."

I said.

"Search for martial artists in black robes. Look for chivalrous warriors in white robes. Whether it's a hundred or three hundred miles away, release the skeletons and find them. No, make a map and mark the locations of the zombies."

Preta looked puzzled.

"What do you plan to do with those lives, my lord...?"

"There are still two people fighting a war in this ruined world. They want a proper conclusion, a proper ending. But sadly, from what I see, it's just a pitiful game of soldiers."

I looked up at the night sky.

The moon was up.

"If they want a real conclusion, let's give them a real war."

"A real war, you say?"

"Yes."

A smile came naturally to me.

I felt like Santa preparing Christmas gifts.

"Let's prepare a proper Great Orthodox-Demonic War."

Chapter 76: Song of Light and Shadow (2)

When I first tried to learn the Sword of Starving Death.

"What?"

The Heavenly Demon was disappointed.

"You mean to tell me the longest you've ever starved is just about three days?"

She didn't appreciate my effort. She gave up. Resigned. After briefly observing me wielding the sword, the Heavenly Demon quickly turned her back and left.

"We're not on the same page."

"How could you comprehend the Demonic Heavenly God Art without even knowing this?"

The Heavenly Demon only tested me to give up on herself.

Since there was nothing more to hope for in this world. Nothing should be.

"It's done."

"It's my fault."

That was when I learned 'hunger.'

But when it came to mastering 'thirst,' her attitude completely changed.

"Your swordsmanship is excessively simple."

The Heavenly Demon watched as I fought the zombie.

I could feel her gaze on me changing. Even when I clumsily swung my sword, she didn't turn her back, frowning instead. She even offered advice.

"There's no subtlety in your sword. No room for adaptation. It's straightforward and honest, yet that makes it vulnerable."

To me, a human, the Heavenly Demon began to pin her hopes.

"Your sword seems not to fight against humans but to confront the world. It's closer to the swordsmanship of the orthodox faction than that of our sect. How intriguing."

At first, I was killed by a martial arts zombie in a single blow.

But as time passed, I could easily handle the martial arts zombie. It was inevitable. Every night I was killed by the zombies that Preta brought.

The more I experienced the trauma of the thirsty dead, the stronger my sword became.

"I'll teach you a simple mind technique."

Once my swordsmanship improved, the Heavenly Demon finally began her teachings.

"A mind technique? What's that?"

"...It's like a secret technique or formula. Talking with you, a child from beyond, isn't easy."

The Heavenly Demon cleared her throat.

"Think back to when you used the Sword of Starving Death. What were you thinking about when you swung your sword?"

"I thought of hunger."

"Of course. But that's not all. Unbeknownst to you, you had already grasped the essence of demonic art."

The essence of demonic art.

"I will now teach you about it."

We sat facing each other on the snowfield.

"Now, imagine an [apple] in your mind."

"An apple... as in the fruit?"

"Yes, the edible apple."

I did as told and pictured an apple.

"Have you imagined it?"

"Yes."

"How does the apple feel to the touch?"

"Excuse me?"

The question caught me off guard. How could I know the touch of an apple when I didn't actually hold one in my hand?

Confused, I looked at the Heavenly Demon, who was keenly observing my reaction.

"Don't you know?"

"I could force myself to imagine it, but..."

"That's fine. Say you don't know if you don't know."

"Ah, yes. I have no idea."

"Hmm. Hmm."

The Heavenly Demon smiled. She seemed pleased.

"Honest, I see. Good! Now think of [hunger]."

"....."

I did.

I imagined a farmer tirelessly swinging a hoe on parched land. The motion of hitting a child. Children digging soft mud by the river and making mud cookies from it.

"Have you imagined it?"

The Heavenly Demon whispered.

"Yes, I have."

"What is the touch of hunger?"

The crunch of teeth on mud cookies. The taste. The dry texture.

".....It's dry."

"What is the scent of hunger?"

"The smell of dirt."

"Oh. What kind of dirt? There are different types. Soil for farming, clay for pottery. Black soil, red soil. I'm curious. What kind of dirt is your hunger?"

"Mud."

I said with my eyes closed.

"Any mud won't do. It must be mud with fewer pebbles and sand."

"I see. And what is the taste of hunger?"

"....."

"Child."

The Heavenly Demon's voice softened.

"I asked about the taste of hunger. Why don't you answer immediately?"

".....It's sad."

I replied.

"The children dry mud cookies in the sun. While drying, they have nothing to do, so they linger around the cookies. They just wait for the mud to dry..."

"Waiting children under the sun."

"...Yes."

"Hunger is like children waiting for the sun."

That's how it was. That's how it had been.

"Child. That's your poetry."

The Heavenly Demon's voice fell like gentle snow.

"When I asked about the touch of an apple, you said you didn't know. But what about hunger? You touched the mud. You smelled it. You chewed and ate it! You saw the flowing river, so you must have heard its gurgling sound as well."

An old man's last voyage. A ferry. The night sky.

A lonely death, not wanting to be a burden, yet ending up as one.

"An apple has a form, but hunger doesn't. An apple has taste, but hunger is tasteless. Yet you speak so well of hunger! To you, hunger is mud, sunlight, river, and children."

"Child! That's your talent."

The Heavenly Demon said.

"Now, open your eyes."

I looked.

The Heavenly Demon moved her hands while seated.

"The reason you don't know the feel of an apple is simple. You didn't stimulate your [memory]."

My memory.

"If you've eaten an apple before, you would know."

The Heavenly Demon smiled and moved her hands.

I soon realized.

She was mimicking cutting an apple in half.

"Apples have smooth skin. Slick yet slightly rough. I usually enjoy eating apples with the skin on, but if there's a sick child, it changes. Cut it in half..."

It was as if she actually had an apple in her hand.

"Scoop it out with a spoon. Feed the scooped apple to the sick child, bite by bite."

"....."

"Have you ever eaten scooped apple like that?"

Yes.

I remembered a teacher in the orphanage doing that for me. When I was sick with a cold, lying in bed, he fed me scooped apple with a spoon.

"How does the scooped apple feel?"

".....It's mushy."

"Exactly! But is that all? Did it just become tasteless?"

"The juice fills your mouth."

"That's right! And what else! If you scrape the peel thoroughly, the remaining apple skin becomes wrinkly. The mother's hands feeding the apple become wet from the juice. But then, child, among all these, what would you say is your apple?"

"....."

I was lost in thought.

The Heavenly Demon pressed on.

"Is it the whole apple? The halved apple? A spoonful of juice? The skin? The mother's hand? What is your apple?"

What is my apple?

"I've seen a mother who fed the entire apple to her child and only ate the remaining skin."

"....."

"To me, the apple is the leftover skin of the mother. The sick child. The mother's heart, grated spoon by spoon."

My heart felt warm, even sitting in the middle of the snowfield.

Maybe it was because of the Heavenly Demon's smile.

"---And then I think of children whose mothers never once scooped an apple for them."

But the Heavenly Demon's smile didn't last long.

"I think of mothers who couldn't afford apples. Mothers who could but didn't buy them. Children who lay sick but had no one to care for them. Children who died without care."

Malice.

The Heavenly Demon's black eyes darkened.

"In this world, there's nothing untouched by human hearts,

thus, there's no place free from human resentments!"

I shivered.

"What is hunger without shape, taste, or scent? Thirst! Hunger is mud, river, and children. Even an apple is so. Child! Your hunger is mud, so make your thirst the same!"

"....."

"Feel the pain of thirst! Sense it. Satisfy the taste. Smell it. Eat it. Gesture it. Demonic art is memory! Memory is sensation. This is our sect's mind technique! The touch of scooping mud to eat, the feel in your hand, that's your hunger, your Demonic Heavenly God Art!"

A chill ran down my neck.

A cold current flowed through my body.

"The common folk may suffer unjustly, but that's all. They can't speak out. They can't express it. The unspoken grievances keep piling up in their hearts, eventually turning into deep resentment. But we of the Demonic Cult are

different!"

The Heavenly Demon looked at me.

"We wield our swords!"

I instinctively gripped the sword hilt tighter.

"Like courtesans sing and scholars recite poetry, we swing our swords. What's the difference between a rogue of the green forests and a martial artist of our cult? They are controlled by the sword. But we control the sword! Just that, and all that matters."

The training began.

"How can a life just lived be called living? It's death! How can a sword swung at will be called a sword? It's a beast. Do you want to die? Do you want to become a beast?"

"No!"

I clenched my teeth.

"I am a living human!"

"Then yearn for thirst. Thirst like you hungered!"

I gathered 112 people who died from starvation.

Among them, there was a child who had gnawed on mud cookies.

I bit into the dry grains of earth in my mouth.

Thus,

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The First Form.

Sword of Starving Death.

"You have found the mud of hunger. Now you must find something of thirst. To you, hunger was the children waiting for the sun. What is thirst to you!"

I gathered 48 people who died of thirst.

Among them was an old woman who drank seawater continuously.

I pickled my internal organs in brine.

Thus,

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Second Form.

Sword of Parched Death.

"To you, hunger was mud and thirst was the sea. But is the sea's pain only in thirst? There's the pain of drowning in seawater, drowning in a river. Child, what is water to you!"

I gathered 37 people who drowned.

Among them was a father who gave his last breath to his child.

I sank in water, sharing breaths with Preta.

Thus,

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Third Form.

Sword of Submerged Death.

"Hunger is earth. Thirst is waves. To you, suffocation is the father's last breath! Land, sea, and air are already yours. Child from beyond! What is winter to you."

I gathered 96 people who died of cold.

Among them was a newborn clinging to its dead mother's body till the end.

I embraced the corpse until I froze.

Thus,

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Fourth Form.

Sword of Frostbitten Death.

"....."

Dawn faded. Morning passed. The day progressed.

The world had spent a day,

And I had witnessed 293 deaths.

"Child. Your sword is..."

The Heavenly Demon slowly opened her lips.

"Truly, it's ever-changing."

The way she looked at me had also changed.

"Every person has their own tendencies. In martial arts, the life of the practitioner is reflected. It's an unchangeable habit. Especially with the Demonic Heavenly God Art, but you, child... are diverse. Truly rich."

"Ah. I often hear that I have a variety of charms."

"....."

"Sorry. Was that nonsense?"

"No. It was utter nonsense."

"That's a bit harsh."

"To be honest, it was completely nonsensical."

That so. Utter nonsense, then-.

If it's utter nonsense, so be it-.

"Understanding all human suffering is difficult. Even if understood, experiencing all sufferings to their extreme is... very hard. But watching you perform the Demonic Heavenly God Art, it's as if... ...hmm?"

The Heavenly Demon furrowed her brows. She turned her head.

"...Someone is coming."

Someone was approaching from where she looked. It couldn't be a zombie since it was still broad daylight, and in this world that had already ended, it couldn't be an intruder either. It was the Head of the Martial Alliance and Viper. Viper was carrying the Head of the Martial Alliance across the snowfield.

"Hmm."

The Heavenly Demon sniffled.

"What brings this old fool here? And what's with that pitiful state? Ha. Have you finally accepted that you're a senile old man?"

"Shut it."

Lying on Viper's back, the Head of the Martial Alliance spoke.

"I came here worried about you. Ugh!"

"Worried? Worried about me? Even a passing zombie would laugh. You're weaker than me, an old fool, and you think you're in a position to worry about me?....."

"Demon. Haven't you received the Nine Bows yet?"

"....."

"Ugh. I knew it, I knew it! I knew this would happen."

The Heavenly Demon clamped her mouth shut.

I wondered in my mind.

'What's the Nine Bows?'

-It's a ritual performed in the martial world when establishing a master-disciple relationship.

The Sword Emperor explained.

-Each sect has slightly different rituals. Some literally bow nine times, others three times.... I'm not sure how the Demonic Cult does it. It's a secret and sacred ceremony.

'How was it in your sect?'

-Well, you get hit on the head nine times by your master. If you endure, that's the Nine Bows. I lasted until the 63rd hit, a record in my sect's history. Cool, right?

I realized why the Sword Emperor was crazy.

Crazy ones start from the sect itself.

".....It's noisy. When to accept a disciple is my decision."

The Heavenly Demon spoke bluntly.

"It's not a matter for you to interfere."

"Nonsense. It's definitely something I must interfere with!"

The Head of the Martial Alliance got off Viper's back. He glared fiercely at the Heavenly Demon.

"Because you're not accepting a disciple out of guilt for me!"

"Huh? What are you saying....."

"We are the only two left in the martial world. You're the

only demonic practitioner, and I'm the only orthodox. If you alone take a disciple, it means the martial world will be left only with a disciple of the Demonic Cult. What does that mean? It's as if you've won the Great Orthodox-Demonic War without fighting!"

"....."

"You and I vowed to settle this ourselves. Broke the oath out of guilt, aren't you, for not taking that young lad as your disciple!"

Hmm.

'...That's a reason too.'

Taking a disciple alone in the same situation.

Considering the Heavenly Demon's feelings, she might indeed feel guilty towards the Head of the Martial Alliance.

But,

"Tsk tsk, such unnecessary loyalty!"

"....."

"You knew I would do this, so you acted first."

The Head of the Martial Alliance patted Viper's shoulder.

Viper smirked and scratched his cheek.

"Well. That's how it is."

The Heavenly Demon's eyes widened.

"No, old man... you couldn't have taken that child as..."

"Yes! From today, he's my official disciple!"

"How dare you do this to me!?"

The Heavenly Demon lunged. Thud thud bang! The two masters rolled in the snow, fighting like dogs.

"How dare you belittle my earnest intentions! You treat it as nothing.....!"

"Quiet! If destiny has come, thank the gods and accept it! Avoiding it because you're wary of me isn't right!"

"What about the Great Orthodox-Demonic War!"

"Must it always be just us two in the Great War? If our disciples fight, that's also a Great War!"

"I won't accept it unless it's with you!"

"Always so extreme, just like a Demon! Just because it's divided, does the world really divide?"

"I see the world as an ocean, but what I see is ice! It divides as it's cut!"

"Then melt it!"

"That's why there's the fire of demonic way! A demonic practitioner is the kindling!"

"Then add more kindling!"

"Axe Sage, you...! Always like an orthodox, just hanging on to words...!"

"That's how it is!"

The woman grabbed the old man's collar.

The old man, in turn, grabbed her hair and glared.

Their argument went on like that. As they tumbled around, two different worlds clashed with a metallic sound. In the midst of such a petty dogfight, the worlds still found their place.

Leaving the two to fight, I looked at Viper.

"It's unexpected."

"What is?"

"Well, someone like you, a 'real' one, taking someone as a master, I mean... "

I couldn't say it directly.

I circled around it.

"You're the master of Celestial Martial Guild. Is it okay for a master to take a new master?"

"Damn. If there's a place to dance, dance. If there's a master to learn from, seek learning. I'm not idle enough to fuss over every detail."

Viper smiled, a manly smile settling on his rugged face.

Hmm.

"Viper."

"Why?"

"I'm being quite frank with you. If you were coerced into it, or if you took on the Head of the Martial Alliance as a master out of sympathy or half-hearted determination, you'll regret it."

The two martial artists are still clashing, making noise.

Viper's situation, being pushed by his disciples into the Heavenly Demon Records, is different.

Such actions would be an insult to these two sects.

Unforgivable.

".....I don't quite understand what you're saying."

Viper scratched his cheek and winked his one eye.

"Damn, what's this King of Death babbling about? If you want to check something, use your sword."

With a snap, Viper raised his sword.

"It won't be easy."

There was an easy way to check. If I opened Viper's psychological window, it would become clear.

But instead of doing that, I quietly said,

"Viper."

"What?"

"Have you ever experienced starvation?"

Viper blinked his one eye.

"What?"

At that moment, I dashed forward.

Chapter 77: Song of Light and Shadow (3)

I charged forward.

Raised my sword.

And slashed down.

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The First Form.

Sword of Starving Death.

My body became a starving farmer, my sword a pickaxe. As

my blade struck, the air crumbled like dry mud.

Crumbling, crumbling, and in the crumbling void, Viper's head appeared.

“What.....!”

Viper flinched, his one eye filled with astonishment. His shoulders moved to counterattack but then stopped, and in the next moment, his hips shifted, choosing to dodge instead.

A farmer's pickaxe never misses the ground.

My sword cleaved through the air. Viper moved back, and as he did, the air he vacated sucked in with a whoosh.

Boom!

The air split and burst, and snowflakes swirled in a whirlwind. It was winter. The air that scraped the nostrils was terribly dry as the wind carried the snow.

"---Damn."

Viper lifted his sword. Between the flurries, his one eye shone through. In the sole eye of the surviving Head of the Celestial Martial Guild, shock swirled.

"What is this,"

I charged again.

Once more, I raised my sword.

And slashed down.

"This," Viper dodged my blade again. "This crap," Boom, the bursting sound and rising snowflakes. "Damn it," Each time I swung my sword, Viper dodged, forced to evade, "Damn," and whirlwinds rose in his place.

"Bloody hell!"

I was about to charge again but stopped.

Or more precisely, stumbled to a halt.

I wasn't breathing. I didn't realize it. "Huff," Dry air assaulted my throat. My lungs churned. "Huh," Each breath twisted my insides, causing pain. My body trembled.

But I did not let go of my sword.

A single exchange.

One clash had ended.

"Damn, almost died there..."

Viper, sweating profusely, looked at me.

"King of Death, I thought you were all talk... but your swordplay is quite something. Damn. What the hell? That was like a series of [Eternal Demon Swords]."

"That's right, my disciple! Truly, a demonic ferocity that freezes and shatters the world – [Eternal Demon Sword]!"

The Head of the Martial Alliance, who had been brawling with the Heavenly Demon, shouted.

The [Eternal Demon Sword] Viper spoke of and the [Eternal Demon Sword] the Head of the Martial Alliance referred to were separated by an insurmountable fourth-dimensional wall. That wall was imperceptible without the art of mind reading.

Heavenly Demon, too, was unaware of this wall. She clicked her tongue.

“Even with only one eye, you're quite perceptive.”

“Of course! Though slightly aged, I'm a true genius with the real eye of insight. Otherwise, why would this Great Steel Cauldron Axe take me as a disciple?”

The Head of the Martial Alliance boasted, then glanced at me slyly.

“Hmm. You, too, seem to have picked quite a talent. To think he could wield such a terrifying demonic sword after such a short time as your disciple, ha. He might surpass even the Four Demon Lords – a truly fearsome seed of a demonic ruler!”

“That's... I haven't accepted him as a disciple yet...”

“Come on! Are you still saying that?!”

"....."

Heavenly Demon fell silent.

‘Right.’

Breathing heavily, I thought.

‘This isn't about defeating Viper or him defeating me.’

The purpose of this duel.

‘To get Heavenly Demon to acknowledge me.’

In this respect, the Head of the Martial Alliance and I had the same goal.

To give Heavenly Demon, who was just waiting for destruction, a future.

The Head of the Martial Alliance chuckled.

“My disciple!”

“Oh, Master!”

Viper responded with vigor, and the Head of the Martial Alliance shouted,

“Let me give you some advice! Listen carefully!”

“What...”

Heavenly Demon opened her mouth.

“What, you old fool! What are you doing now!”

“Why? Is there a problem? If she's not your disciple, then what does it matter?”

“That's not the point... It's rude to give advice during a duel! Even in a game of Go, it's impolite for someone else to interfere, let alone during a duel between two warriors!”

“Two warriors?”

The Head of the Martial Alliance laughed heartily, stroking his beard.

“To my eyes, I see only a green demonic seed and a proud successor of the orthodox path. It's even stated in the great laws that you can team up to defeat a demon. No problem at all.”

“Just look at this old fool...!”

"Ha ha."

The Head of the Martial Alliance boisterously declared.

“My disciple! That green demon, though his strikes are profound, seems to lack the stamina to maintain his ferocity! Don't confront him directly. Evade and wait for his Ki to drop!”

“Hey hey, Master! Is that true?”

Viper smirked.

“I already figured that much out long ago! Got any more practical advice?”

“No. That's how you speak? Is that the dignity of a disciple of the orthodox path you're showing?”

Heavenly Demon gritted her teeth. She was fuming for several reasons.

“Is that really the style of the last disciple you're willing to accept, you demon? Will you still demand the elegance of the Central Plains from this foreign youth? Or are you worried that your green demonic seed will be crushed by my disciple...?”

“This...”

“My disciple! Use the [Filling Butterfly Sword] and [Order of Life and Death]! It will work instantly!”

Viper's thick eyebrows twitched.

Underneath, his one eye was filled with profound realization.

“Indeed. [Filling Butterfly Sword] and [Order of Life and Death].”

“Yes! And if you add the essence of [Divine Martial Heaven], that would be even better, but can you do it?”

“Damn, of course! Master. I am the Head of the Celestial Martial Guild, Viper!”

Viper, with a grand gesture, cleared his nostrils and grabbed his sword.

Meanwhile, I finally managed to catch my breath.

Repositioning myself, Viper teasingly asked me,

“King of Death.”

“Yes.”

“You asked if I've ever experienced starvation?”

“That's right. Viper.”

“Is that your martial art?”

A sharp question, as piercing as the look in his one eye.

I regulated my breathing and answered.

“That was the essence of my strike just now.”

“That seemed likely.”

Viper chuckled. Then he tilted his head, shifting that smile.

“Let me ask you in return, King of Death. What do you think martial arts are?”

A discussion about martial arts by the Head of Chun-Moon Guild.

It was like the Inquisitor discussing God, the Sword Saint discussing the sword, or the future Master Alchemist discussing medicine. It was something to sit down and earnestly listen to.

I would have done just that, had I not met the Sword Emperor, learned demonic arts from Heavenly Demon, and more importantly, not read the man's psychology before this.

“Answer me!”

Viper lowered his stance and raised his sword.

Like a venomous snake ready to strike with its fangs bared.

“To step forward! To swing your arm! To throw a punch!”

And he moved.

No---he flowed.

Like he himself became liquid, flowing smoothly and gracefully from a higher place to a lower one, he came towards me.

Flowing like that, then suddenly, Ka-ching...!

“Martial arts is...”

From below to above, he unleashed an upward slash which I barely blocked.

Immediately after, Viper turned his sword around. The blades sparked as they collided. Viper then straightened his sword, aiming it skyward in a straight line, and slightly

twisted his wrist. Tilted it.

And poured it down.

“To land a blow on the punk in front of you!”

It poured down.

“That's all there is to it! Punk!”

A torrent of sword strikes enveloped me.

“Damn it,” Ka-ching! As soon as I blocked, “Ah,” Ka-ching! The next strike, “Uh!” Then another, “Damn,” The relentless sword strikes chewed at my blade, bit into it, forcefully creating a gap. “Uh,” And then, whoosh...! The blade that finally penetrated nicked my cheek.

“Oh no...!”

Blood burst out. I barely stepped back a few paces, but,

“I won't let you escape!”

Viper, like a snake sinking its fangs into its prey, smoothly coiled and clung onto me.

Again from below to above, I launched an attack.

“Uh,”

As soon as I blocked, he rode the momentum up, unleashing a shower of sword strikes.

"Damn it,"

Indeed, he is strong.

It's no wonder why he's ranked among hunters as a martial artist. This character Viper!

“Hey hey, King of Death! You started with the first strike but that's all you've got?”

Viper scoffed.

The fury that surged within me erupted from someone else's mouth.

“Damn it..!”

It was Heavenly Demon.

“You brat!”

She yelled at me.

“What are you doing! It’s a downpour! It’s water! Doesn’t his sword resemble pouring rain!”

Heavenly Demon, who had been grinding her teeth at the Head of the Martial Alliance's provocations, finally raised her voice. Clenching her fist, she shouted at me.

“What's there to be afraid of! Catch it and drink it!”

Heavenly Demon had accepted this duel.

Me, becoming the successor of the Demonic Cult, and Viper, inadvertently becoming the successor of the Orthodox Faction. She acknowledged our fight. This was a battle between the Demonic Cult and the Orthodox Faction, and we were the 'representatives' of Heavenly Demon and the Head of the Martial Alliance.

"Ha."

I laughed.

“Understood!”

Holding the sword in reverse grip, I raised my stance.

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Second Form.

Sword of Parched Death.

I blocked Viper's pouring strikes before they could even start, and reversing them, I drew them in along the path I desired. I let them flow.

And poured them onto the bare ground.

"Ah."

A wasted move by Viper.

A move wasted by me.

As our gazes crossed for a moment, the voices of the old man and the woman intertwined.

"My disciple! Be like decomposed leaf soil! Become like wet earth..."

"Ha! Just turn it into a puddle!"

Viper crouched into a defensive stance and I twisted my sword to the side simultaneously.

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Third Form.

Sword of Submerged Death.

Slightly angling it.

Diagonally horizontal, Ka-ching! Delivering the strikes, Ka-ching! Matching Viper's breath, Ka-ching! Syncing with his blink, Ka-ching! And then,

Off-beat at the end,

Shush, Bang...!!

"Damn!"

Viper, cut on the flank, gritted his teeth.

The Head of the Martial Alliance shouted.

“Harsh! Retreat!”

“Stick to him!”

Heavenly Demon yelled.

Viper followed the Head of the Martial Alliance's voice to retreat, and I followed Heavenly Demon's voice to stick close.

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Fourth Form.

Sword of Frostbitten Death.

“Damn it!”

Viper got angry.

“This fight is crap!”

“Viper, you're no pushover either!”

“No, really, it's crap! King of Death, were you molasses in a past life? How do you stick so closely?”

“And you, Viper, were you a dog in a past life?”

As we both pondered each other's past lives, Viper and I exchanged blades. Snowflakes burst around us, and the winter wind howled.

The outside arena grew even hotter.

“Break it off properly, my disciple!”

“Strike now!”

“Don't block! Use Lazy Mule Roll to evade! Then follow with Ground Hands...”

“Aha! Don’t evade that! Let it hit!”

The wounds grew.

They deepened.

Blood spattered, flesh flew.

Both Viper and I became bloodied. The burst wounds quickly turned into scars in the cold wind.

“Ah, you damn demon! Always meddling like this!”

The Head of the Martial Alliance, still laughing, scolded.

“This snake-filled old fool...”

Heavenly Demon, also laughing, rebuked.

As their laughter intersected, Viper and I’s sword strikes

intertwined.

Neither Viper nor I intended to kill each other. There was no killing intent in the exchange between Heavenly Demon and the Head of the Martial Alliance. Therefore, this was not a life-and-death battle.

It was not a fight to kill someone.

But definitely, it was a fight that killed everyone.

“Huff, hah! Ha!”

I became Heavenly Demon's sword. Fully infected, unable to fight with full strength unless she poured all her Ki, I fought on her behalf.

It was a landscape she had lost.

“Haaaaah!”

Viper became the Head of the Martial Alliance's sword. Fully

infected, unable to swing his axe without breaking his vital energy, he charged with full force on his behalf.

It was a dream he could no longer dream.

"....."

Every landscape fades.

No matter how brilliant a dream, it eventually loses its color.

Humans decline.

"Uh....."

At some point.

The Heavenly Demon became silent.

The once-proclaimed greatest woman in martial arts slowly

covered her face.

“Such annoying creatures...”

A declining genre.

And a declining world.

“I let it all go long ago. Why does it come back again...”

Only humans can abandon humans.

Only humans can choose not to abandon humans.

"What to do....."

How much time had passed?

When both Viper and I could no longer even lift a sword, our duel ended. There was no winner. Even more so, no loser.

"....."

I sheathed my sword.

Breathing heavily, I walked with heavy steps. Across the snowfield. Walking up to Heavenly Demon, who stood with her face covered, I bent my trembling knees.

"Heavenly Demon."

I leaned on the snowy ground with a shaking hand.

"I wish to become your disciple."

I want to be your landscape.

"I wish to take you as my master."

To be your unfading dream.

“My alias is the King of Death.”

To connect your landscape to mine, your dream to mine,
your life to mine.

“My real name is Kim Gong-Ja.”

In an era mocking all seriousness.

To be the pillar that prevents anyone from ridiculing you.

“Please accept me as your disciple.”

Please keep living.

That's what I meant.

"....."

The sky was tinged with sunset.

Snowflakes were falling on the snowy field.

“I am the Heavenly Demon, So BaekHyang.”

From the sky to the snowy field, snowflakes fluttered in the wind for a long time. Countless snowflakes. Among them, one drifted and fell onto the black hair of a woman, melting the white into the black.

“Perform the Nine Bows.”

Heavenly Demon opened her lips.

“I will accept you as my last disciple.”

Chapter 78: The Scent of Snow (1)

.....Baraya, Baraya, Agabaraya.....

.....The mind is a candle; burn it here.....

An ancient prayer passed down through the ages.

Just as monks chant Amitabha, the people of the Demonic Cult recited Baraya.

.....Baraya, Baraya, Agabaraya.....

.....The mind is a candle; burn it here.....

No one knew what 'Baraya' meant. Not even So BaekHyang. Nor the old woman who brought her into the Demonic Cult. They recited it without understanding.

To So BaekHyang, Baraya was the song of the common people. It was a scream. Screams inherently lack meaning. Isn't it natural that the song of the common folk lacks meaning too?

The ability to recite without understanding.

The fact that one doesn't need to know much to scream in agony.

Thus, while people need to learn rituals to behave respectfully, and ethics to act justly, screams are the exception. Even the uneducated and untrained common folk can scream.

.....Baraya.....

.....Baraya.....

.....Agabaraya.....

Screams were a universal essence.

The world seen by So BaekHyang was screaming.

-There is nothing more for me to teach you.

The old woman said.

-Come forth.

-Where shall I go?

So BaekHyang asked. Her voice was soft. She had grown up now.

The 11-year-old child was no longer here. Dark hair, dark eyes, dark robes. The woman was as dark as a midnight well.

She wished to become hell.

To be the hell of people, the woman deepened herself that much.

-Where do you want to go?

-To where the hungry are. To where the thirsty are, where people are suffocating, where they are cold, addicted to drugs, ill, whipped in government offices, burnt to death.

So BaekHyang looked at the void.

-That's where I want to go.

-.....

Far away, far away.

The sound of prayers from outside the main hall reached them. The cultists were praying and bowing. Their voices. Their tremors. Baraya, Baraya, Agabaraya..... These vibrations traveled along the wooden floors.

-Then BaekHyang.

The old woman spoke.

-This entire world is your destination.

So BaekHyang, 21 years old.

Made her appearance in the martial realm.

That winter, 31 martial artists, 47 government officials, and 55 local nobles lost their heads.

"Our cult's rituals are special."

Heavenly Demon quietly dismissed everyone. She sent the Head of the Martial Alliance and Viper away. She and I headed somewhere alone.

"Do you know how to perform the Nine Bows?"

"No, I don't."

"In our cult, a disciple bows nine times to greet their master."

We were headed towards a cave. A cave with hot springs. It was a familiar place to me, like home, but where Heavenly Demon took me was unfamiliar.

A place never allowed for our group.

Deep within the cave, Heavenly Demon walked.

"Hmm."

Heavenly Demon waved her hand. Her wide sleeve fluttered once, and candles lit up in the darkness. Countless candles illuminated the cave's stalactites and stalagmites.

"But the ritual doesn't end with bowing. Whether to accept each of the nine bows is entirely up to the master. A master can demand the Nine Bows as many times as they wish until they are satisfied."

Heavenly Demon smiled faintly.

"It all depends on my heart."

“Is there a specific criterion?”

“There is.”

At the end of the passage.

“Originally, etiquette is more about the heart than appearance. Child, the reason we choose times and places in etiquette is merely because human hearts are fickle and light.”

There was a huge library.

As Heavenly Demon took each step, candles lit up beside her footsteps. With each candle, the true face of the library became clearer. The high cave ceiling, filled with books and bamboo slips piled up to the top.

“It's not easy to capture the lightness of heart.”

Heavenly Demon walked.

Her ankle was illuminated by a candle.

“That's why people rely on sacred times and holy places. They rely on time and place. Leaning on heaven and earth to capture their light hearts.”

“Heavenly Demon. What is this place?”

“This is the secret martial arts library of our cult.”

The Heavenly Demon spoke.

“And also of the Ten Sect Alliance and the Five Noble Clans. I call it the Heavenly Martial Library.”

The Guardian Spirit spoke.

-Wow, this is epic. A treasure trove! Zombie, I'll check out the martial arts manuals! Don't worry about me, do your thing. Drag it out if you can until I read them all!

The martial arts-obsessed Guardian Spirit dashed off.

-Woohoo! Now the martial techniques of this world are all

mine! I'll sweep them all up! Hahaha!

Unaware or indifferent to the ghost rampaging in her library, Heavenly Demon remained calm.

“I debuted in the martial realm at the age of twenty-one. Do you guess what my first thought was upon entering the martial world?”

“Uh... maybe something like, 'I'll smash all those annoying Orthodox martial artists' heads!'”

“That was my third thought.”

“To prove the superiority of the Demonic Cult...?”

“That was my second thought.”

Heavenly Demon winked with her left eye.

“I mean this. I've always hated the term 'Martial Realm.' It refers to a place where martial artists are revered. But why

only martial artists in such a world? There are boatmen, farmers, merchants, and prostitutes. A realm consists of numerous trees, each with its own name and grain. Yet, the Ten Sect Alliance and the Five Noble Clans dared to call it a realm of martial arts.”

She didn't like it.

Heavenly Demon murmured quietly.

“So I decided to take away their 'martial arts.'”

“Taking away martial arts means...?”

“They worshipped their martial arts manuals like holy relics, so I plundered them all!”

Heavenly Demon laughed mischievously.

Her smile was full of playfulness.

“Haha. I still remember the faces of those Kunlun Taoists.

They begged, saying they would twist their necks but pleaded to spare at least the manuals containing the mysteries of Cloud Dragon! As who I am, I gladly buried those Taoists in the ground, leaving only their heads sticking out. And then in front of their eyes, I grabbed the manuals and ran off!"

Wow.

Our master really has character.

"For decades, it was like that. Now this place is Kunlun, Wudang, Sichuan School, Jiegal Clan, Maoshan School. All martial arts of the world form a forest here. It's fitting to call it 'Martial Forest.' I..."

Heavenly Demon slowly sat down.

"I want to accept your bows here."

"I'll perform them."

"Yes."

“I won’t mind the form. Child from the outer land. Just bow as your body follows.”

So I did.

I took off my shoes and placed them politely. I knelt down. As I was about to touch my forehead to the ground, Heavenly Demon’s voice flowed.

“Perform all nine bows, but fill each bow with a different heart.”

Each different heart.

“The first bow shall contain the heart of starvation.”

“Understood?”

I see.

“Yes, I understand.”

The bond between master and disciple was indeed profound.

In the Demonic Cult, this ritual wasn't just about bowing nine times.

The Nine Bows.

It was no different from practicing Demonic Heavenly God Art.

“Hoo...”

Slowly, I took a deep breath.

I drew a picture in the center of my heart.

A farmer swinging a hoe. The riverside. The mud.

「Hunger is children waiting for the sun.」

I bowed.

Heavenly Demon nodded. She accepted my first bow. There was no deceit in my hunger, making it a sufficient ritual.

“The stages of the Demonic Cult are divided into four.”

Heavenly Demon imparted an old teaching to me, soon to be a disciple.

“The first stage is Novice Demon. A Novice Demon is one who can speak of their own pain. Cultists in our cult speak with swords, not words. Thus, the stage of Novice Demon refers to those who can express their pain with a sword.”

I performed the bow again.

Following hunger, it was time for thirst, so I drew seawater in my mind.

“The second stage is Extreme Demon. An Extreme Demon is someone who can speak of others' pain. Therefore, the stage of Extreme Demon refers to those who can empathize and alleviate others' pain with their sword.”

Heavenly Demon quietly acknowledged my second bow.

I then thought of a father who drowned while saving his child and bowed again.

“The third stage is Cathartic Demon.”

Heavenly Demon nodded again.

She willingly accepted my third bow.

“A Cathartic Demon understands everyone's pain. As they meet people while walking, they can feel what causes each person pain.”

I performed the fourth bow.

“Reaching this stage is extremely rare! In the history of our cult, there have been fewer than five Cathartic Demons. I am one of them.”

Heavenly Demon received my bow once more.

“The final stage is God Demon. A God Demon not only understands the pain of all humans but also of all beings. They can speak of the sufferings of the entire world. However, this stage is unproven! It's merely speculated that such a stage exists. No one has actually reached it.”

I was about to perform the fifth bow when she stopped me.

“Stop.”

“Do it again.”

“.....”

The fifth form of Demonic Heavenly God Art is the Sword of Noxious Death, symbolizing those dying from poisoning. I hadn't yet mastered this form. Heavenly Demon softly said,

“Bow again.”

I bowed.

“Bow again.”

I bowed.

“Bow again.”

Again. And again. And again. And again.

Sweat formed on my forehead. My back was drenched.

Heavenly Demon's expression remained calm.

“Bow again.”

It took 336 times to crudely contain the heart of those poisoned to death.

To conjure the heart of those who died from disease in my mind, 189 bows.

To express the heart of those beaten to death, 510 bows.

I was drenched in sweat.

Silently, I knelt and bowed.

“...A truly upright child.”

Heavenly Demon smiled.

“There are children who are naturally upright from birth and those who become upright through their will. Child from the outer land, you surely belong to the latter. What life have you led to become so pure?”

Her smile carried a tinge of sadness.

“Why strive to purify oneself in living...”

The candlelight flickered.

The flickering light made our shadows tremble.

As they trembled, Heavenly Demon's shadow overlapped with mine.

“If the sun represents life, then the shadow is pain.”

The lean shadow spoke.

“While each human's outline in life is separate, pain overlaps and multiplies. Thus, humans are not one through living but one through suffering.”

It was the doctrine of the shadow.

“If you say you wish to share pain with someone, it means you're willing to spend a lifetime with that person. Thus, those who get hurt by everyone only wish to be with everyone. Child.”

A doctrine to be passed on by the only remaining mouth in this world.

“Gong-Ja.”

The mouth spoke to me.

“People not only decide who to hurt but can also choose who to be hurt by. The commoners you seek will not be pure. The group you save will not be noble. The one you love will not be perfect.”

The shadow whispered.

The whisper of the shadow carried the warmth of the candle.

“Yet, if you willingly accept pain from everyone, if you bear your bare skin to them, when they scratch you, it’s just them holding you too tightly, remember that.”

“Life is pain. But it is uniquely human pain. Baraya, Baraya, Agabaraya. Your heart is a burning flame. Burn it and see the shadows of others.”

The wax dripped.

“The eighth form of Demonic Heavenly God Art is the Sword of Scorching Death.”

It flowed.

“Gong-Ja. Perform your bow with the heart of one burnt to death.”

I did.

「 But you know I'm the Flame Emperor. 」

「 My name is Yoo Soo-Ha. 」

「 Farewell. 」

I bowed.

" "

Quietly.

The shadow closed its mouth.

336 times for poisoned death. 189 for disease. 510 for beating.

For 1035 times echoing 'bow again' in the cave, this time, it didn't come. My Sword of Scorching Death seemed sufficient in just one bow.

".....So it is."

The trail of wax.

A voice seeped into where the mark lay.

"The last sword of Demonic Heavenly God Art is not set. It's a void form. Each leader of the cult engraves their own death into this final form. Thus, the ninth form of Demonic Heavenly God Art varies greatly depending on the practitioner."

The place for one's own death.

"Bow the Ninth Bow with your own death."

"....."

I...

During 4090 instances of suicide, I...

Felt pain in my neck.

My throat ached from stabbing it with a dagger. My hands trembled. My arms shook. Afraid that my trembling and shaking would cause the blade to miss its mark, intensifying the pain, I wrapped blue tape around the dagger's handle.

I wrapped the same blue tape around my right and left hands. Secured it. It seemed like it would stop the trembling. The day for my return had reached 4050 days. But I died 4090 times. I had to die. Because I almost gave up halfway. It was an escape for a few days.

But there was a person I couldn't forgive.

I couldn't live on forgiving that person.

So, I wrapped the tape again. The slower the death, the more my resolve faded, and my decision slowed down. The more it prolonged, the more days I had to die. I cut off any stray thoughts. Ignored any hesitations.

Desperately wanting to live, I desperately died.

Suicide.

I drew that as my final image and bowed to Heavenly Demon.

"....."

The shadow trembled. I realized a bit late that Heavenly Demon had stood up. By the time I realized, she was already embracing my shoulders.

“Gong-Ja,”

In the cave, our two shadows overlapped.

“My disciple.”

“.....Yes.”

“You are my disciple.”

“Yes.”

“Where you came from does not matter to me. Wherever you go, wherever you are, you are the disciple of Heavenly Demon So BaekHyang. Our doctrine is in your heart. Even if the martial realm perishes and the world comes to an end, as long as your heart does not stop, the Heavenly Demonic Cult will continue.”

I spoke.

“---Yes, Master.”

My throat hurt.

They were painful days.

Now, I knew.

Chapter 79: The Scent of Snow (2)

The Heavenly Demon and I were able to return to our companions after a long while.

"....."

"....."

Both of us were solemn.

While walking through the cave, the Heavenly Demon said, "...It's very dark in front of us, be careful where you step." That was her only remark. I simply replied, "Yes." That concluded our conversation. The face of the woman I glimpsed beside us was steeped in worry.

The Heavenly Demon, no.

What could Master be thinking?

‘Character Window.’

There's a saying that a disciple should not even step on the shadow of their master, but my curiosity was too strong to resist. Could it be that my Master has become cautious because I showed weakness? That was not what I wanted.

+

Name: So BaekHyang

Favorability: 85

Preferred Genres: [Martial Arts]

Disliked Genres: [Classics], [Mythology], [History], [Fairy Tales]

Preferred Characters: [Commoners], [Rivals]

Disliked Characters: [Oppressors], [Deceivers], [Playboys]

Preferred Plots: [Full-strength Battles]

Disliked Plots: [Escape], [Forgetfulness], [Meaningless Death]

Psychological State: 'Let's see. Judging by the remaining Ki... if I use it sparingly, I can live for another year and a half. One and a half years! Oh, it's tough! Within a year and a half, I have to pass on everything I know to my disciple...'

+

Hmm....

Hmm.

My face felt hot. I felt guilty for intruding on my Master's thoughts... but that wasn't all. Shame. A touch of emotion. I wasn't sure why, but my face was burning.

Ah. Am I really so weak to people's kindness?

-The heavens are with us today! It's our lucky day! What a break for us zombies!

Of course, the emotion didn't last long.

A non-human ghost had shattered all tranquility.

-What! Even in a different world, the heads of the martial world are no different. Reading a martial arts manual after so long feels refreshing. Ha! Oh, right. Did you properly perform the Nine Bows?

"....."

-What's with that glum face? Even your already unattractive face looks worse, zombie. You really need to work on your appearance.

If I had a favorability score, it would have just dropped by -10 points.

Ghosts really don't understand the human heart.

[Shiny has stopped sobbing and looks up at the Hero.]

Shiny, who had been trembling all this while, finally stopped.

Indeed, it's the Constellation that knows the human heart.

My favorability towards Shiny increased by 30.

“Oh, you're back?”

Viper spoke to us. His one eye immediately turned to look at me.

“Is the Nine Bows ceremony over?”

“Yes. I am now officially a disciple of the Demonic Cult.”

“Good. Congratulations.”

“So, how did you, Viper, come to form a master-disciple relationship with the Head of the Martial Alliance?”

Viper smirked and crossed his arms.

“Well, it just happened.”

“That’s what you said before.”

“What, you want to hear the whole story?”

“If that's possible.”

Viper crossed his arms, showing a sly smile that seemed to hold many secrets, then shook his head.

“Sorry, but it's impossible.”

Viper continued calmly.

“I just asked for his teachings. There wasn’t really anything special about it.”

Hmm.

Since the duel was over, I decided to look at Viper's psychological window.

『Tch. An old man nearing death... No, he’s now my master.

How could I refuse or say anything when he, knowing his life is short, wants to give a reason to live to the Heavenly Demon?

And that's from someone whose skills are far superior to mine...』

I looked at Viper feeling like I’d been hit on the head.

Viper.

He was a ‘real man.’

『Ah~, maybe because I lied, but the memories are flooding back.

The Head of the Martial Alliance and the Heavenly Demon occasionally spar, right? I've always thought those guys were something special.

So, we sat down and talked about martial arts.

Suddenly, the Head of the Martial Alliance goes, 'Wow! Really? To think there's such a talent in the outside land! How lucky can it be!' and he was shocked.

I was just scratching the back of my head, thinking, well, it's not much---

Then the Medicine King interrupts, saying, 'Ah, this Celestial Master Guild master might not look it, but he is a valuable [comrade]. It's only natural for someone of his skill, character, and looks.'

The Apothecary, her face turning red, chimed in,

'Yes... uh, Celestial Martial Guild ma... no, not that! I didn't

say anything! Anyway, Celestial Martial Guild Master is a top-ranked person in our world... kind of like an idol! Ahaha, ha, ha, oh, I said something embarrassing---!' while covering her cheeks.

I could only stare into the distance amidst this sudden downpour of facts.

Then the Head of the Martial Alliance, as if everything made sense, nodded,

'Hey, hey, do me a favor! This genius, please become my last disciple before I die!'

Ah~ this is troublesome.

I just wanted to live quietly, but why is my life never peaceful...』

Yeah.

That's enough.

Viper.

He was, after all, a 'true man.'

A man of culture.

"King of Death. And the leader of the Demonic Cult."

The greatest 'true man' of this era shrugged his shoulders and spoke.

"I have one piece of good news and one piece of sad news to tell you."

"What is it?"

"We succeeded."

The answer to my question didn't come from Viper. It was a much more vague voice. The Apothecary's voice. Wearing thick-rimmed glasses, the Apothecary was walking towards us.

“The cure. We’ve successfully developed it. King of Death.”

"....."

The reason I didn't respond immediately wasn't because I was moved by the announcement of the development's completion.

The Apothecary is a genius. I had no doubt she would eventually develop a cure; it was just a matter of how long it would take.

I had spent a lot of time learning Demonic Heavenly God Art. With the Medicine King's help, it was about time for the Apothecary to develop the cure.

“What? A cure has been developed?”

Master looked surprised.

“Is that true? If you’re lying, confess now. I am forgiving of one lie.”

“...Yes. It’s true.”

The Apothecary said.

“In fact, it was developed yesterday. We observed it for one more day because we needed to observe the clinical trial.”

“Clinical trial? What’s that?”

“It's to see whether the cure works properly or not. We used a corpse donated by the Heavenly Demon and the Head of the Martial Alliance for a day... Sorry. It was the body of the former Wudang sect leader.”

The Apothecary seemed to be forcing a blank expression.

“It had been dead for a long time, so revival was impossible, but... the zombie virus... the pandemic was cured, and it returned to a normal corpse. Yes. There’s nothing wrong with the cure.”

“If that's true, it’s a huge cause for celebration!”

Master was overjoyed.

“Amazing! The doctors and taoists of the martial realm tried everything, but they gave up. To think that just two people found a solution, it's no ordinary feat!”

“No. It's thanks to the material you provided, King of Death...”

“Enough with the modesty. Immediately treat that old man, the Great Axe Sage!”

Master grabbed the Apothecary's hands.

Master's joy was palpable in his gestures and body language.

“That old man acts tough and proud, but he doesn't have many days left. He must know that, which is why he took a child of the outside land as his disciple. It's truly a blessing from the Jade Emperor that the cure was developed before the old man passed away!”

“Yes... Of course, I'll treat him. That's why I came here...”

Then I spoke up.

“There's a problem with the cure.”

"....."

“That's the case, isn't it, Miss Apothecary?”

The Apothecary bowed her head. Her complexion was as faint as her voice. From the moment she said, ‘We’ve successfully developed the cure,’ the Apothecary avoided meeting my eyes. I had been feeling uneasy since then.

“No, there's nothing wrong with the cure... I made it myself. It's perfect. But...”

But...

“But what?”

“The Dantian must be destroyed.”

Thud.

A light footstep sounded.

“Demon. I too witnessed the body of the sorcerer returning to normal. Just to be sure, I brought a few more infected with the zombie disease for testing, and the results were the same. The efficacy of this girl's medicine is beyond doubt.”

The Head of the Martial Alliance, the Great Axe Sage.

The elderly man, dressed in white buddhist robes, slowly walked towards us.

“But you know as well. The two of us are already half-dead. Our bodies turned into corpses a long time ago and were forcibly kept alive.”

"....."

Master's face had hardened.

The Head of the Martial Alliance chuckled and stroked his beard.

“Surviving against Heaven's will all this time was an achievement. But it's time to pay the price.”

“...It's been too long since both of you were infected with the zombie disease.”

The Apothecary spoke, opening her lips.

“If someone is not yet infected or was recently infected, a single vaccine dose could cure and prevent the disease. But for you two...”

The Apothary's head drooped as she spoke quickly.

“There's no abnormality above the cervical Ki points. After taking the medicine, you'll return to normal, as you were before the infection. But below the cervical Ki points, your internal energy, what you call vital energy, is indistinguishable from the pathogen... in other words, from the Corrupt Energy.”

The condition of the lower Dantian is especially severe, the Apothecary explained.

“The channels through which your vital energy flows coincide with the paths spread by Corrupt Energy. Simply put, it's like needing to clean a corridor. But the cure is not a delicate tweezer but a blunt broom. You can't separate the dust and sand while sweeping the corridor with a broom. Your corridors are too clogged with dust, especially the lower Dantian is in a terrible state...”

The Dantian is where vital energy and Ki accumulate.

For a martial artist, it's as important as life itself.

“We need to remove all of it.”

“...To remove means.”

Master spoke.

“What do you mean by 'remove'?”

“It has to be eliminated.”

The Apothecary’s voice was strained.

“We will perform surgery.”

“...To remove a tumor from the Dantian? That’s manageable. There will be a loss of energy, but at our level, it can be quickly restored.”

“No. We're going to completely clean the area.”

"....."

“You don't have to doubt the success of the surgery. We've already conducted clinical surgeries. I'm not a surgery specialist, but Medicine King is skilled. I can support it to a feasible extent. So...”

“Their skill in performing the procedure is remarkable.”

The Head of the Martial Alliance interjected.

“I realized that for medical treatment, we should look beyond the martial world to the outside world. Watching from the side, it was miraculous. Demon, take the chance to learn if you can.”

“Namgung Woon.”

“The decision is mine,”

The Head of the Martial Alliance coughed.

“I will undergo the procedure.”

"....."

“Anyway, what I'd lose in terms of Ki is just a handful. There's nothing to regret or lament. It's fortunate that I took a disciple in my old age. Even if my Dantian is removed, I'll have the mental clarity to teach my disciple, and the disciple is a genius who understands ten things from one word.”

The Head of the Martial Alliance looked at his long-time rival.

“We are martial artists. The Martial Way is about the heart. As long as the heart remains, the martial way continues. Isn't that right, BaekHyang?”

Master did not respond.

Throughout the night, the Head of the Martial Alliance underwent the procedure. By dawn, the Apothecary and Medicine King informed us that the surgery was completed.

The surgery was successful.

At dawn, the snowfield embraced the shade's color.

"Master."

"....."

Master stood alone at the entrance of the cave, looking down at the world turned into shadows. His long black sleeves fluttered in the wind.

The scenery was distant.

Master's back seemed even more distant than the landscape.

“Master.”

“...Has the result of the procedure been revealed?”

“Yes.”

“How did it go?”

“It was successful.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.”

“That's how it is.”

Master's gaze was fixed on the void.

“My disciple.”

“Yes.”

“In my youth, I wanted to cut down all the cold of the world.”

Master spoke.

“Ever since I was young, I detested winter. The snow falling in winter was lamentable. Why should there be seasons in the world, and in each season, a winter that takes lives with its passing, I wondered.”

A world forever frozen in winter.

A woman born with a Glacial Body and Extreme Yin Body hated the season most similar to her.

“I was confident that I could execute those who freeze the

world, even if I couldn't cut down the cold of the world with a single sword. I remember when I first emerged in the martial world. It was also in the heart of winter.”

I noticed something different about Master.

A Sword.

Master held a sword in his right hand. There was no crossguard, just the hilt and the blade. Unlike the other transparent swords, Master's sword was a dark ink color.

A sword that refused to become transparent.

I had never seen it before, but I guessed what it was.

“Lethal Demon Blood Sword.....”

“Yes.”

Master murmured softly.

“When I first emerged in the martial realm, I tried something. It was youthful folly. I literally took the world's cold as all things of the world and tried to cut down a snowy mountain.”

Master breathed.

His breath in the dawn was white.

In the white-touched sky, high mountain peaks soared.

“But back then, I couldn't even cut the fringes---.”

Master raised his sword.

“I wonder how it will be now. I'm curious.”

The sword swung.

It was a slow motion.

Master's long sleeves needed time to follow her movements. The black sleeves fluttered freely in the air as the world seemed to pause for a moment. Master's sleeve danced freely in the still air.

“Baraya,”

Sword dance.

“Baraya,”

Sword life.

“Agabaraya,”

The sword priestess swirled with the dance of the sword.

“My heart is a candle.”

And then.

“I shall burn this place.”

The snowy mountain was cut.

A snow peak that held no trees or rocks, meaningless beyond its mere existence, was sliced.

The mountain's scream resembled thunder. Following the echoing scream, a white snowstorm burst forth. The mountain crumbled from the peak, creating waves of snow, which rose and fell in layers. It collapsed and collapsed again. A blizzard, not of the heavens but created by that woman, swept over the dawn.

"....."

Master exhaled.

“Only the peak was cut, and it ended. Although I cut the mountain with my heart, I failed to sever it. This is my final realm.”

“My disciple.”

Master turned to look at me.

A single great mountain was crumbling into white.

“I will undergo the procedure.”

Chapter 80: The Scent of Snow (3)

Master couldn't undergo surgery right away.

"I'm sorry. I need to rest for a bit..."

The Head of the Martial Alliance's procedure had just finished. Both the Apothecary and Medicine King were exhausted from performing the surgery. The Apothecary collapsed from fatigue, and Medicine King silently slipped into a hot spring with his mouth agape.

"....."

Master frowned and looked down at the Head of the Martial Alliance.

"Old man. I came to see you because you lost your Dantian."

“What a remarkable first visitor to my sickbed. Sure, enjoy yourself with those eyes.”

“How do you feel?”

The Head of the Martial Alliance, lying on a straw mat, chuckled.

“I feel light. Like I could ascend to immortality.”

“You're delusional. How can someone who hasn't even undergone a complete transformation think about ascending...”

The Head of the Martial Alliance smirked.

“Your face looks lighter too. Demon, have you decided to undergo the procedure?”

“...Yes.”

Master sighed.

“I just spent a year’s worth of Ki to fully wield my sword. It was the last time in my life that I rampaged with my Ki.”

“Ho!”

The Head of the Martial Alliance’s eyes sparkled.

“That must have been a sight to behold. It’s a pity I couldn’t witness it lying here. So, what did you achieve?”

“I tried to cut down winter but failed. The realm of life and death was far beyond reach.”

“Oh, what a shame. But cheer up. It’s a realm unexplored in history, right? If it were easy, the history of the martial realm would have been overturned six times by now.”

The Head of the Martial Alliance laughed heartily.

Master looked down at the old man’s laughter and spoke.

“Namgung Woon. You...”

“I don’t regret a thing.”

The Head of the Martial Alliance cut him off.

“The world ended like this, but surviving three years was a miracle. Being treated by doctors from the outside world was a miracle. Taking a disciple at the end of my life and continuing the lineage of the orthodox martial realm, which I thought would be severed, was also a miracle! When miracles stack up, isn’t that a miracle itself? I’m just thankful.”

"....."

“Hmm. The only regret is that I couldn’t conclude the Great Orthodox-Demonic War with you, Demon. Well, a perfect life doesn’t exist. Our disciples will handle the rest.”

“Yes. They will.”

Master smiled faintly, a wistful smile. However, when he turned to look at me, his eyes held a firm belief.

“If this is where my life has led, I will accept it.”

Her face was not one of eagerness but of resigned acceptance.

Even the sweetest candy must be melted and swallowed several times.

Was Master savoring the end of her life, breaking it into smaller pieces?

"Hmm."

I nodded.

"Master, I need to step out for a moment."

"Huh? Where is there to go in this world now?"

"Think of your disciple catching some fresh air. Don't worry."

"...Telling me not to worry only makes me more concerned."

Master quietly furrowed her brows.

“Are you getting yourself involved in something dangerous?”

“I will return by the time your procedure is completed.”

I performed a formal bow.

My movements might still be awkward, but my heart was fully in it.

“Please take care during your procedure, Master. When you wake up, your unworthy disciple will be waiting for you.”

Master had accepted her end.

Now it was my turn to give back her life.

I left the cave and crossed the snowfield.

Crossing the snow, I recalled what this world looked like before its destruction. The Martial Realm. Were there thickets there? The Rivers and Lakes. Did water flow there?

“My Lord.”

Across the snowfield.

“I have carried out your command.”

Where once thickets may have grown and rivers flowed, in the middle of the snowfield, Preta was kneeling on one knee.

“Did you find them all?”

“Yes.”

Preta answered, her head bowed. Snowflakes clung to her hair, showing how long she had been waiting there.

“As you commanded, my Lord.”

I had given Preta a task previously.

“There should be martial arts-using zombies scattered around without direction.”

“Find them.”

“Find those in black martial robes and those in white swordsman robes.”

During the past three years of the ongoing Great Orthodox-Demonic War.

Many zombies had 'disappeared.'

The bodies of the Martial Realm were blown by the snowstorms and swept away in blizzards.

“439 zombies of the Demonic Cult. 478 of the Orthodox Faction. A total of 917 missing corpses.”

But that wasn't all.

“560 zombies of the Demonic Cult and 521 of the Orthodox Faction, not missing but gathered nearby, adding up to 1998 in total. All present.”

Preta bowed her head a bit more.

Beyond her slender shoulders.

“They have been brought here.”

The zombies were lined up on the snowfield.

My skeleton legion held the zombies on both sides. It was morning. The zombies, weak to sunlight, wouldn't move, but even if the sun was obscured by clouds, the formation wouldn't collapse immediately.

“Good. Well done.”

I nodded.

“Now, bring the zombies to me one by one.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

Skeletons dragged a corpse over. When it reached me, I had already drawn my holy sword. The winter was cold. However, the blade, sliding through the winter air, would be colder still.

.....Baraya.....

Somewhere, the wind blew. Like rain gathering in a lake, the wind gushed into the valley. In the valley, the wind of the world seemed to mimic a human voice.

.....Baraya.....

Far away. The wind chanted a scripture.

When falling, all sounds resemble human voices.

I overheard the sound tumbling in the wind and swung my sword.

.....Agabaraya.....

A clean cut.

The zombie's head split apart.

"Phew,"

I kept cutting through the corpses.

Relentlessly.

As the zombie's head burst, fragments flew.

"Next!"

"Yes!"

The skeletons quickly brought the next corpse. Preta coordinated the skeleton legion. As I found my rhythm, Preta quickly brought the corpses, and if I seemed tired, she slowed down the pace.

“Faster! We’ll finish all of them before dusk today!”

“Yes, my Lord!”

Our execution ritual flowed like the wind.

A total of 1998 corpses.

No matter how still and unresisting they were, slicing them with a single sword wasn’t easy.

“Huh, hoo... hoo...”

I had been pondering all along.

‘How can I achieve a perfect ending?’

What kind of ending would completely satisfy the Master?

‘How should a person's life turn out to be complete?’

I wanted it sincerely, without a hint of falsehood.

That's why I could come to a conclusion.

‘Just becoming a disciple isn't enough.’

Master going mad and rampaging would be a bad ending. A definite bad ending. But is my [Discipleship] truly a happy ending?

Literally, would the Master be happy and satisfied with this ending?

‘No.’

A Normal Ending.

[Discipleship] is not a complete ending. It barely satisfies the criteria for an ending.

Even if I declared it over now, the Constellation Librarian would probably accept it, and the 22nd floor would be cleared,

but...

“Huk! Huk...”

I couldn't be satisfied.

“My Lord, just a little more strength! We have only half left!”

[Shiny is cheering for the Hero with all her might!]

Eventually, dusk fell.

The sky turned red, and the snowfield purple.

“Hoo, hoo...”

I didn't know how much time had passed. Seven hours? Eight? Something like that. Anyway, I kept swinging my sword without rest. My clothes were drenched in sweat and gore.

“Last ten, my Lord!”

10 left.

I looked ahead. Indeed, only 5 from the Demonic Cult and 5 from the Orthodox Faction remained. I gripped the hilt of my sword tightly, gasping for breath.

Just a little more.

“Five left!”

Just a bit more.

“The last one! Really the last one!”

I crushed the head of a Demonic Cult member in a black robe. The frozen brain of the zombie shattered like ice. Right after cutting down the 1998th zombie, my knees gave out, and I collapsed into the snow.

“Haah, ha... Huh...”

“Your hard work is appreciated, my Lord! You have truly endured much!”

Preta cheered as if she would jump around in joy. It was mutual suffering, after all.

Preta, always stoic since joining my shadow, seemed genuinely happy for the first time.

“Why? What’s so fun?”

I caught my breath and asked. Preta realized her expression had softened for a moment and quickly returned to her usual stoic face.

“...Just thinking about the scene you will show us made my heart full. I haven’t personally met your Master, but I think she will surely be delighted. Not just happy, but really, very much so.”

“Right.”

I lay in the snow, smiling.

“I hope she is very happy.”

The cure was developed.

I was acknowledged as Master’s disciple.

Finally, I also obtained the permission of the Sword Emperor.

The journey here wasn't easy.

But finally--- I’m ready to witness the ending of this world.

A week passed.

“Hmm. Being without a Dantian feels quite empty.”

Master and the Head of the Martial Alliance recuperated together for a week. Fortunately, there was no need for a separate sanatorium. This cave, with its open-air bath, was the best place to relax.

“Even when I try to circulate my energy in meditation, not even a bit of Ki accumulates. Without Ki, I feel unnecessarily anxious. Ah, this must be how people who cannot use martial arts feel...”

“I rather feel more at ease now. Frankly, I haven't felt like I was really alive lately! All day, I had to block my cervical Ki points, keep my heart moving. Oh, my, oh my.”

The Head of the Martial Alliance sighed, soaking in the hot spring.

“Now that I can breathe without any thoughts, it feels like I'm truly living! All thanks to the children from the outside world.”

“Th-thank you...”

The Apothecary stuttered as she finished examining Master.

“That's it for today's check-up. Both of you show no abnormalities. At this point, you can be considered fully recovered. If... if you get bitten by zombies again, you won't get infected...”

“Thank you.”

Master raised his hand and patted the Apothecary's head. She flinched for a moment.

“Me and this old man owe our lives to you. It's not easy to help a stranger.”

“Oh, no, I... I just did what was necessary...”

“To think something is necessary is remarkable. To do what you think is necessary is even more remarkable. Child, you are truly impressive at such a young age.”

“Eek. But, no, that's not...”

The Apothecary was rendered immobile under Master's patting. She was quite shy but didn't seem to dislike it. Watching them felt heartwarming, like observing affectionate sisters.

"Hmm."

But I couldn't just keep feeling heartwarming.

“Miss Apothecary. So both of them can now move around without any issues?”

“Yes, yes! I set a longer recuperation period just to be safe. They can move and exercise without any problems.”

Okay.

“Master. Head of the Martial Alliance. Let's go for a walk with me.”

“A walk?”

Master tilted his head in confusion.

“I'm delighted to go for a walk with my disciple... but why with that old geezer? If I go with that old thing, even a pleasant walk will turn into a muck walk.”

“Look at that. I'd rather refuse a stroll where old demon and

young demon are together. Go and enjoy it with your dull disciple.”

Their reactions were as expected.

“No.”

I shook my head calmly.

“You both must come.”

“Hmm...?”

Master and the Head of the Martial Alliance exchanged glances. They seemed to realize that this wasn't just a casual walk I was proposing. Both wore expressions as if expecting something interesting.

“Alright. Our disciple must have some scheme. I don't intend to stroll with that old thing, but I'll willingly play along with my foolish disciple.”

“Bah. Whatever young Demon has planned, it'll be trivial. I have no expectations.”

We left the cave.

It was cold. Like the first day I descended into [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon], today was also winter.

The difference from that day was that both Master and the Head of the Martial Alliance could no longer use their Ki. Never again.

I held Master's hand with my right and the Head of the Martial Alliance's with my left. That way, I could use my Aura to transfer warmth to them.

“Master.”

“Yes.”

“Head of the Martial Alliance.”

“Yeah.”

“You both said that your only regret was not concluding the Great Orthodox-Demonic War. It’s regrettable, but that’s a problem we, as your disciples, have to solve from now on...”

The two leaned on my warmth as we crossed the cold winter path.

“But I think differently.”

Was it unfamiliar because it was their first time out in a week? Or was it their bodies, now unused to walking without Ki? Both Master and the Head of the Martial Alliance walked a bit clumsily.

“The Great Orthodox-Demonic War is your legacy. Even if the Celestial Martial Guild Master and I fight, it would just be an ordinary duel, never a great war. Only your duels can be the Great Orthodox-Demonic War. After all, you two have been the mainstay of the Demonic Cult and Orthodox Faction.”

“Disciple...?”

“Thank you.”

We reached the snowfield.

“Thank you for not giving up for the past three years.”

The place where once the corpses spread like a forest. The forest of shadows. Now, this place was just a clean snowfield, devoid of any bodies.

“Thank you for coming here every morning to gather the zombies again. If you both had given up and left the zombies as mere corpses to be lost, we would never have been able to recover them.”

The life you lost.

The scenery you should have enjoyed.

To return that to you, I slowly opened my mouth.

“Ghoul Reincarnation.”

My shadow spread across the snowfield.

[Activating skill.]

Shapes like snowmen rose from the shadows, one after another. Some shadows wore black robes. Some fluttered white sleeves. They gradually took on human forms, marveling as they looked down at their hands.

“Disciple, what is this...”

But none were as astonished as Master and the Head of the Martial Alliance.

“Think of it as a dream. It’s okay to dismiss it as an aftereffect of losing your Dantian. If you believe I have learned a strange magic that can temporarily bring back the memories and bodies of the dead, that’s fine too.”

“Master. Head of the Martial Alliance.”

Ghoul Reincarnation was complete.

“The Great Orthodox-Demonic War hasn’t ended yet.”

The Demonic Cult’s elite disciples. One thousand.

“Martial Arts hasn’t forgotten Chivalry, and Chivalry hasn’t lost Martial Arts.”

The Orthodox Faction’s elite warriors. One thousand.

“The fate of the Demonic Cult doesn’t end with mere zombies, and the orthodox martial realm isn’t devoured by corpses.”

The true Great Orthodox-Demonic War.

That was their wish.

“If the Demonic Cult is to vanish from this world, it should be solely by the sword of the Orthodox. And if the Orthodox Faction truly must perish, it should only be at the hands of the Demonic Cult.”

"....."

“To the leader of the Demonic Cult and the Head of the Martial Alliance.”

I smiled.

And performed a formal bow.

“Decide who the final master of the martial realm will be!”

Chapter 81: The Humblest in the World (1)

The murmurs flowed through the snowfield.

"What exactly is happening here!"

"Are we... alive?"

"Is this the Peach Blossom Spring...?"

Disciples of the Demonic Cult. Warriors of the Orthodox Faction.

Their last memory was their own death. They might remember being bitten by zombies, but not becoming zombies themselves. For them, it's as if years have passed in the blink of an eye.

"....."

Some had endured those three years entirely.

Master stood, staring blankly at the snowfield, disbelieving her own eyes.

"Disciple..."

"Yes, Master."

"Are you not from the outer world but from a world beyond...? This, this is not a spell a mere human can cast. It's the stuff of absurd legends, or have I died without realizing and ended up in the Peach Blossom Spring...?"

"No, it's not like that."

I shook my head.

"These people, like Master, can no longer use martial arts. They have become much weaker compared to their prime. But

this is not the Peach Blossom Spring, and these people still have their memories of life."

"....."

"Go and see for yourself."

"....."

"Please, Master."

Thud.

Master walked. Thud, thud... light footsteps. They belonged to a martial artist whose Dantian had been destroyed. A warrior who had lost her Ki. A woman who bore the traces of a three-year illness.

The Heavenly Demon.

My Master.

She walked with light steps toward the disciples. They were trying to grasp the situation.

"First, let's assess the current situation. Stay calm! Send scouts to..."

"Blood Ghost Troop Captain."

Hesitation.

The disciples flinched. About a dozen of the Demonic Cult's followers fell silent. Then, with unfamiliar eyes, they looked at Master, their leader.

"Lord Heavenly Demon...?"

Master's breath grew whiter.

"Blood Ghost Troop Captain."

"....."

"Truly, the Blood Ghost Troop Captain."

Silence spread. At first, it was just about ten people. But as they fell silent, dozens around them did the same, and then hundreds.

A quiet snowfield.

"Moon Shadow Demon..."

"Yes."

"Hell Ghost Demon..."

"Yes, Master."

"Sword Demon..."

"Please give us your orders."

Master started calling the names of the disciples. Each named disciple simply knelt down without questioning. The snow crunched under their knees.

"I have lost you, again and again..."

Master reached out.

"My children..."

Her fingers trembled. Seeing the trembling of their leader, the disciples bowed their heads more earnestly. It seemed their loyalty was not to see what should not be seen. All thousand disciples turned their eyes to the ground.

Not only the disciples were wrapped in shock.

"...Ah."

An old monk stroked his beard.

"I must have laid down in a cave and crossed the river. I

closed my eyes and there's neither paradise nor hell, just this snowfield..."

"Old Monk!"

"...And there's also a devil mixed in. Ah, even in death, I must roam with this creature. What does Buddha expect of me?"

"Damn, just hearing your nonsense makes me realize you're the real old monk!"

The Head of the Martial Alliance rushed over and hugged the old monk. I guessed who he was. Excluding Master and the Head of the Martial Alliance, he was the one who survived the longest. The Head Monk of the Shaolin Temple.

"You're alive and back! My friend is back!"

"I am not your friend."

"Ah! Surely the Jade Emperor has granted us a miracle!"

"Eating grass like a dog," said the old monk.

"Don't pollute my ears, mortal. I should never have fallen for your tricks and fought with those heretics. I should have quietly passed away in the temple."

"Ah! Just seeing you immediately cools my joy! Really, you're the monk I know! I want to punch you!"

While the Demonic Cult's warriors remained quiet, the Orthodox Faction's martial artists were noisy.

They were sharing this reunion in their own ways.

Time passed.

"....."

The first to turn and look at me was Master. Our eyes met across the snow. Dark eyes. Emotions rested in that gaze. My feelings were imprinted, engraved in her heart.

".....I am."

Master began to speak.

She spoke towards the Head of the Martial Alliance.

"I am the Lord of the Demonic Cult, So BaekHyang."

The Head of the Martial Alliance, who was sharing moments with his comrades, paused. He shook off his companions and looked towards Master from a distance. Master performed a formal bow.

"The Heavenly Demon."

"Today, even if this is just a night of blind dreaming, it's okay."

It was midday.

"Even if I'm just a sleepwalking patient, it's okay."

The snow in the snowfield wasn't eternal because it didn't melt in the sun, but because it kept being covered anew, endlessly.

"The Demonic Cult's destiny isn't a fleeting dream. Life belongs to those who share the same illness, and the world belongs to those who dream the same dream."

In the blazing sunlight, those who wish to remain white must do more than just be born white. They must continuously scatter whiteness into the world, ready to break, shatter, and spread endlessly.

"I haven't forgotten the name of the illness I chose to suffer from. I haven't lost the warmth of the dream I chose to dream. So, I haven't let go of any person or missed any world. Baraya! It's not the name of martial arts, but the name of an illness that proves my place, not the strength of Ki, but the warmth of a dream that proves me."

The sound of crumbling snowflakes.

"I am right here, and only while I remain here, I am myself."

With the sound of melting and falling anew.

"I think therefore I am."

Master recited a declaration of war.

"I challenge you to the 990th duel."

Silence enveloped the surroundings.

The noisy Orthodox Faction had quieted down.

They were the last small and great heroes of the martial world. They came thinking this was the end, to wage the final war.

How could they act rashly?

If the last words one chooses in life are a testament, then now they were about to speak the testament of the Orthodox Faction.

And the orthodox looked to the one who would speak their testament.

"I am the Head of the Martial Alliance- and the Namgung Clan-"

The old man performed a formal bow.

"Namgung Woon. I am Great Axe Sage."

One thousand of the Demonic Cult and one thousand of the Orthodox Faction faced each other.

"You Demonic Cult used the screams of the common people as doctrine. Screams became revenge, and revenge became bloodshed, staining the world red. Bloodthirsty avengers! The world has turned red, yet you still act like victims."

The man who rose to Head of the Martial Alliance, with his own voice, drew a line between the Demonic Cult and the Orthodox Faction.

"You cling to the Heavenly Demon's sleeves, crying endlessly. Begging him to dance for your lost souls, to avenge you. As long as you cling and beg, you are just the weak commoners, the sad people!"

The old Head roared.

"Thirst! You have legs and hands, why still indulge in the past's evil ghosts! The Huayan Sutra says, even a single tree must shed its flowers to bear fruit. What about you? You are merely flower sellers in a garden, profiting from your own pain!"

His words provoked the Demonic Cult's crowd.

The disciples clenched their swords, anger and killing intent rising. Against them, the Orthodox Faction's warriors began to match their energy.

Neither side had Ki, yet the air on the snowfield grew tense.

"Good."

Master smiled.

"I take that as acceptance of the duel."

"Of course."

"Is this a duel of life or a duel of life and death?"

"Life and death."

"Accepted."

Both warriors released their formal bows.

Swoosh!

At the same time, one thousand of the Demonic Cult and one thousand of the Orthodox Faction drew their swords. It was high noon. The blades of nearly two thousand swords, absorbing the sun, shone brightly.

"Children of the Demonic Heavens!"

Master clenched her fist.

"Even if today's event is but a vain dream, a delusion!"

"Baraya!"

A thousand disciples shouted in unison.

"Even if we are called a futile dream, it's fine!"

"Baraya!"

"Then we must live as if in a dream!"

"Agabaraya!"

"Our hearts are like candles!"

"We shall set this place ablaze!"

"For the Demonic Heavens!"

"For supremacy of the Common People!"

Master burst into laughter.

"Kill them!"

The war had begun.

A thousand disciples roared like beasts as they charged. Lacking the exquisite Stepping Techniques or the mysterious Movement Techniques, they attacked and tore at their enemies like animals. This was their holy war, as dictated by their doctrine.

"Warriors! I am the first of the Demonic Cult's Warriors, Moon Shadow Demon! Face my swordsmanship!"

Captain of the Demonic Cult's Shadow Corpse Troop.

Moon Shadow Demon.

"I am the Leader of the Wudang sect, HyunGong Jinin! A

worthy opponent!"

Leader of the Wudang sect.

HyunGong Jinin.

The two clashed, shouting their titles. The fight was barbaric despite the formal exchange of names.

"Hyaaaah!"

Moon Shadow Demon King struck HyunGong Jinin's face with the hilt of his sword. Teeth. Blood. White and red fragments flew.

"Wooaaaah!"

HyunGong Jinin roared, baring his broken teeth, and thrust his fingers into Moon Shadow Demon's eyes. Moon Shadow Demon laughed wildly, covering the sound of bursting with his laughter. The monk's roar and the demonic laughter intertwined.

Another black and white pair buried their forms.

"Demonic Cult's Warrior, first rank, Hell Ghost Demon. I will claim your head."

Captain of the Demonic Cult's Soul Repentance Troop.

Hell Ghost Demon.

"I am JoMyung, from the Shaolin Temple."

Head Monk of the Shaolin Temple.

Zen Master JoMyung.

"As one of the four Demon Lords, I shall let you have the first three attacks."

"I hope you'll always be faithful to Buddha's teachings!"

Hell Ghost Demon attacked immediately after JoMyung's assault, ramming into his stomach. JoMyung chuckled amidst his groans.

"You said you'd allow three moves?"

"Did you believe that?"

"Did it seem like I did?"

"Yes." The sound of blood trickling intervened. "It seemed so."

Hell Ghost Demon collapsed to her knees, her nose broken from the impact. At the moment of impact, JoMyung had swiftly kneed upwards. JoMyung stroked his beard pleasantly.

"My acting skills haven't rusted."

"This damn stone monk..."

"Take the remaining two moves!"

Hell Ghost Demon grabbed Zen Master JoMyung's ears, intending to knee him again. But Zen Master JoMyung headbutted him instead. Their skulls collided, "Kuhuk!" JoMyung jumped up, clutching his knees in pain.

"Kahaha! You lot, without Ki, are just riffraff! True to your real skills! Good! The true faces of the Orthodox Faction are revealed to the world today!"

Captain of the Demonic Cult's Extermination Troop.

Sword Demon.

".....So vulgar, truly vulgar."

Elder of the Mount Hua Sect.

Chaos Flower Sword.

The two swordsmen clashed their blades. Clang! Simultaneous groans, clang! Swallowed gasps, clang! Trembling hands and shoulders. Both bled from their torn hands. Blood from their mouths and hands mixed.

Yet, neither let go of their swords.

The Sword Demon grinned, baring his teeth.

"Stop pretending and just let go."

Chaos Flower Sword replied through gritted teeth.

"That's something you should say to yourself....."

Their eyes met, and their swords collided again. Clang! Muffled groans, clang! Gasping for air, clang! The blood flowed.

Still, neither released their swords.

White robes fluttered. Black robes swayed. Under the bright sun, shadows formed. Between the sun and shadows, the Orthodox and Demonic Cults clashed. Blood splattered.

"For the Demonic Heavens! Honor to the peasants!"

"Uaaaah! Die! Die!"

"Moyong's scoundrels, come forth now!"

In a world devoid of all but grayscale.

What flowed vividly there was not the splendor of martial arts.

It was solely the red blood of humans.

"Huhu, haha... Ughaha."

Amidst it, a particularly crimson laughter erupted.

"Ughahaha! Ha! Hahaha!"

It was sheer madness.

"So many Orthodox dogs!"

The Master shouted.

"Good. Come at me. Let's see who's better with a sword!"

Amidst the Orthodox warriors, a dark shadow rampaged. The sun seemed to rise and set at tens of times its usual speed. A woman who had spent three years bedridden without any Ki, merely that, yet her movements stood out prominently among the martial artists, equally unable to use their martial skills.

"How ludicrous!"

The Master laughed.

"Shaolin's Head Monk, such tricks won't stop me. Wudang's charlatan, do you think you can shoulder the karma of my sect?"

These words were familiar to me,

"Despair floods the world, submerging Mount Song. Hatred flares up, setting Mount Wudang ablaze! The Demonic Cult is the heaven of the martial realm, and I am the heaven of the

Demonic Cult! Do you have the right to discuss the beyond heavens?"

"You lot are not enough! Orthodox lackeys!"

The Master roared.

"Namgung Woon!"

Amidst the clashing of swords and colliding of flesh, the Master called out.

"Where is Namgung Woon?"

Laughing out loud, the Master,

"Bring forth the Supreme Patriarch of the Namgung family! Summon the leader of the Martial Alliance! No matter how dense the forests of the martial world or how vast the heavens, only one can withstand my sword in this world above worlds! Warriors, bring Namgung Woon before me right now!"

Her laughter was crimson and exhilarating.

"Hmm."

The old man took a step into the increasingly reddened world.

"I'm reminded of the first day the great war commenced."

The leader of the Martial Alliance stood bare-chested. The winter was cold, maybe due to the lack of Ki, yet he seemed to use it as his armor. His emaciated muscles were rigid as bone.

"We failed to conclude on the first day, leading the battle to continue on the second. Unable to finish on the second day, it was postponed to the third. In hindsight, we should have put in our full effort from the beginning."

Hoo...

The leader of the Martial Alliance took a deep breath.

He then assumed a stance and beckoned with his hand.

"Come at me, Lord of the Demonic Cult. Today, heavenly luck is with me."

Head of the Martial Alliance.

The Great Axe Sage.

"Heavenly luck, eh? Good."

Crunch,

The Master stepped on the snow.

"Today's heavenly luck will only be your fate."

Lord of the Demonic Cult.

The Heavenly Demon.

"....."

"....."

A single breath,

The two eyed each other intently.

Half a breath,

They closed the distance with their steps.

As their breaths intertwined,

They collided with a gesture.

"-----."

White...

Snowflakes whirled.

"-----."

Black...

Hair fluttered.

Red...

Blood splattered.

Chapter 82: The Humblest in the World (2)

"Aha!"

The Master laughed.

"Ughahaha! Hah!"

Her nose bled, coloring the white snow with her blood. Whoosh! The Master swung her bare fist.

"Huh?!"

The fist struck the Head of the Martial Alliance squarely on the jaw. As he staggered, the Master didn't miss a beat. She lunged. She pounced. She bit down.

"Ugh!"

Crunch!

"Cough, gasp! You, insane creature...!"

The Head of the Martial Alliance hastily pushed her away, but his ear was already soaked in blood. A ripping sound followed as flesh tore off. "Krhup!" A low groan flowed across the snowy field.

"Ptoo!"

The Master spat out the blood-soaked ear onto the snow. Her lips were also stained red. She smiled, seemingly satisfied with her prey.

A demon.

She was like a bloodthirsty ghost.

"Fu! What a foul taste! Is the high and mighty martial arts of

the Namgung family useless in improving flesh quality!”

“You, demon! As if being a heretic wasn't enough, now you indulge in cannibalism!”

“You’re like an old, overcooked spinach, old man. But your words earlier weren't without merit.”

The Master wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

“The Great Orthodox-Demonic War should have ended on the first day. Both of us faltered. We thought we were fighting with all we had, but in truth, we didn’t. We didn’t truly risk our lives!”

"....."

“Today's battle is a second chance that should never have been given.”

The Master looked at me.

Her dark eyes held a warm and gentle kindness.

“We can't foolishly repeat the same mistake. Great Axe Sage. Today, I will give my all.”

“...You intend to destroy your vital energy.”

“Yes.”

Innate True Ki or Vital Energy.

The energy everyone is born with, essentially life force itself. Unlike internal energy or Ki , True Ki cannot be accumulated artificially. Once used, it's over. And the fate of a martial artist who draws on 'life' is set.

Death or becoming a cripple.

For martial artists, True Ki is truly a last resort, akin to a final stand.

“...Demon. We are both weakened now anyway.”

The Head of the Martial Alliance spoke. Maybe due to losing an ear, his expression was fiercely grim.

“Even if we use True Ki now, we can only exhibit the skill of mid or low-level martial artists. Without internal energy, even our Dantians are gone. It's impossible to wield divine might. ...Do you understand?”

“I do.”

“Are you planning to break your True Ki just to show off the martial prowess of a mere mid-level warrior!”

“Of course.”

The Master smiled.

“Don't be angry, Namgung Woon. I'm not trying to abandon life. Not at all. I'm just hoping that my last moment comes today.”

"....."

“I feel an unparalleled joy in being alive right now. I'm thankful, ever so thankful. Grateful to have survived until today, and for this fate that allows me to die today.”

“The world has perished, yet you say this?”

“Yes. I'm thankful for every relationship I've encountered until this moment.”

The Master slowly assumed her stance.

Right hand forward. Left hand back.

“Looking back, I truly am a blessed warrior.”

Whoosh!

Snow swirled around. It wasn't snow from the sky. A small whirlwind formed around the Master. It was the flow of Innate True Ki. The wind spread from the Master as its center.

“...So it is.”

The Head of the Martial Alliance faced her wind with a bare face.

“Good. I too have long yearned for a day like today.”

The wind reversed its course.

“Let's die together, Heavenly Demon.”

The two charged towards each other.

And I saw the flow of two lives across the snowy field.

The Master deflected the Head of the Martial Alliance's hand. He tripped her foot. As arms interlocked and footsteps crossed, endless True Ki flowed from their bodies. It was a leakage of life.

The sun, unable to melt the eternal snow, melted in the lives of these two.

The Master struck the Head of the Martial Alliance's waist.

The wind blew. Where her fingertips pointed, where the wind passed, snow flowed.

In a world covered in snow, only the paths where the two had passed slowly revealed bare ground.

"....."

But that was not all.

Around the battleground of the Master and the Head of the Martial Alliance, slowly, rapidly, things other than white began to grow. Weeds. Bushes. While the rest of the earth remained frozen under snow, their path of struggle saw the birth of seasons.

-Their True Ki is feeding it.

Guardian Spirit commented.

- Such great warriors' True Ki is a feast. Albeit brief.

Even if it was only for a moment, their seasons were beautiful.

The earth drank the True Ki shed by the two. Thus, for a brief moment, the world returned to its state before being engulfed in eternal winter.

It was a forest of peach blossoms.

As if time sped up, peach trees grew and thickened. The peach branches resembled human fingers. The branches creeping up from the earth stretched towards the sky, as if trying to grasp something.

Flowers bloomed.

Among the pink petals and finger-like branches, the Master and the Head of the Martial Alliance continued their combat.

Hand gestures and footwork intended to kill each other.

Yet when momentarily obscured by the petals, it seemed like a dance, a Martial Dance, and as their lives intertwined, a Martial Destiny. Hidden by the petals, many things in the

world shone brilliantly. Even killing intent. My master, even your venom.

-...This is quite rare.

The white snowy field.

Red peach blossoms fluttered.

-One born with an Extreme Yin Body, the other with a Heavenly Martial Body, perfectly aligning Yin and Yang. Around those two, it's already a different world. Even I haven't seen such a rare sight.

Peach blossoms bloomed and withered.

Spring lingered and then passed.

"Heavenly Demon's Dominating Steps."

The Master stepped forward. A blizzard rose, scattering peach blossoms.

"Sky Destroying Golden Axe."

The Head of the Martial Alliance twisted his wrist. The snowstorm ceased, and the peach blossoms bloomed again.

"....."

A petal drifted on the wind, landing on my shoulder.

I then realized.

Those red flowers are the blood of the Master. The blood of the Head of the Martial Alliance.

The petals blooming from the blood the two shed in their final moments.

"---I despise you."

Winter is bleeding.

"I despise you all."

The Master.

"I don't hate your happiness. Never did."

The Master.

"Creatures like you also feel pain,"

Peach blossoms bloomed and withered, seasons lingered and passed, but the rising petals grew fewer, and the lingering seasons shortened.

"Creatures like you also suffer in life, express pain, seek comfort, give comfort, pretending to be human in that way."

The Master is dying.

"I hate it."

The flowers wither.

"Why,"

The season fades.

"Why are you endless beasts to others yet endlessly human to yourselves?"

Countless peach blossoms obscured the shadows of the two.

Looking back, it was like a fleeting dream, a mere round of tea in a martial duel.

The branches dried up. No more peach flowers bloomed. Wind blew, covering the bare ground with snow again. In the center of the fallen petals, the Master and the Head of the Martial Alliance stood tall.

"....."

Stagger,

“...Cough, gasp! Pff, hup...!”

Above the red field of flowers, something even redder was coughed up.

It was the blood of the Head of the Martial Alliance.

The Master's tightly clenched fist was pressed against his chest. The old man wobbled like a mirage and then fell gently. Flop, and as his body met the ground, red flowers blossomed.

The Master stood quietly.

"Master."

There was no response to my call.

"Master."

I quickened my pace and ran to her, standing rigidly, and embraced her.

She was cold.

Her body was as cold as ice.

“Master...”

“We won.”

Her voice was clear. The warmth that had disappeared from her body still lingered in her voice. But she felt too light. Her fingers, her frame, it was as if she had aged rapidly, becoming feather-light.

“Yes, we won. You won.”

“I should have pierced through his chest with my fist and grasped his heart. I couldn't even do that; I just hit him. I have no face to show my disciple.”

“No, that's not true.”

“Yes. Even then, it's better to see my face than yours now.

Why such a face?"

I gently laid the Master in my arms. I used Aura to warm her body, but she didn't get any warmer. Her fingertips stroking my cheek were as cold as icicles.

"Don't worry, my disciple. I still have about two hours before I breathe my last breath."

Two hours.

"That is enough time for a proper farewell."

Only two hours remained to hear her voice, to listen to her breathing.

"...Yet you wear such a sad expression."

The Master looked sorrowful.

"A disciple troubling their master. But I have already troubled you. I wanted to convey everything over time, but due

to this old fool's stubbornness, I couldn't. I worry about what I will leave in your heart, what I will be remembered as."

Afraid that I would become nothing to you, the Master, whispering, coughed up blood.

"If I'm remembered as a briefly bloomed flower, I could ask for nothing more..."

"King of Death!"

A frantic shout echoed.

It was the voice of the Apothecary. Realizing the Great Orthodox-Demonic War had taken place on the snowy field, the Apothecary and others from the tower rushed over.

"King of Death, what, what happened..."

"Hey! Master!?"

Viper was startled to see the Head of the Martial Alliance.

“Are you alright!? Hey, Master! Look at me!”

“He’s fine.”

The Master coughed weakly.

“The last punch was shallow. It didn't penetrate deeply. Bragging about his heavenly fortune... it seems his fortune is to live as a cripple for the rest of his life.”

“A cripple?”

The Apothecary was flustered.

“I won’t let it... Anyway, there’s no time for this! Both of you need treatment immediately!”

“I am done. Look after the old man.”

“But...!”

"I know my body best. It's already nearing its end."

The Master then said, "And,"

"I want to spend my last moments with my one and only disciple."

"Child, can you give us some privacy?"

The Apothecary was both a pharmacist and a physician. She came close, pressing the Master's pulse firmly. She used a skill to diagnose the patient's condition. The Apothecary's expression darkened.

"...Do you want painkillers?"

"No, it's fine."

The Master smiled.

"The winter wind is pleasant. My chest feels refreshed. I want to feel this wind fully as I go to the afterlife."

"....."

The Apothecary stood up. She bowed silently towards the Master. The silent Medicine King gestured for the group to leave. They soon carried the Head of the Martial Alliance back to the cave.

They respected our privacy.

"...Master."

"Come here."

The Master held my hand.

"What shall we do in the remaining hour? Are you curious about my childhood? Want to hear about the beauty of our cult's main temple?"

"I have a request."

I firmly held the Master's thin hand.

There's still time.

Her life hadn't reached perfection yet. For her to experience a truly satisfying ending, the ultimate moment, one more puzzle piece was needed.

“I have a request.”

“What is it?”

“Please engage in a duel with me.”

The Master's eyes widened.

“Unexpected. While a physical duel would guarantee your victory, in a verbal duel, you're sure to lose. I will freely display techniques as if I were back in my prime. How can you, who barely grasped a few strands of Demonic Heavenly God Art, compete!”

“I...”

I began to speak.

“I don’t think the duel you had with the Head of the Martial Alliance was your best. You said you should have pierced his chest and grasped his heart. ...Even if it's a verbal duel, I want the Master to achieve the most satisfying duel at the end.”

A duel without regrets.

The wish of every warrior.

“Can you show me that?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm...”

The Master seemed amused by my proposal. Maybe she thought it was the naive desire of a young disciple. She didn't seem to expect that I could really give her that duel.

“Alright. But I won’t hold back in a verbal duel. I’ll let you

strike first, but don't resent me if I end it in one move.”

“Yes.”

“Once the duel ends, I'll tell you stories of my past! Now, show this master the fruits of your training.”

The Master smiled gently.

A smile fragrant with peach blossoms.

I looked down at the Master's face, then slowly, at a man seated opposite me. A warrior who had reached the pinnacle in another world.

-Hmm.

Sword Emperor.

-So it's finally my turn.

Another being who reached the peak of martial arts in another realm.

Though a ghost, unable to physically fight, he could participate in a verbal duel through my mouth.

‘Yes. Please fulfill the [promise] I lost in the bet.’

-Alright.

The Guardian Spirit grinned.

-I’ve been wanting to face this world’s Heavenly Demon.

He crossed his arms and sat down on the snow.

-I’ll give you the best duel. Tell her I’m conceding three moves.

Between us, two absolute beings of different martial worlds faced each other.

Chapter 83: Sword Dance (1)

Sword Heart.

It was only after several winters had passed, to the point where So BaekHyang could no longer remember their coldness, that she began to grasp this realm.

The Sword of the Heart.

It was when she no longer was known as 'The Fragrance of Snow' but as 'The Heavenly Demon' that So BaekHyang started to glimpse this realm.

.....I see it.....

The woman who was So BaekHyang, now the Heavenly Demon, muttered.

.....A realm untrodden by any warrior lies ahead.....

.....It seems as distant as the Pure Land.....

.....But if it's visible, is there any place unreachable?.....

Her heart pounded with excitement.

The Sword Heart is a realm known only in legends. Killing Heart: the mere intent to kill, the harboring of murderous will in one's heart, causes the target to die instantly. No need for a sword. No need for words. She, at last, had that realm before her.

.....Heavenly Demon.....

If only.

.....Our revered lord.....

If only she were given time.

60 years to dedicate solely to training.

If only that were possible.

.....Please relieve us of this resentment.....

People knelt before her.

.....The officials demand marten fur as taxes. My father went hunting and never returned, leaving us unable to pay. We are to pay taxes based on the number of family members, so my grandmother, nearing her end, has decided to disappear to reduce our taxes.....

.....Heavenly Demon.....

There were so many bowed before her.

.....Famine has hit last year and this year, leaving us nothing to eat. We were ordered to build reservoirs and embankments, supposedly to prevent next year's drought, but how can we lift stones on empty stomachs.....

.....My daughter was taken and has not returned.....

.....Heavenly Demon.....

They were numerous.

The Heavenly Demon quietly looked up at the snowy mountains.

If she had 60 years, a period solely dedicated to training, she would ascend to a realm no warrior in the history of the martial world had ever reached. It was an undeniable fact. But still.

.....Lead the way.....

The Heavenly Demon stood up, her dark robe fluttering.

.....There are so many I must cut down.....

Abandon the world or herself?

The Heavenly Demon easily discarded her personal desires.

Her Unyielding Martial Desire becoming Desirelessness.

That had always been her life.

That day, too, she cut down those who had frozen the world.

She just couldn't cut down winter itself.

-Originally,

The Guardian Spirit knelt down.

-A warrior using another's mouth for a duel is absurd. It's unprecedented rudeness and would become a laughingstock in martial history.

The Guardian Spirit sat respectfully in the snow, a posture I had never seen before. It was his own form of etiquette, reserved for those he recognized as worthy opponents.

-But even knowing it's laughable, I must request this duel.

The Sword Emperor looked straight at the Master.

-My alias is Sword Emperor. In the world known as the Ten Thousand Sword Realm, I was acknowledged as the number one. I implore your forgiveness for my rudeness and request a verbal duel.

Then, he bowed his head.

"....."

"Disciple?"

The Master blinked.

"Why don't you speak the technique? The duel has already begun."

Naturally, the Master couldn't see or hear the Guardian Spirit. She didn't see his etiquette.

“.....Master.”

“What’s the matter?”

“You must have known that I use strange magic.”

“You mean the magic that returned my children and the Martial Alliance’s zombies to their original states?”

The Master chuckled, her laugh fleeting as if it might vanish any moment.

“I’ve chosen not to ask anything of you. Silence is a virtue. I just thought you were a messenger sent by the Jade Emperor out of pity for me.”

The Master rested her head on my thigh, smiling. Her head shook slightly with each laugh, highlighting her diminished weight.

“...I know one more kind of magic.”

The Master's time was running out. I needed to be concise.

"One of them is a spell to summon ghosts."

"Hmm?"

"Right now, a ghost who is deeply versed in martial arts is beside me. He was once called the greatest in the outside world."

"Ah ha! The greatest warrior of the outside world! Impressive."

The Master giggled, apparently taking it as a joke.

"Fine. I shall duly acknowledge the ghost summoned by my disciple as an opponent for a verbal martial duel."

"....."

I looked at the Guardian Spirit.

He sat silently in a formal position.

“So, what technique will the ghost of the greatest warrior present?”

“...He says he'll concede the first three moves to you.”

"Uh-huh?"

“Master, he said he would yield the first three moves to you.”

The Master's expression lost its mirth.

“Arrogant. No disciple of mine would say such a thing. It's definitely a cheeky ghost. I'll strike with the fifth technique of [Twelve Cloud Dragon Swords], the Rising Swift Dragon Sword, at the Acupoint of Swift Water.”

1st move.

-I respond with the sixth technique of [Earth Dragon Martial Staff], Eastern River Cave Dragon as a feint, then step back

with Divine Floating Step.

The Guardian Spirit immediately countered without hesitation.

I didn't understand what [Twelve Cloud Dragon Swords] or [Earth Dragon Martial Staff] were. My knowledge was limited to Demonic Heavenly God Art. I just relayed the duel verbally.

“He said he responds with the sixth technique of [Earth Dragon Martial Staff], Eastern River Cave Dragon as a feint, then steps back with Divine Floating Step.”

“Hmm...”

The Master furrowed her brows.

“I counter with the seventh technique of [Great Taichi], Torrent Flurry Kick.”

-I use the second technique of [Flesh Killer Fist], Double Ground Hands as a feint, then dodge with Steel Plank.

The Master's delicate eyebrows wrinkled further.

"I attack with the sixth technique of [Great Unmatched Swords], Thousand Cat Demon Flicker Strike."

-I respond with paired moves. Retreat with Plum Blossom Step and then...

"....."

Three moves passed in an instant.

I couldn't grasp the exchange that unfolded between them.

But the Master was now silent.

-You.

The Guardian Spirit spoke calmly.

-I can guess how you lived. After reaching the peak, you had no time for training, busy with cult affairs. You saw the threshold of the Life and Death Realm but didn't pursue it. Why? You were too busy. Managing the cult alone took up all your 24 hours. You were too occupied taking care of your family and sect members to spare time for training.

Then he continued.

-Do you know what's the most frustrating?

The corner of the Guardian Spirit's mouth twisted.

-That even with all that, you were still known as the greatest. There's no need to strive higher.

Because you're already at the peak. Comfortable, recognized by everyone. No need to make an effort. In your own words, you're heaven itself.

"....."

-Poor thing. Your misfortune is that you were the absolute strongest in this martial realm.

The Guardian Spirit crossed his arms.

-Let me show you what lies beyond the heavens.

I didn't relay these words.

It felt unnecessary.

"Hm."

The Master slowly lifted her head.

Leaning slightly against me, she assumed a seated position on the snow.

“Seems like he’s not just any random warrior.”

The Heavenly Demon.

Origin, The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon.

The Absolute Greatest of All Times.

The Demonic Sect.

-Of course. Who do you think I am?

The Sword Emperor.

Origin, Ten Thousand Sword Realm.

The Greatest Warrior of the World.

The Orthodox Faction.

“Alright. I won't treat you lightly.

-Come at me as much as you like.

A Martial Duel...

Commences.

"I'll start with the first technique of Flaming Blood Dragon, Explosive Ascension, striking upward at the chin."

-Suddenly mimicking the Orthodox Faction, huh? Counter with the first technique of Great Eight Techniques of the Cloud Dragon, once striking the ground, then upward with the fist.

One move.

"I'll switch Explosive Ascension to the third technique of Execution Blade, Gentle Fierce Strike, aiming for the Fountainhead Acupoint to kill the momentum."

-Oh, really now? Let's see, should I counter or... Alright, I'll mix in the principles of Order of Life and Death with Estuary Butterfly to match.

Another move.

"....."

As the verbal duel continued, the Master's breathing grew more labored.

In winter, her breaths turned whiter.

The Master clenched her left hand, grabbing her knee firmly. With her right, she tightly held my hand. She was trembling. Her tremors were transmitted to me through our clasped hands.

"...How long will you keep your filthy feet on the fingers of the Master? I'll tear you apart with the second technique of Demonic Leeching Dharma, Flaming Leeching Chin Strike."

-Just a mere strike back and you're losing your temper. I'll immediately retreat from the strike and roll in mid-air, Lazy Mule Roll, while simultaneously performing the fourth technique of Divine Chariot Spin, Hill of Life and Death, targeting the right Greater Bone, Sun Valley, and White Tiger Acupoints.

"I'll retreat three steps with Reigning Steps of the Heavenly Demon!"

The Master seemed delighted.

-Mimicking the Demonic Sect now? I'll counter with Sword of Frostbitten Death to follow suit.

Yes.

The Great Axe Sage of the martial alliance was never a [Match] for the Master.

Undoubtedly, the Great Axe Sage was the strongest in the Orthodox Faction of this world. He was the only one who could possibly stand against the Master. But wasn't it proven in the final Orthodox-Demonic Great War? If both gave their all in a duel, the victor would always be the Master.

A duel with a foregone conclusion.

Perhaps, that's why the Master delayed the resolution of the Great Orthodox-Demonic War to the 990th round.

Like a child savoring a candy that will eventually melt, cherishing it as long as possible.

"I'm sorry."

That's why the Great Axe Sage, in the timeline where he faced a bad ending, said to the Master.

"I'm sorry I was weaker than you."

"I was the weaker one."

"Kill me."

Squeeze.

Unconsciously, my grip tightened.

"Foolishness! I'll counter with the second technique of Execution Blade, Welcoming Person!"

-Impossible. I dodge with Steel Plank and retaliate with Explosive Ascension at the same time.

"Aha."

The Master finally broke into laughter. Not a sad one, nor a fleeting smile. It was a laughter tinged with the pounding of her heart, radiantly red.

"My disciple, this ghost you've summoned is indeed the best!"

".....Yes."

Now, I fully understood the Great Axe Sage's feelings.

"Among those I know, he is probably the strongest."

"Where did you hide such a powerful warrior, only to introduce him now!"

A bit of resentment.

"Such a powerful martial artist, I've never encountered in my lifetime!"

No.

I felt quite a lot of resentment.

"I'll mix in the techniques of Divine Martial Heaven to twist his arm and kill his momentum. Then, I'll retreat four steps with the Reigning Steps of the Heavenly Demon!"

-Oh dear. You've already retreated three steps and now four more? Seems like you've started to show your tail. I'll follow closely with one step using Divine Floating Step, then Midsummer Downpour with sword energy.

"Ah! Midsummer Downpour with sword energy! It seems you're tired of probing. Alright, I'll use Sword of Parched Death to draw you in and spill, then immediately switch to holding the sword in reverse grip for Shining Torrent Dragon from the first to the third technique, targeting the Heavenly Pillar, Great Push, and Body Pillar in order!"

I didn't understand the martial duel unfolding between them.

I couldn't even visualize the clash in my mind.

I knew what Sword of Parched Death was, but I didn't know what Shining Torrent Dragon was. I knew what Lazy Mule Roll was, but I had no idea what the stance for Life and Death of

Divine Chariot Spin was.

Not knowing, and unable to picture it, I wasn't even allowed to try to fathom their movements.

Their swordplay and martial dance were beyond my comprehension.

-Then, I'll counter with a Butterfly Filling Sword mixed with Order of Life and Death, stepping back and then unleashing the Supreme Ultimate Heavenly Sword!

“Not bad at all. Not bad!”

Ah.

If only I could be your worthy opponent.

If only I could be the sole recipient of your hopes.

I wanted you to spend your last moments in life, happy only because of me.

But I can't see.

All I can understand at most is,

"Fine. Dodge with ■■ Technique and counter with ■■■ Sword!"

-■■■■ with ■■■ Technique, then aim for the throat with ■■■■!

Just this much.

I can't see your swords.

"I'll counter, then with ■■■■'s tenth technique, ■■■■, I'll strike at ■■■ and ■■!"

-Quickly, dodge with ■■■■ and then counter with ■■■■, using ■■■■■. After countering, whirl ■■ with ■■■■'s ■ ■ ■ ■ and strike at ■■.

“■■■■, ■■■ to ■■ and ■■■ to----.”

It was dark.

The realm where the two danced was so far beyond.

"Then, after countering..."

That's when it happened.

The Master, who had been gasping for breath, turned to look at me.

"....."

For a moment, time seemed to stop.

The Master's gaze.

Her dark eyes rested on my face.

".....Yes."

A small smile graced the Master's lips.

“My disciple, the day is cold.”

"....."

“The season repeats into winter, and this place becomes a perpetual snowfield. A snowfield is a harsh battlefield for martial artists. Every step sinks deep, requiring constant use of stepping techniques.”

The Master touched the snow.

Delicate snowflakes clung to her fingertips.

“That's why battles on snowfields always focus on destabilizing the opponent's stance. Understand, my disciple? There's no need to stubbornly aim for the neck or waist. Just pressure them into losing their footing.”

“You and your ghost are thus vying for each other's space. Limiting the room to maneuver.”

The Master.

“Using a lot of kicks serves the same purpose. Not just to strike the opponent, but also to scatter the snowflakes, obscuring vision a bit. Hmm, quite a desperate fight, isn’t it?...”

The Master whispered in my ear.

“I think I’ll close my eyes.”

Her left hand gently covered my eyes.

“I can see the opponent.”

“.....Yes.”

“A mighty and noble master. He must be quite large. Almost twice the size of me, right?”

I pictured the Guardian Spirit in my mind.

“Yes.”

“A huge bear-like master, breathing heavily. There he stands, confidently smiling, beckoning me to come at him. Given the difference in physique, he must be confident...”

As the Master’s whispers continued, the Guardian Spirit’s figure became clearer.

“How could I possibly overcome the natural difference in physique? I accept it. But I remember my strengths. I can move faster than him. Above all, I am familiar with snowfields. I’ll perform the Printless Snow Walk more skillfully than him...”

“Yes.”

“It’s a long-term battle. Understand, my disciple. I am aiming for a prolonged fight.”

Ah, the Master playfully commented.

“But that fellow has seen through my plan. His movements become hurried. His swordplay quickens. He charges at me like a wild boar---.”

Soon.

"But fear not. It's all as expected. I step back, lightly, retreating---."

Before my eyes.

"I draw him in."

The scene unfolds before me.

"Continuously retreating. My steps are light, ever so light. He, like a real wild boar, charges, stirring the snowflakes in all directions---."

As winter repeats, the world becomes an eternal snowfield.

The Master, she steps back.

The Guardian Spirit charged ahead.

“---With each of our steps, snowflowers bloom and flutter.”

To me as well,

The swords of the two started to become visible.

Chapter 84: Sword Dance (2)

Winter.

"The snow is falling."

The Master's steps were light.

"It has already been two days since the duel began."

Gliding lightly, as if sliding on ice, the Master treaded on the snowfield.

A world covered in white.

The Master's black robe flowed like brush strokes on a blank canvas.

-How long do you think you can run?

Another set of brush strokes followed.

Stronger, fiercer, and more aggressive than the Master's. Like a brush heavily loaded with ink, pressing down hard.

-I won't lose just because of your movement.

Guardian Spirit, with heavy steps, breaking the ice, bulldozing the snow, charged forward.

"I am confident that I can run away forever."

-But the end will come eventually.

"Don't you know? This world has become an endless snowfield. Though there's nowhere to go, there's infinite space to flee."

-I won't let you be.

Guardian Spirit leaped, kicking off the snow.

-If you were really in your prime, maybe you could run forever. But this duel is happening now. There's hardly an hour left of your life. The hourglass is running out. Still planning to run?

"Ah, how petty."

-Truth is often petty.

Guardian Spirit swings his sword.

"Alright, I admit."

The Master turns her neck, dodging lightly.

"My life won't last much longer. I can't keep running."

-Sooner or later, we'll have to face off.

"Then there's no reason not to make it now."

-You're finally talking sense, I see.

"Then."

The Master grips her sword hilt.

"I'll show you my greatest power."

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The First Form.

Sword of Starving Death.

"---Starvation can make someone exchange their own child with the neighbor's and eat it."

The sword cries out, cutting through the winter wind.

"Have you heard the story of an adult who preserved the neighbor's child as jerky and buried it in the snow? The tale of that village? In winter, if you dig through the snow, you find young human flesh caught on every shovel."

-How sad.

Clang,

The Master's blade is blocked by Guardian Spirit's sword.

-Famine must have struck.

"Yes. Famine is like a recurring plague."

-But it's just a coincidence.

Guardian Spirit, facing the winter wind, swings his sword.

-Coincidentally, there's a good harvest, and coincidentally, a famine. There's nothing in the world that's not by chance. Lord of the Demonic Cult, if you mourn for coincidental

tragedies, by the same logic, you should laugh and be happy for coincidental joys.

"....."

-The depth of one's sorrow is surely equal to the height of their happiness.

Clang,

The two swords cross.

Red plum blossoms fall.

-That's why I'll sing of the joyful autumn harvest.

Snowflakes fall like fallen leaves.

-I remember a day I walked and saw the horizon. A golden sea of grains stretched to the horizon. Children, as tall as the rice stalks, were playing hide and seek. Their laughter echoed through the stalks, hiding and reappearing.

Autumn.

The wind blows.

The hills turn red with maple, and the horizon yellow with grains.

-You talked about children buried in snow? I speak of the laughter of children playing hide and seek under the grains.

In a world showered with red maple.

The Sword Emperor swings his sword.

-Whichever it is, it's just a coincidence of a coincidental day. If there's something I should enshrine in my sword, it's the laughter under the grains, and if there's a scene I should remember at my death, it's also the sight of children playing hide and seek. An obvious choice.

"Really,"

The Master cuts through the maple leaves.

"Such a blessed speech!"

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Second Form.

Sword of Parched Death.

"Both are coincidences, you say? Yes. But happiness doesn't kill people. It's the agony of starvation, the torment of thirst that kills! Death is the end. It's all over."

The sun blazes down.

"I sing of the people who died without a sip of water!"

Summer.

A hot wind blankets the world.

The vegetation withers.

Weeds turn yellow. Fruits shrivel. The movements of the beetles slow, and on the riverbanks lie hundreds, thousands, millions of dead fish. Flop. The round eyes of the fish are devoid of moisture.

-Ah.

The Master's sword becomes sticky.

Even though Guardian Spirit counters, the Master doesn't retreat, instead clinging closer. A close-quarters battle. The breath of each can be felt, so close they are. Clang! Bang! The swords mix rapidly, blurring the sight.

-Washing your hair in summer is so damn refreshing.

Guardian Spirit counters all the Master's swift attacks.

-You're teaching Gong-Ja wrong.

"...What?"

-Sorry, that was a bit harsh. Not wrong, but too early.

Guardian Spirit's sword flows like water.

-It's good to sing of the world's pain. It's good to turn your eyes to others' suffering. But you can't keep doing that forever.

"Why not?"

-You just get exhausted.

Clang!

Red spider lily petals fade.

-Gong-Ja hasn't yet experienced the joy of the world.

Suddenly, the roles reverse.

-You should taste the delicacies of land and sea. Only then can you mourn for those who'll never taste them. Wash your hair in summer. Only then can you cry for those dying without water. The human heart is like a candlewick. It burns, and eventually, it burns out.

-Do you know? Heavenly Demon, this guy hasn't even fallen in love yet. Ridiculous! He's never even dated!

Torrential sword strikes pour down.

-Yet he already acts as if he's shouldered all the world's pain and sorrow. Acts! Ha. Don't even dream of it. Your cult's teachings are too early!

It pours like rain.

-I'll teach him how to be joyful.

The rain pours.

-To laugh without a hint of hypocrisy. To put an arm around others. To be so happy in someone's company it's inevitable. Only then can he truly mourn endlessly!

"You're..."

The dry land receives rain. The river soaks with rainwater. The dead fish bodies are swept away by the water. The morning glory opens its purple tongue, drinking the raindrops.

Frogs croak.

"You're planning to pretend to be my disciple's teacher!"

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Third Form.

Sword of Submerged Death.

-Exactly!

"How dare you!"

Like an unending rain.

The sword strikes rain down.

"Who are you to covet my only true disciple!"

Midsummer.

The monsoon overflows.

Roses by the thousands drift in the river.

-You're hilarious! I was planning to become his master before you!

The reservoir breaks, flooding the village. The water level rises to the mountains. On the risen water surface, the Master and Guardian Spirit leap. Splash. Splosh! Waves bloom where their steps land.

-I'm the one who taught him how to behead orcs! I'm the one who awakened him to the use of Aura! I coaxed and comforted a talentless brat into something useful! And here you are, leader of heretics, meddling!

Winter.

"What, heretics?!"

-Yes! Aren't those of the Demonic Cult a bunch of heretics!

The two glide on the water surface.

Being chased.

Ripples spread with each step.

Chasing.

Rose petals gently crushed underfoot.

Their shadows cast upon the ripples and petals.

-Swinging a sword is a joyful thing!

The smell of rain, the scent of flowers.

-The Demonic Heavenly God Art should be taught later to the disciple! A sword that wields pain, by pain, for pain! What is that! Too demonic! Sing of the joy of smelling flowers, the happiness of being drenched in summer rain!

“The disciple! My disciple! Born to be the next leader of our cult!”

-That's why they call you a cult leader! Heretical leader!

Hundreds of millions of roses.

Suddenly, the flooded river fades. The surface fades. Covered by roses, petals.

The world turns into a red flower field.

"■■■■, ■■■. ■■■■."

-■■■, ■■, ■■■■. ■■■!

Spring.

Flowers flow.

Red peonies scatter, drifting in the sky.

“—With the sixth form of Peony Sword Chaos, Scatter Strike Chaos, I shall gouge your cervical acupoints.”

Clang!

Two petals, severed by the blade, fall apart.

-I’ll avoid that with Snow Amidst Orchids Steps.

They were visible.

“...With the seventh form of Demonic Heavenly God Art, Sword of Contusing Death, I will strike.”

And audible.

-I respond with the fourth form of Ten Thousand Sea Moon Strike, Autumn Night Falling Moon Strike.

Their swords become visible.

The crushed peonies, stepped on, their fragrance released, are seen.

"....."

Only when visible, can it be known.

The Master.

Lord of the Demonic Cult, Heavenly Demon, is losing.

".....With the eighth form of Demonic Heavenly God Art, Sword of Scorching Death, I resist."

Under the peony-filled sky, the Master bleeds.

Bloodied.

The difference in strength between the Master and Sword Emperor is clear. No matter how much she prolonged the duel, escaping the Sword Emperor's pursuit was impossible. The Master, trying the impossible, bleeds from her arms, legs, shoulders.

-Hm.

Guardian Spirit takes a stance.

-Strike with the first form of Falling Sun and Flower Sword, Moonlit Night Arrival Sword.

The Master's breathing becomes thinner.

Her internal energy is depleted.

Attempting mutual destruction with her remaining energy is overambitious.

"I..."

The Master speaks.

“Originally, I never completed the last technique of Demonic Heavenly God Art. There's one reason. Since childhood, my envisioned death was freezing. Abandoned by my mother in the snowfield, dying alone from the cold. That was the end I always saw for myself.”

The Master raises her sword high.

“However.”

The sword tip points directly upward, like a noon clock hand.

“Paradoxically, after the world ended, I was able to complete the ninth technique of Demonic Heavenly God Art.”

"....."

“I am my own lord, throughout heaven and earth.”

“Looking up to heaven, walking under the sky, only I exist. Baraya. Baraya. Agabaraya. The world becomes winter, a single candle flickers. My song alone is the world's song, and my death, the demise of heaven and earth. White, whiter, and even whiter.”

The sword,

Splits the sky.

"My Demonic Heaven will leave this as my final word in the snowfield."

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Ninth Form.

Sword of Solitude Death.

"-----."

Winter,

Cuts through spring.

The red sky of petals splits. Through the gap, white winter storms in. The storming winter falls. Petals turn to snow, hundreds of millions of peonies become snowflakes, freezing the world.

A solitary sword.

A strike singing the lonely death of the Heavenly Demon.

-Indeed.

Facing the winter torrent rushing at him, Guardian Spirit quietly looks up.

-Lonely death. Is that the death chosen by the Lord of the Demonic Cult? Yes. I acknowledge it. A fitting strike for the last warrior of a destroyed world.

A melancholic smile appears on Guardian Spirit's lips.

-But when it comes to loneliness, I know it better than you.

Guardian Spirit grips his sword hilt.

-How long did you endure alone in that world? 3 years? 2 years? No, not even a day. Because you always had the Axe Sage with you. When he died, you lost your mind and went insane.

The sword tip moves.

-Sorry, but.

And.

-I endured alone for 130 years.

Martial Art .

No Form.

A Single Sword.

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Peonies,

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Winter, Spring, Summer, Autumn,

Autumn, Winter, Spring, Summer,

Summer, Autumn, Winter, Spring,

Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter,

Plum, peony, rose, and spider lily,

Spider lily, plum, peony, and rose,

Petals, petals, petals, petals,

Red, redder, reddest, red,

Winter,

Turns red,

Again winter,

Winter,

Breath,

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"-----"

I gasp for breath.

"----Ah!!"

It was imperceptible.

Unperceivable.

I couldn't even begin to comprehend that final strike.

“Ha, ah, uh...! Ha, ah...”

But...

Right now, there's something more important than understanding that sword.

“Master.”

"....."

“Master, are you okay...? Your body, is it okay?”

The Master gazes silently towards the winter sky, her eyes unfocused. Thump. My heart races. I fumble for the Master's hand, repeatedly feeling for her pulse.

It's beating.

She's alive.

Still alive.

“Master.”

"....."

The Master slowly speaks.

“So that is how it is.”

"So that is how it is," says the Master, looking into my eyes.

“Disciple.”

Her dark eyes.

“My disciple. From the start, you only ever sought to help me.”

“To claim that you came from another world out of admiration for me...A blatant lie. Why didn't I realize it sooner? My disciple is not one to be swayed by fame...”

Her voice trails off.

"Thank you."

"....."

“Disciple, were you happy that you met me?”

I nod.

“Yes.”

“Will I be remembered as a flower in your memory?”

“Yes, Master.”

“What type of flower, I wonder.”

“A peony...”

I embrace the Master.

“As a red peony. That's how I will remember you, Master.”

“Ah.”

The Master smiles.

“How pretty.”

The Master gently caresses my cheek.

“How pretty.....”

And.

With her remaining hand, she gestures towards the sky.

A delicate motion, reminiscent of a newborn bird testing its wings.

“My disciple...”

Silently.

Without a sound, the snow-laden mountain is rent asunder.

Split in half, the snow-covered peaks stand undisturbed; as if they were always meant to be so.

The Master breathes a white breath.

She dreams a white dream.

“Master.....”

I bury my face in the Master's shoulder. In her ceased breath.
In this frozen moment of time. In the scent of snow from one
born of its fragrance.

“You have cut the winter, Master...”

“You have cut the winter.”

That day.

The winter of a world was severed.

Chapter 85: The Reader's Heart (1)

I held the Master in my arms for a long time.

Even when the breath ceases, the human body remains.

That's why death is so harsh and cruel.

"Sir."

After a while, I heard a voice calling me. Warriors in black martial arts uniforms, the elite of the Demonic Cult, gathered around me.

While I silently held the Master, the Great Orthodox-Demonic War continued. In the end, the Demonic Cult emerged victorious.

"During the battle, we were preoccupied, but many disciples heard the Master call you [Disciple]."

A warrior asked with a tense face.

"Could it be that you, Sir, are the rightful successor appointed by Lord Heavenly Demon?"

"....."

I looked around.

All the surviving disciples gazed at me. Even those whom the Master called the Four Demon Lords. Some had bleeding noses, torn lips, or severed arms. Everyone was soaked in blood, all silently waiting for my response.

"...I'm not sure if I've received the succession."

"Didn't the Master accept you as a disciple?"

"That's true."

I held the Master's cold body a bit tighter.

"I am the Master's disciple."

"....."

The warrior's face hardened further.

"If the Master truly accepted a true disciple, then surely, you must have been taught the Demonic Heavenly God Art. I must rudely ask this. Sir, please demonstrate a strand of the Demonic Heavenly God Art before us."

The tone was polite, but it was the same as saying [Prove that you really are the Heavenly Demon's disciple].

'Being the Master's disciple automatically makes me a successor.'

I realized why the Master hesitated so much in accepting me as a disciple. Becoming the Heavenly Demon's true disciple meant being the rightful successor of the Demonic Cult.

Now, with the Master's last warmth gone from this world, the Demonic Cult's teachings were mine.

"...Alright. Would demonstrating the Sword of Starving Death be sufficient?"

"Yes. The Master often said [Even if you miss a single hair, you won't be acknowledged as my successor]. We may be just ordinary swordsmen, but we have the ability to discern and judge from a glimpse of your swordplay."

Other disciples murmured around us.

"Hey, what's that Blood Demon ranting about?"

"Don't you get it? By seeing the first form of the Demonic Heavenly God Art, we can tell if he's really the Heavenly Demon's disciple."

"Really? But why's that guy representing us?"

"He's the most mannered among us, coming from the Moyong clan. Even though he's an illegitimate child."

“What? That guy's from the Moyong bastards?”

“Hey, why are you acting surprised? This story has been told dozens of times... Enough. A river is a river, a mountain is a mountain, and a meathead will always be a meathead.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“It means your mere existence is comparable to the toxic techniques of the Sichuan School. Sword Demon, considering I currently have cancer because of you, despite mastering the Thousand Poison Invulnerability, you're quite remarkable.”

“Oh? Is that a compliment?”

“Fuckin' blockhead.”

“Ahem.”

The warrior coughed and glared at the murmuring disciples. His eyes carried a stern warning to keep quiet.

But the Sword Demon and Hell Ghost Demon tilted their heads in confusion.

“What're you looking at? Wanna fight?”

“Annoying. Look somewhere else. It makes me sick.”

"....."

The warrior turned back to me. His eyes seemed to say, [Nothing just happened].

“Ah.”

I chuckled a bit.

‘Yeah. This place has always been like this.’

The Demonic Cult was originally a refuge for the uneducated. My Master was an orphan. It was natural for most disciples to be ignorant of manners.

"Starvation means---"

I didn't draw my sword. I didn't want to swing a blade while holding the Master. I just channeled Aura into my left hand and gestured.

A strike engraved itself on the snowfield.

"---children waiting for sunlight."

Startled.

The representative warrior and the murmuring disciples all fell silent. My strike created a deep ravine in the snow, like a wound on someone's body.

I didn't stop at just demonstrating the first form. I performed the second, third, fourth... all the forms I had mastered to the extreme.

Silence fell around us.

Thanks to witnessing the Master and Guardian Spirit's fierce battle, each of my strikes seemed sharper than before. This, too, was the Master's arrangement.

"I haven't fully mastered the remaining forms yet. It would be embarrassing to show them."

"Is this enough?"

Rustle!

The warrior knelt on the snow.

"I greet the rightful successor of the Demonic Cult. Our new Heavenly Demon."

Following him, the Hell Ghost Demon, Moon Shadow Demon, and Sword Demon knelt in succession. Rustle, crunch. Their knees crushed the snow. All the surviving disciples from the Great Orthodox-Demonic War bowed down on the snowfield.

"We greet the rightful successor of the Demonic Cult! Our new Lord!"

I slowly spoke.

"The title of Heavenly Demon is too grand. I already have the alias King of Death, and I wish for the Master's title to remain forever in her name alone."

"Then..."

"The title of Lord also feels too weighty."

I turned my head. Guardian Spirit, arms crossed, quietly closed his eyes, probably recalling the battle with the Master. I glanced at his face, then spoke to the disciples.

"I still have much to learn. How can I be the Lord when I have nothing to teach you? A title for the sake of a title."

The warrior looked perplexed.

"...In his lifetime, the Heavenly Demon never erred in choosing a person. If she accepted you as a true disciple, you're undoubtedly fit for the role of Lord."

“Thank you. But by my judgment, I am still lacking to carry on the teachings of the Demonic Cult.”

The disciples murmured.

“Then, how shall we address you, Sir? We can’t just keep calling you ‘Sir’...”

“Vice-lord.”

Someone blurted out.

“Call me Vice-lord.”

It was the Hell Ghost Demon. The disciple who lied about giving three moves to the Shaolin monk. His broken nose hadn’t fully healed, leaving dried blood on his philtrum.

“In the martial world, it’s common to call someone Junior Master or Junior Clan Lord. If it’s too burdensome to assume the role of Lord, but not outright refusing it, calling you Vice-lord is appropriate.”

“Hmm.”

I nodded. That was acceptable.

“Yes. Let it be so.”

The disciples sighed in relief. Their faces visibly relaxed as they looked at me.

“Vice-lord. We sincerely thank you. We don't know what miraculous technique you used, but we all remember being bitten by the zombies. If it weren't for you, finishing the Great Orthodox-Demonic War and paying respects to Lord Heavenly Demon would've been impossible!”

The warrior saluted me.

“The top of the Demonic Cult's Four Demon Lords. Blood Demon here. I, along with all of Blood Ghost Troops, pledge loyalty to you, Vice-lord.”

Others followed suit.

“The top of the Demonic Cult’s Four Demon Lords. Hell Ghost Demon. I, along with all of Soul Repentance Troops, swear fealty to you, Vice-lord.”

“Moon Shadow Demon here. I, along with all of Shadow Corpse Troops, commit our loyalty to you, Vice-lord.”

“Sword Demon! Along with Extermination Troops, I vow my allegiance.”

Dozens more followed.

"....."

I gently laid the Master down.

The Master, like a flower born in the snowfield, matched perfectly with the white snow.

I saluted the disciples.

"As long as my life endures, the shadow doctrine shall be

immortal."

Just then.

[Stage Cleared.]

[You have cleared Volume 1 of the quest 'Remake The World!]

It felt like forever since I heard this voice.

[Today, the 22nd floor stage has been cleared.]

[Announcing once again.]

[Today, the 22nd floor stage has been cleared.]

It seemed so long since I heard it.

[Assessing raid participants...]

[Assessment complete.]

Without releasing my salute, I spoke.

"Please arrange the Master's funeral."

[Announcing the 4 raid participants.]

The mountain split in two by the Master's gesture.

Letters carved into the sky above the mountain peak.

+

[Raid Contribution Ranking]

1st place: King of Death

2nd place: Apothecary

3rd place: Viper

4th place: Medicine King

+

“Please don't hold a grand funeral. The Master wouldn't want it. Just being present until the end of the funeral will make her happy. Take care of the Master, Please---”

I didn't continue.

There was no need, and I couldn't.

When I blinked, my body was no longer in the snowfield.

“Welcome back, King of Death.”

The Great Library of All Knowledge.

"I've been waiting anxiously for you!"

The Constellation, the Head Librarian, smiled with his eyes and looked at me.

"Congratulations!"

The Head Librarian was floating in the air.

Her 5-meter-long sleeves fluttered like goldfish fins.

"Hmm. The last word of 'The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon' ended with 'please'. Hmm. The word 'please' signifies a wish for someone. A wish, a prayer. In the Demonic Cult, it's called 'Baraya'. 'Please' and 'Baraya' can be seen as the same. In that sense, it's quite an appropriate ending..."

"Wait a moment."

I interrupted the Head Librarian's lengthy explanation.

I felt a sense of [dissonance].

It was my second time in the Great Library. I had spent nights reading here before. I was quite familiar with this place.

However, compared to my last visit, something was glaringly different.

"...Why are all the other hunters unconscious?"

The hunters who participated in the Apocalypse strategy.

All 250 hunters with aliases lay sprawled on the floor.

"Hmm."

The Head Librarian raised the corner of her lips.

"Don't worry. They're just put to sleep temporarily."

"Asleep...?"

"Yes. I used a harmless fragrance."

The Head Librarian reached out his hand. Around the Constellation, dozens of books floated. Among them was one titled [Tale of a Lotus-Scented City].

"There are many worlds where people communicate with words, but there are also worlds where they communicate through song, and even through scent. In this Apocalypse, people converse using the scents of anger, sorrow, and joy."

"....."

"Of course, there's also a scent for sleep."

I was on alert.

"Oh, don't look at me like that. I just wanted to talk to the King of Death, so I quieted the surroundings for a bit."

A talk.

"What kind of talk do you want to have after knocking out my colleagues?"

"Ah, [colleagues]. That's just like the King of Death! Though you could see them as burdensome and useless baggage, naturally, you think of them as colleagues. I'm moved to tears once again by your noble heart."

"....."

"This place has seen every move and step of you and your companions. Like a movie. A crucible of emotions. Really. The people here would've greeted the King of Death warmly."

The Head Librarian giggled.

"But if I left them as is, I would only be able to talk to you much later, right? My turn would be far back in line." The Head Librarian shrugged.

"To create a moment for conversation, I had no choice but to calm people down for a while. Don't worry. I used the most

gentle method available to put them to sleep."

I found it hard to believe at once.

I quickly looked around. The Witch was there, leaning against a bookshelf with her long hair trailing down. I approached her and gently felt her pulse.

Thump.

Thump.

Thankfully.

Her complexion looked relaxed, and her breathing was back to normal.

I confirmed that my colleague was safe and then looked up at the Head Librarian.

"...Finish your talk quickly and wake everyone up."

"Are you in such a hurry? I wanted to have a more leisurely conversation with you. I specifically summoned only you, leaving out the other participants."

"I still have unfinished business on the 22nd floor. A sword to find..."

"Later."

The Head Librarian's eyes smiled like inverted crescent moons.

"That can be explored later."

"....."

Tension filled the air.

Despite his small stature, the Head Librarian was no joke. He could summon the bizarre monsters of other worlds at will. Last time, he swallowed up nearly 50 hunters in an instant.

'Even with the mastery of the Demonic Heavenly God Art, facing him now would mean certain defeat.'

I swallowed hard.

"...What do you want to talk about?"

The Head Librarian's smile deepened.

"A very intimate conversation."

Flutter.

The Head Librarian fluttered his sleeves and landed on the ground. Approaching me, he took something out of his sleeve.

"Hmm."

It was a pair of scissors.

"Why the scissors all of a sudden...?"

"Your hair has grown quite a bit, King of Death. Let me trim it for you."

The Head Librarian hopped up and started snipping my hair swiftly. Not much was cut, just about half a palm's length from the back. He placed the cut hair into a red silk pouch.

"....."

"And your nails are long too. It's a big deal if a martial artist doesn't maintain their nails. Let me cut them for you."

The Head Librarian took out another item from his sleeve.

It was a nail clipper.

He grabbed my right hand and started clipping my nails, one by one. From the pinky to the thumb, he cut them all. Each nail was placed into different silk pouches.

Hmm.

"Excuse me, Head Librarian?"

"Yes."

"What exactly are you doing?"

"King of Death."

The Head Librarian bent down, kneeling on the floor. He started to remove my shoes as if it were the most natural thing.

"Imagine someone you like very, very much. So much."

"...I'll try. What about it?"

"That person doesn't exist in reality but only in the pages of a novel. An ideal character from a story."

The Head Librarian took off my socks.

"But then, voilà! What a twist of fate! The character from your dreams appears right before your eyes."

"Uh..."

"Imagine your feelings then."

The Head Librarian spoke earnestly, holding a toenail clipper.

"Yes. That's it."

"....."

"That's it."

What does he mean by 'that's it'?

"Ah, ah! Don't move! What are you doing! If you move, my toenail clipper might leave a terrible scar on your marble-like toes! That would be terrible!!"

"Why are you yelling at me! Leave now!"

"Wait! Wait! Just let me clip one little toenail! Just one toenail! I've compromised this much, shouldn't that be enough!"

"Why are you doing this to me?!"

"Ah! Ah! If not the toenails, then how about three eyebrow hairs? I'm fine with negotiating for that!"

At that moment, I realized the true nature of the [dissonance].

"You weren't someone who used formal speech!"

That's right.

The Constellation Head Librarian didn't use formal speech. He insisted on speaking in a haughty tone. He definitely did, but now she was using formal speech with me. That was the source of the dissonance.

"Use your usual haughty tone with me!"

The Head Librarian's lips quivered.

"It's impossible! How can I, a mere insignificant creature, dare to speak in such a manner to the Radiant Sir?!"

Insane.

[The Holed-Up Head Librarian wants your toenails.]

What insanity.

'Character Window!'

Struggling not to give up my toenails to the Head Librarian, letters appeared before me.

+

Name: Holed-Up Head Librarian

Favorability: 95

Preferred Genres: [Fusion], [Romance], [Mystery], [Adventure], [Horror], [History], [War], [Sports], [SF], [Mythology], [Fairy Tale]...

Disliked Genres: None

Preferred Characters: [Fictional Characters], [Constellation Killer]

Disliked Characters: None

Preferred Plots: [Story]

Disliked Plots: [Serialization Cancellation]

Psychological State: 'Toenails! I must obtain them, even eyebrows if possible! Ah, I wish he would grow a beard so I could pluck some hairs, but that's impossible. Ah, Radiant Sir, Light of Lights! Oh brilliant protagonist! How I wish to preserve you as a bookmark forever!'

+

Such madness.

Chapter 86: The Reader's Heart (2)

Goosebumps. A favorability of 95.

And now I was witnessing what happens when someone reaches a favorability of 95.

"Radiant Sir! Until I saw you, I was nothing more than a blind lowly being!"

While fiddling with my feet, the Head Librarian shouted out.

"Until I heard your words and dialogue, I was deaf!"

As he attempted to clip my toenails with the nail clippers, the Head Librarian's eyes shone.

"You are my light! You are my music!"

His gaze was frighteningly intense.

"I'll gladly convert to Confucianism since your name is Gong-ja! I will become a scholar solely for you! Ah, a King requires a friend-like subject that shares his vision! From today onwards, I am a Confucian scholar dedicated to serving you, Gong-ja!"

"Hey, hold on, stop!"

What kind of Confucian scholar covets someone's toenails?

That's what I wanted to retort, but looking into the Head Librarian's eyes, I realized. Those eyes were not normal. They were eyes that would gleefully ignore whatever I said. His breath was already heavy.

"If you keep doing this, I'm not entering any more Apocalypses!"

"....."

He paused. The Head Librarian stopped holding my foot, but the scary part was that his fiddling fingers continued their motion. Was she crazy?

The Head Librarian pondered deeply, like a troubled scholar.

“.....Indeed. That's a valid threat.”

For a moment, I felt relieved that my words had an effect.

"But that's impossible for Gong-ja. You know there are characters like the Heavenly Demon in other Apocalypses who are unjustly withering away. With your nature, you couldn't stand not helping them."

The Head Librarian smiled.

"Don't underestimate a fan. I know more about you than you know about yourself! I can describe which hand you used, your expression when you ate the Grain Pill on the first day of 'The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon', across two pages..."

Was he really crazy? This was madness.

"Okay, Gong-ja. Just hand over what I need to take from you! Even though I didn't put you to sleep with the sleeping scent, it's a testament to how incredibly conscientious I am."

"I'm shocked at your so-called conscience."

"You wouldn't understand, having never been someone's fan. Oh, the misery! To have never experienced being a fan in your life! How cold must a heart be that has never been passionate about someone? But I must still understand our Radiant Sir..."

"Back off before I say [I dislike you]."

He stopped immediately.

"Move five steps away from me. If you don't, I'll really say it."

"....."

The Head Librarian obediently backed away.

"Use your usual haughty tone. It's creepy. Honestly. And please give back my hair and nails."

"No way! That's utterly unreasonable!"

His usual tone returned.

The Head Librarian clutched the silk pouches and made a mournful face.

"Rather, take my head! No, wait, Gong-ja. That was an exaggeration. Don't seriously consider taking my head... It really hurts me..."

He mumbled like a deflated hamster.

Eventually, I managed to calm the Head Librarian down.

After burning the silk pouches containing the creepy contents (I heard terrible screams), the Head Librarian and I finally started having a proper conversation.

"It was tremendous."

The Head Librarian first reviewed the newly completed 'The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon'.

"Your heart for the Heavenly Demon was truly noble! Just by becoming his disciple, you could have seen the [Ending]. But you didn't stop there! The final battle of righteousness... The ultimate duel... Oh, it was like tasting a sweet chocolate ice cream bingsu."

"Does this mean the world of 'The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon' is now incorporated into the 22nd floor?"

"That's right."

The Head Librarian smiled.

"Other hunters can freely enter and exit the 22nd floor. They can even learn skills by viewing the martial arts manuals stored in the Heavenly Martial Library. All thanks to your contributions, King of Death."

"....."

I propped my chin.

"I've been curious about something while in the Apocalypse. I want to ask you, Head Librarian..."

"Ask anything! I'll answer almost everything!"

"Just stop trying to take off my shoes sneakily. Why is 'The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon' an Apocalypse?"

The Head Librarian tilted her head, seemingly puzzled by my question.

"Why? Hmm. Is there a specific reason why 'The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon' should be an Apocalypse?"

"In my opinion..."

I put my shoes back on.

"Do you prefer happy endings, Head Librarian? Or do you prefer bad endings?"

"Either is incomparable."

The Head Librarian answered immediately.

"An ending is the harbor where characters' lives ultimately arrive. Life can be happy or arduous! While readers generally hope for happiness, I want to embrace their sadness and failures too."

"So a bad ending is a legitimate conclusion too."

"Hmm. Of course."

"That's why I'm even more puzzled."

I grabbed the Head Librarian's wrist as he tried to come behind me again and snatched the scissors. The Head Librarian hopped trying to take them back, but couldn't reach them.

"Even if I hadn't intervened, 'The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon' had a proper ending. A bad one, but still."

"The Heavenly Demon, along with the Head of the Martial Alliance, did their best to the end. They tried. Even if the Head of the Martial Alliance died first and the Heavenly Demon went mad... That's the conclusion they reached."

I looked into the Head Librarian's eyes.

"Why is 'The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon' included in the Apocalypse? Is it because if the Head of the Martial Alliance dies and the Heavenly Demon goes insane, it's not considered a proper ending?"

In fact, this question arose when I saw the fairy tale 'Me and Our Scapegoat'. Regardless of whether I could accept it or not, it seemed like a world that had naturally reached its conclusion according to its course.

The Constellation was silent.

In the library, only the breaths of unconscious hunters flowed quietly. Amidst the rising and falling chests of hunters, the Head Librarian remained expressionless.

"Maybe I just wanted to see a happy ending. Is that reason not good enough?"

"If you don't like the ending, you could have changed it yourself."

"....."

"You are powerful. To me, you seem omnipotent. Yet, instead of directly changing the Apocalypse, you sent us."

Therefore, this Constellation is a 'reader'.

A reader who abhors meddling in stories and simply accepts them. Never wishing or daring to be in the 'author's position. Even if capable, they refuse.

A reader who never intervenes.

Namely, the 'Holed-Up Head Librarian'.

"I could analyze your character too, couldn't I? Someone as thorough as you wouldn't classify something as an Apocalypse just because it ended weirdly. There must be some other reason why 'The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon' and other Apocalypses are classified as such."

".....Indeed, you're not easy to convince."

The Head Librarian gave a bitter smile.

"Follow me."

He grabbed my hand. On his other hand, was a book he picked up.

The title was 'The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon'.

“---I will show you the truth of the Apocalypses.”

The Constellation opened the book.

And a light engulfed my vision.

When I opened my eyes, we were in the world of snowfields.

But there was no need to walk through the snowfields. The Head Librarian still firmly held my hand, flapping his long sleeves like the wings of a goose, flying through the winter sky.

“Suppose.”

We flew over the snowfields.

“Suppose the zombie virus was a naturally occurring epidemic in 'The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon'. If that were really the case. As you said, I would never have made this place an Apocalypse.”

We crossed the snowy mountains.

"That means..."

"The zombie virus wasn't a disease that occurred naturally here. It's a contagious disease introduced from the outside world. Much like the New World being invaded by external forces."

Ha. The Head Librarian let out a white breath.

"Look there."

We were at the peak of a high mountain.

The spiritual peak of this world.

At the top of the mountain, touching the ceiling of the sky,
lay something enormous.

[Shiny detects an ominous presence.]

The holy sword at my waist trembled.

Noticing this, the Head Librarian said,

"Oh, your sword feels it too. Not strange, considering your sword was once a full Constellation. It's natural for beings in similar situations to recognize each other."

"Similar situations..."

"Gong-ja, have you ever seen a Constellation falling from grace?"

The Demon King of Autumn Rain. Preta.

"Yes, I have."

"But have you ever seen the corpse left behind by a dead Constellation?"

"....."

"Thought so."

The Head Librarian smiled sadly.

"It's a rare sight, so take a good look this time."

It was a dragon.

A dragon's corpse.

At the peak of the mountain lay a dead dragon.

What was once silky smooth skin was now charred black. The horns on the dragon's head crumbled like coal. The broken Spirit Orb was buried in the snow.

And then.

[Shiny senses the presence of its sister sword.]

A sword was stuck in its chest.

[Shiny says that it's the second sister sword, the Sword of Pity!]

Black corrupt energy flowed from the sword.

It could be considered Aura. But it wasn't ordinary Aura. It was similar, no, even darker than what surrounded the Demon King of the Autumn Rain. The swirling corrupt energy enveloped the dragon and covered the peak of the snowy mountain. As white snowflakes landed on the peak, they were immediately infected by the corrupt energy, turning black.

-It hurts.....

Black eyes.

-I feel wronged.....

From the lifeless eyes of the black dragon, moans escaped.

-It hurts. It's painful.....

-It's agonizing.

-It's wronged. It's bitter. It's stinging. It hurts.....

I momentarily lost my words.

"...You said it was dead. But that, it's still alive."

"It's already dead. What you see and hear there is nothing but the resentment of the corpse. When a being reaches the status of a Constellation, it can't die peacefully."

We both landed on the snowy peak.

The black dragon continued its endless moaning nearby.

The Head Librarian looked sorrowfully at the end of this Constellation.

"The epidemic you called the zombie virus is a curse."

"A curse....."

"Indeed. The curse left behind by the death of this world's Constellation, [The Golden Dragon of the Great River]. A grudge that can't die even in death. A body that continues to suffer, infected with a curse that makes its inhabitants turn into Jiangshi."

I looked up at the dragon's corpse.

-It hurts.....

The host of the epidemic. The source of the curse.

The disease that destroyed this world started right from that corpse.

Ultimately, it was because of this dragon's curse that my teacher passed away.

"...If the Constellation didn't stab itself in the chest, then someone killed it."

"That would be the logical conclusion."

"Who's the culprit?"

"You've already guessed the perpetrator."

I gritted my teeth.

"Leafanta Aegim."

"That's right."

The Head Librarian nodded.

"The Constellation Killer. A being who traverses the boundaries of worlds, slaying Constellations."

Constellations represent the essence of their respective worlds, as Shiny had explained.

"And a world that loses its Constellation is like a castle without its walls. Such worlds become highly susceptible to catastrophic destruction."

The Apocalypse.

A world where its representative is gone, and its inhabitants have disappeared.

"Why would someone who founded the Aegim Empire and should be content ruling as emperor wreak havoc on innocent worlds?"

"That, I cannot answer."

The Head Librarian scrutinized my face.

"I am but a mere reader. You called me omnipotent, but it's not true. If anything, I am omniscient but impotent. I can know the truths of worlds, but I don't interfere in them."

The Head Librarian spoke self-deprecatingly, then suddenly pointed at my waist.

"But you are different."

My waist, where I carried the sword.

"You can intervene, and you are intervening. Whether you want to or not, you are fixing things one by one that someone else has broken."

"Once could be a coincidence. Twice could be fate. But thrice becomes inevitability. You saved the empire abandoned by the Constellation Killer, collected the shattered Constellation, and now you have arrived in a world destroyed because of the Constellation Killer."

The Head Librarian said,

"The method used to kill [The Golden Dragon of the Great River] was vicious and cruel. Ordinary people can't even touch that sword. But you can. Gong-ja. You have turned coincidence and fate into inevitability."

I looked again at the corpse of the black dragon.

Muttering in my mind.

'Shiny.'

The holy sword vibrated slightly.

[Yes, Hero, Shiny responds.]

'How do I collect your sisters?'

[Shiny says to pull it out and touch the sister sword with it.]

'Alright.'

I drew my sword.

The winter air split.

I struck down on the sword embedded in the black dragon's chest with mine.

[The Goddess of Protection absorbs a fragment of herself.]

Instantly, my sword was surrounded by light.

Chapter 87: The Reader's Heart (3)

Light flowed from my sword, enveloping the black dragon.

[The Sword of Pity resists absorption!]

The resistance wasn't insignificant. Black venomous energy surged like sewage water in the summer monsoon. It was as if a black panther, quiet until now, suddenly woke up in alarm.

[The Sword of Pity is bewildered.]

[It rebukes the Goddess of Protection for betraying Leafanta Aegim.]

[The Goddess of Protection soothes her sister.]

My holy sword's light and the dragon's shadow tumultuously

intertwined.

[The Sword of Pity demands proof of the new master's worthiness.]

White and black.

Neither side seemed willing to back down easily.

[The power of a Constellation is immense. It must never be bestowed upon one who is unworthy. The Sword of Pity does not yet recognize you as its new master.]

"Fine."

I quietly observed the sword embedded in the black dragon's chest.

"There's logic in that. But how do you suggest I prove my worthiness?"

Corrupt energy leaked from the dragon's corpse. Dense

venomous energy, more profound than ever before, took shape.

A dark angel.

An angel formed entirely of a murky substance from toe to head.

[A fragment formed from the Goddess's fallen compassion.]

[If you have proven to be someone's idol -]

[Now, you must prove your ability to feel compassion for others.]

The expressionless angel spread its wings.

Even the wings were tainted.

From the outstretched black wings, thick droplets of dark saliva fell.

[It requests to momentarily entrust your body and mind to it.]

"Why is that necessary?"

[To glimpse into your memories.]

The light emanating from my holy sword intensified.

[The Goddess of Protection disagrees. Traveling together will inevitably show whether you are a worthy master. There's no need to take unnecessary risks.]

"No, it's fine."

I sheathed my sword.

"I can't carry a sword that doesn't trust me, even if it's a world renowned blade. If it makes me uneasy, I can't bear it. Come! Come and steal whatever you like from my memories until you're satisfied."

At the moment I spread my arms wide,

[The Sword of Pity tests your compassion.]

The angel's wings enveloped my vision. Like a mother bird wrapping its wings around its chick, the massive black wings surrounded me.

Darkness encompassed me.

Then, dream-like visions flowed before my eyes.

「 Kind sir. 」

A garden engulfed in flames.

「 Just bear with it a little longer.... 」

「 Poor souls. 」

Paradise shrouded in smoke.

「 The world has become emptiness. 」

A peony blooming red in a snowy field.

「 My dear disciple. 」

The mansion, paradise, and snowy field rapidly passed by.

Suddenly, the darkness brightened.

The angel's wings that had covered my vision disappeared.

[.....]

The black angel hastily retracted its wings and looked at me. Although still expressionless, its black eyes betrayed an undeniable sense of bewilderment.

[You are.....]

"I am not perfect."

I spoke first.

"I'm weak to people's kindness. I desire their favor. I go out of my way for it. I love being praised and struggle to be seen as a 'good person' by others. That might be my weakness."

The fragment of the Constellation closed its lips.

"And your previous master was no different in being imperfect."

[.....]

"I don't yet know what grand purpose Leafanta Aegim has in killing Constellations. It might be a noble act. But, even so, I'll hold Leafanta Aegim accountable."

I drew my sword and pointed it at the black angel.

"If you think your previous master was perfect and made no mistakes, then don't follow me. I don't need such a sword."

The black angel slowly began to speak.

[Do you intend to kill Leafanta Aegim?]

"If he is a man deserving of death."

[Can you promise that your judgment will not be influenced by personal emotions?]

"I don't know."

I spoke honestly.

"My master died. The martial realm crumbled. Too many people were hurt and died; I'm not sure. But I promise to do my best."

[.....]

"Then, if I seem to stray, do your best to correct me. I will do my best. You do your best. That's what it means to be together."

The black angel's wings crumbled.

[My power is pain.]

[Those cut by me will feel pain, but their bodies will never be wounded, nor will they die.]

[Pain without injury is my true ability.]

The angel's form collapsed.

It turned into black water.

[New master.]

[I swear to serve you to the best of my abilities.]

Whoosh!

The black saliva swirled and poured into my holy sword, like a fierce flood. The sword absorbed all the water like a parched desert fox.

[The existence of the Goddess of Protection becomes more defined.]

The transformation didn't stop there.

-Oh, oh.....

The once Constellation of this martial realm, the divine beast.

Even the blade embedded in its chest flowed down and was absorbed by my sword, causing the black dragon to moan.

-Ohhh.....

The black dragon had been slain long ago. It no longer had

the will to express anything verbally. It just groaned, tired of life, like an exhausted old woman.

-Ohhh, oh.....

Eventually, the dragon's corpse melted into essence.

Its horns crumbled like dry coal. Its scales melted like candle wax. A beast that once reigned as a myth in a world met its end.

And then winter crumbled.

The eternal snow of the mountains collapsed. It was an avalanche.

Standing at the summit, I could look down at the world as the snow crumbled beneath my feet.

"Winter is the season of death."

The Head Librarian looked at the earth beside me.

"You ended the lonely season by your own hands."

The white avalanche engulfed the white world. However, the land left behind after the avalanche was no longer white.

The brown color of the earth shone through.

The brown was the flesh of this world. Finally, after a long winter, the earth began to bare its skin.

"....."

Why does the spring breeze smell so different from the winter wind?

Did my master know where the scent of spring came from?

"...Head Librarian."

"Speak."

"I have a special ability from my clear reward that allows me to see people's characteristics. I can see what plots and characters they prefer."

"I am aware."

The Head Librarian exhaled.

"I oversee the 21st to 30th floors. The special reward you received was also prepared by me. Hmm. As it was a gift from me, of course, I would know."

"Your preferred character includes the Constellation Killer."

"Indeed."

"Why do you favor the Constellation Killer? Leafanta Aegim kills Constellations and wanders the world. It's more likely to be hated than liked. I don't understand why you would favor him."

"Hmm."

The Head Librarian closed his right eye.

"Since you've asked, I'll tell you. I have a long-held dream."

"A dream?"

"Yes. To appear directly in the novels I love!"

The Constellation's eyes shone with innocence.

I was perplexed.

"To appear directly... Can't you do that now? You can freely travel through revelations, right?"

"Haha. You don't understand a reader's heart. There's a difference between 'intervening' in a novel and 'appearing' in it. No, it's truly different."

The Head Librarian covered his mouth with his sleeves and chuckled.

"For me, as an outsider in these revelations, I am nothing but a foreign body, an invasive species... something that shouldn't exist in those worlds. Whether it's the Constellation Killer who killed the dragon of the martial realm or me, we're the same in being foreign bodies."

"....."

"I don't want to intervene in novels as such a foreign body! No, that wouldn't be right. Like a character who has always been part of that world, as an equal among other characters, I want to appear as a legitimate character! That is the dream of me, a reader of all thoughts."

I still didn't quite understand.

Noticing my expression, the Head Librarian smiled gently.

"Then, let me ask you. Why didn't you kill the Heavenly Demon?"

"....."

"The Heavenly Demon attained the realm of Killing Heart at

the last moment. Though she couldn't retain her power from her life, had you collected her as a Ghoul, she would have undoubtedly become a powerful ally and an excellent master. Her affection for you was profound. Why didn't you kill the Heavenly Demon?"

"...That's because."

"Shh."

The Head Librarian placed a finger on my lips.

"It's okay. You don't have to say it. I already understand."

Gently.

The fingertip pressed against my lips.

"You didn't want to interfere with your master's final moment. It's the same for me. I don't want to directly intervene in the endings that these worlds have reached. Your heart and mine are not different..."

Gradually, the landscape melted to the horizon.

The ice on the lake thawed, and the sun shone over the water's surface.

"I refuse to intervene. Then, there is only one way for me to become a character in a story."

"What is it?"

"It's simple if you think in reverse. Instead of me going to the characters of the novels, the characters of the novels come to me."

The Head Librarian whispered.

"Leafanta Aegim, the Constellation Killer, constantly travels between worlds, killing Constellations. Someday, he will visit my world, the Great Library of All Knowledge."

The Head Librarian smiled.

"To kill me."

The Constellation pulled out something from his robe. A book. Unlike other revelations, its appearance was different. Above all, it was worn. Read dozens, maybe hundreds of times, like a seasoned author's notebook, its leather cover was frayed.

[Leafanta Aegim's Epic]

Such was the title embroidered in gold thread.

"....."

"I am waiting. For the day when the Constellation Killer visits the library. When he comes of his own accord, following the narrative of his story, standing before me. On that day, I will finally become a character in Leafanta Aegim's story."

"Even if that story's end is your death?"

"Of course."

The Head Librarian smiled brightly.

The Constellation gazed down at the thawed land.

A crane fluttered its sleeves like wings.

"To die at the hands of the protagonist, what a grand epilogue, no?"

There's an epilogue to tell.

"Ah, Vice-Lord."

Before returning to the library, I stopped by the congregation. I wanted to ensure that my master's funeral was properly conducted.

"Welcome!"

"Please, come in, Vice-Lord."

The congregation members greeted me with a bow as soon as they saw me. However, I sensed their apparent panic. It wasn't just one or two; all of them seemed flustered.

I tilted my head in confusion.

"Has the funeral already finished?"

"No, Vice-Lord. The funeral is yet to take place, but..."

"What happened?"

The congregation members glanced at each other.

"Well..."

"The Heavenly Demon's body disappeared."

One of the Four Demon Lords, the Blood Demon, spoke. He was a member often referred to as the Blood Ghost Troop Captain by my master.

"What?"

"It's best if you see for yourself, Vice-Lord."

I hurriedly followed the Blood Demon.

Shortly, we arrived at the spot where I had laid my master's body.

And there, I was at a loss for words.

"Suddenly, all the snow in the world began to melt. The Heavenly Demon's body also vanished... We are sorry. It happened so quickly that we had no time to respond."

Where the snow had melted.

My master's body was nowhere to be seen.

No matter where I looked, it was gone.

"Our guess is that the Heavenly Demon's internal energy was so pure that, over time, the body naturally melted into Ki and disappeared..."

Only red flowers were blooming.

In the spot where my master's body last lay. Where her arms reached, her feet touched, her hair fell. There, crimson peonies bloomed extravagantly.

-Remarkable.

The Guardian Spirit, silent until then, murmured.

-This world's Constellation left only a curse upon death, but your master left flowers. Better than that clueless Constellation.

I approached the floral circle and bent down. I gently stroked the petals of the peonies. They quivered slightly, rubbing their red cheeks against my index finger.

It was the first spring to bloom in this world.

"Of course, we are still preparing for the funeral."

The Blood Demon spoke from behind me.

"Please attend to honor the Vice-Lord..."

"No."

I shook my head.

"It's enough. Don't hold the funeral."

"No?"

"This is sufficient."

I stood up.

I looked around at the congregation members.

"Though I became the Vice-Lord and inherited the teachings, some of you may still not accept me. In our cult, the strongest warrior holds the highest position."

"Let's replace trivial funerals with martial arts. Offering the most valuable thing at a funeral is customary. What's more precious to us than our swords? Let's offer our swords to our master."

I smiled.

"Come at me."

Spring is coming.

As with all who live.

My next story will begin on a higher stage than ever before.

Chapter 88: Dead Ends are the Norm (1)

"We're moving the headquarters of Celestial Martial Guild to the 22nd floor."

Viper casually remarked.

This conversation took place a few days after we completed [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon].

"Really?"

"We're moving, relocating the entire dojo. Like you who inherited the true lineage of the Demonic Cult, I've become a disciple of the Head of the Martial Alliance, haven't I? Since Celestial Martial Guild is mine, it makes sense to move it under the Martial Alliance."

Viper read a novel indifferently.

As seen before, Viper was an avid reader. His tastes might be eccentric, but this place was full of books satisfying even his bizarre preferences.

Viper, wearing non-prescription glasses (just for style, cost 9,800 won), flipped through a book with a magical cover (a Hero-class item that could be used on any book, allowing free change of title and cover design, cost 2,000 gold).

"My master became half a recluse, but he's still physically able. The Apothecary said he could still move around. So, I plan to honor him as the Supreme Guardian."

"The Martial Alliance's leader as the Supreme Guardian..."

"Yep. He was deeply saddened by the Heavenly Demon's death. It makes me feel depressed just watching him."

Viper bluntly stated.

The Guardian is a protector of a sect, literally someone who guards the law. And as the Supreme Guardian, Viper was

essentially honoring the Martial Alliance's leader as the most respected elder.

"It's better to keep busy in such times. Teaching the younger generation will be beneficial, and it'll also help boost our guild members' strength."

I was slightly surprised. What a considerate action.

Viper seemed to notice my gaze and paused flipping the pages.

"...Hey, King of Death. Why are you looking at me like that?"

"No, it's just... I'm amazed. Being a leader of one of the 5 great guilds is not something anyone can do."

It was clear why he had deep loyalty from his subordinates. He really looked after his people.

"Is that so?"

Viper blushed and scratched his nose.

"Ahem. Well, don't get me wrong! I just did what was necessary. If you get praised for doing the obvious, the world would be a lonely place. Sigh, I can't have the world become lonely just because of me."

"Disappointing...."

"What?"

"I didn't say anything."

Anyway, after hearing Viper's story, I became contemplative.

Taking care of one's people. That was something I had been considering even before entering the [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon].

Now, as the 3rd ranked hunter, was it enough to just have a high ranking and some martial arts skills? Respect, reputation. Perhaps it's time for such considerations.

Let's see.

Who in my circle could I call 'my people'...

-Ah, I want to fight a duel. I really want a fierce duel. An overwhelming, devilish duel. A life-risking duel is what I crave. Zombie, let's go to another martial world in the next revelation. This time, let's venture into a world where the Unorthodox Faction dominates!

Hmm.

No, not this guy...

"Vice-Lord! I have specially tailored nail clippers for your fingers and toes! Once you experience my clip-clip craftsmanship, you'll never want to trim your own nails and toenails again! Just 3 minutes! No, just 2 minutes! Please, just give me 120 seconds with your hands and feet!"

Definitely not this constellation-nut.

Even more so not this one.

[Shiny sings today as well. About the Hero's brilliant achievements. About the Hero's majestic roar from the ramparts of the Aegim Empire. About the Hero's fierce yet beautiful struggle in the martial world. Ah, Shiny is delighted to see the Hero's face today. For a thousand years. Ten thousand years. Forever.]

"....."

Wait.

Is there no normal person around me?

No one?

Seriously?

Strange. I'm normal. A model student trying to live a regular life. So why are there only crazy ghosts, mad constellations, and silly swords around me?

Thinking about it, all three aren't even 'human'. Crazy. Is this my destiny? If this is my destiny, isn't it a bit dog-like? Maybe the god is a dog? This Siberian Husky-like....

“Ah, King of Death! What are you pondering over?”

“The Heretic Inquisitor, I was thinking it'd be good if you could negotiate with the Aegim world's clerics on Floor 13. It'd be nice for the newbie hunters to receive quests there.”

“Oho! I was actually thinking along the same lines. It seems we share similar thoughts, King of Death! I shall head there!”

After sending off the blond Cozy Bear-like man, I became even more uncertain about my fortune.

“Umm. Ki-King of Death.”

A savior appeared before my despairing eyes.

“We've successfully mass-produced the zombie virus antidote. The ingredients are readily available. Taking a preventive shot should make it safe to roam around the 22nd floor.”

This is the one!

“Miss Apothecary.”

“Yes, y-yes. King of Death...”

“Have you ever thought about relocating?”

As I mentioned the plan I had considered after the Apothecary and Medicine King duel, the Apothecary blinked in surprise.

“Me?”

“Your current shop is too small. With your growing reputation after clearing this stage, you need to expand. Can you handle the orders with your current capacity?”

“Well. I have thought about expanding, but the real estate prices on Floor 1... As you know, it requires a huge loan. The Countess offered to cover it all with a contract, but...”

“Don’t sign that, no matter what.”

Where did this cat come from, meddling in other people's fish?

“Real estate. I'll cover all of that.”

I boldly declared.

“In addition to relocation and interior design costs. I'll take care of it all, so just bring yourself.”

The Apothecary's mouth dropped open.

“Re-really...?”

“Yes. Floor 20 is under my ownership, you know? I'll find you a prime spot. Just bring yourself.”

The Apothecary was speechless, seemingly unable to believe my offer.

But I was sincere.

‘Why leave land idle?’

Investing in someone who would become the Master Apothecary in the future didn't seem wasteful.

I smiled.

“Just make sure to prioritize any potions or medicines I request. Is that okay?”

“O-of course! I’ve already been doing that... Uh. What, what should I do? I owe you too much, King of Death...”

The Apothecary’s lips quivered. Despite the confusion, the joy was unmistakable.

Her clasped hands seemed to be shouting 'Yesss! Aja aja!' inside.

I felt content.

‘Indeed. This is the satisfaction of taking care of people.’

Then...

“Ahem. Hem! Khuhem. Uh, hum, khuup!”

"....."

“Oh dear. Young man. Aren't you forgetting something?”

The Medicine King had appeared behind me unnoticed. He must have mastered some sort of stealth technique in the martial world without me knowing. Astonishing skill.

“I too, in my old age, would appreciate some land...”

Glance.

“Ah, my shop is so old, it's damp and musty. Terrible for my back health! Climbing up and down the third floor every day, my knees are creaking...”

Glance.

“It would be great if some kind soul generously offered me a mere 100,000 acres in a nice place...”

“I'm sorry. My friend caused you inconvenience.”

The Sword Saint approached, grabbed the Medicine King's nape, and dragged him away.

As he was pulled, the Medicine King loudly protested.

“No! It's outrageous to interfere in a friend's business! Is that how they teach in Northern Europe! Marcus, you gnome! Even from a renowned wealthy family, your sense of business ethics is worse than a beggar's!”

“Friend. You're already pitiable being old, don't become disgraceful too... You already make enough money.”

“Deficit, I tell you! Orders have plummeted lately! Apothecary! Hey, Apothecary kid! Just say 'I lost the duel, I'm no match for the power of Shawn McCallister's Victory Road'! That's enough, so say it!”

Everyone in the Grand Library stared at the Medicine King.

Apothecary, who had come to respect him as an elder through joint research and surgeries, now looked at him with eyes as if seeing a water flea, exclaiming in awe.

Viper, quietly reading his novel, grumbled.

“Why do all the heroines die in the novels I read? Is this some kind of trend?”

It was definitely a group with no normal people.

Setting up the Apothecary's new shop on Floor 20 went smoothly. The construction materials were easily covered with the gold from the lottery. There were no issues with labor either.

"King of Death, I can get you a discount on the construction materials. And that's not all. I can also gather enough workforce for you. Just sign this contract with the Apothecary and everything will be..."

"Ah, that's enough!"

Shaking off the Countess who kept hovering around like a cat, I turned to Preta.

"How's everything going?"

"Yes, my Lord. The construction progress is smooth."

Preta, wearing a yellow safety helmet, a green armband, and a pink whistle in her mouth, directed the construction. Skeletons summoned through Ghoul Reincarnation took the place of the construction workforce.

"Damn it! Freakin' hell! Hey, you raggedy-ass bastard! What grudge do you have against me! Why do I have to be stuck here among bones, hurling stones around! Say something, you bastards!!"

A young man with a ponytail and a loud mouth was among them, but with the majority of the workforce being efficiently moving skeletons, the construction faced no issues.

Amidst the unproblematic progress, the Apothecary, Celestial Martial Guild Master, and I struck a deal.

"Alright, this should do it."

The agreement was as follows:

"There are still many zombies on the 22nd floor. And there are many ruined Taoist temples scattered around, meaning a lot of dungeons."

"Exactly. So our Celestial Martial Guild will establish a base there and..."

"Those who want to go to the 22nd floor will first stop at my new pharmacy on the 20th floor... to get vaccinated?"

"Exactly. We can charge a fee for that process... Of course, within reasonable limits."

It was a mutually beneficial plan for me as the owner of Floor 20, the Apothecary opening a new shop there, and Celestial Martial Guild relocating to the 22nd floor.

‘Never thought I'd be collecting real estate fees.’

I felt genuinely pleased.

However, as soon as the pharmacy opened, a problem with the plan became apparent: too many people flocked to Floor 20.

"God of Medicine!"

"Lord Apothecary!"

"Medicine Emperor!"

"Supreme Medicine Deity! Please sell me some medicine!"

People could travel to Floor 20 without an alias, so not just hunters wanting vaccinations for the 22nd floor, but many more headed there.

Administering the zombie virus vaccine required a somewhat complex process. Amidst that, trying to produce regular medicines continually led to logistical issues. Initially trying to cope within his means, the Apothecary eventually yelled.

"King of Death, this is unmanageable!"

Eventually, we had to call the last member of the 22nd floor expedition team. Viper, with his arm around the Medicine King, proposed.

"Medicine King. Isn't your business a bit dull lately? I'll give you a nice spot at the Celestial Martial Guild headquarters on the 22nd floor. Want to come over and be our exclusive physician?"

"Ah, Celestial Martial Master! What do you take this Shawn McCallister for!"

He protested loudly, but in reality, the Medicine King's business was struggling. His shop's merit was handling high-end medicines, but with the superior Apothecary present, his strategy had fallen into an awkward high-end approach.

Everyone knew it, and deep down, so did the Medicine King. After some persuasion, he grudgingly agreed.

"Fine. For a while, I'll give injections and treat emergencies on the 22nd floor, earning some fees."

"Thanks. We also need a personal physician to take care of the Supreme Guardian."

"Hmph. Well, that guy makes more sense to talk to than Marcus. Alright, I was getting bored anyway."

As time passed, the expeditions continued.

There were many hunters besides us aiming to conquer stages.

+

Floor 21: The Great Library of All Knowledge

the 22nd floor: The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon (Genre: Martial Arts, Fusion)

Floor 23: Chronicles of the Space Iron Knight (Genre: SF)

Floor 24: Daybreak Mountain Hut Diary (Genre: Mystery, History)

+

"Excellent. Truly, really, excellent."

The Witch smiled contentedly.

Before long, she was meticulously deciding which revelation to conquer, forming teams, and guiding hunters.

"King of Death. Your splendid conquest of [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon] had a significant impact. Other hunters are burning with enthusiasm, not wanting to be outdone by you. If only they listened to me like this all the time! Ah, how nice it would have been if it had always been like this."

The Witch looked at me with affectionate eyes, as if seeing a golden goose. She was almost ready to say that everything about this tower was thanks to me.

"With this momentum, we might break through to the 30th floor before next month."

Unfortunately, the Witch's prediction missed the mark.

On the 2nd week after clearing The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon.

[Today, the 25th floor stage raid has failed.]

Hundreds of hunters, including the Witch, stared blankly into space.

[We announce once again.]

[Today, the 25th floor stage raid has failed.]

"Wh-what..."

The Witch was flabbergasted, shock evident in her black, flickering eyes.

"I arranged the best expedition team... and they failed...?"

In the Grand Library's holographic screen, hordes of demons cackled as they slaughtered humans.

Among the slaughtered were familiar faces.

Rank 4 Hunter, the Countess.

Rank 9 Hunter, the Paladin.

One managed Babylon's gold vein, the other managed connections. They were the best cards we had for economy and security.

Yet, they failed.

+

[Tales of the Sormewin Academy]

Genre: Romance, Fantasy

Difficulty: D

Required Participants: 4-5

*The serialization has been discontinued.

Description: Sormewin is an academy of ancient magic. A normal school where friendship, competition, love, and jealousy intertwine. This Apocalypse could have remained a typical school story if not for the world-ending artifact sealed underneath the academy!

Reason for Discontinuation: The Villainess Lady loses her fiancé (the Crown Prince) to a second-time reincarnated female student. In a fit of rage, she unleashes the sealed artifact, freeing the Great Demon and causing world annihilation.

+

It was a revelation of merely D-grade difficulty.

"The world was chosen because it was rich in magic and resources like mithril."

"Alas, it's a pity."

The Holed-Up Head Librarian looked down at the bewildered hunters.

"But spilled water is spilled water! If I could return the failed conquest, I would, but it's impossible for me. My friends, please understand my position."

He smiled with his eyes.

In other words, if there was someone capable of collecting the spilled water, he'd acknowledge it as an exception.

The implied exception was obvious.

"....."

I headed to the bathroom set up in the library. I had visited here before entering The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon. The mirror reflected a man with a hardened face.

"Damn it. I've never even read a romance novel."

-Well, you handled a martial arts story without ever reading one. Should be no problem.

"True, but still..."

I sighed, holding a dagger.

"I can't leave the Countess and Paladin to die. Sending someone else doesn't guarantee success. I guess I have to try it myself."

One might argue why not skip this revelation and go for another, but it's not that simple.

There's a reason why we absolutely can't skip this revelation.

[Shiny supports your decision, Warrior.]

Because another piece of the Holy Sword is hidden there.

".....Okay."

I fiddled with the hilt of the dagger, steeling myself.

"Let's give it a try!"

And so, I returned to the day before the raid team was formed.

My next stage was set to be [Romance].

Chapter 89: Dead Ends are the Norm (2)

As soon as I returned a few days earlier, I declared to the hunters.

"I will lead this stage."

"....."

The hunters were speechless.

Among them were the Count and the Paladin, who originally died attempting to conquer the 25th floor, but I had returned to a time before they embarked on that mission.

Of course, they had no idea about that.

"Uhm..."

The Paladin showed a troubled expression.

"I'm sorry, King of Death. I didn't know you were also versed in romance."

"No need to apologize. I am indeed ignorant about romance."

"...Yet you still want to take charge of this stage? Are you serious?"

"Yes. I really want to lead it."

The hunters murmured among themselves.

To not be overshadowed by the genre, I calmly said.

"While it would be ideal to have a hunter skilled in romance, that's not the only criterion. I've never read a martial arts novel, yet I successfully cleared The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon."

"That might be true, but..."

"I have a bad feeling about this stage. I sense something terrible will happen. Please let me take charge."

They were startled.

A reaction to the words "bad feeling" was noticeable among the hunters. The Witch and the Sword Saint believed in my prophetic abilities.

"...It should be fine, shouldn't it? King of Death's abilities have been proven several times."

"Personally, I think we should heed King of Death's opinion."

With the support of the Rank 2 and Rank 1 hunters, things became easier. The other hunters didn't resist us either. I successfully gained command as I wished.

"Now, I will select the team to enter the revelation with me."

Determined, I spoke.

"We're only taking the absolute best for this stage. Please don't hold it against me if you're not chosen."

"Hmm, the absolute best, huh."

The Witch glanced at me emotionlessly.

"Well then, I should go. I'm not familiar with romance, but if someone desperately needs me, I should be there."

"....."

"Romance is new to me, but I think my romantic sensibility matches well. I'm not claiming to be an expert in romance novels. Hmm. If the absolute best is needed, shouldn't I be included, just my personal thoughts."

The woman who introduced herself as a drama-watching lady was in a pretty bad state.

"Romance and romantic fantasy are somewhat different. If romance is a macaron, then rom-fantasy is a chocolate mousse cake. King of Death, an expert should step in for this, I believe..."

The quietly profound expert was the Paladin. However, in the last cycle, she had failed in the conquest. It was a burden to take her along.

"Isn't love ultimately convertible to money? People who spend money well are also good at love. Love is power, and power is money. An unchanging truth. In this context, I should be chosen."

The Countess fanned himself. Who on earth brought this woman into romance?

"Hmm."

I looked around calmly. At that moment, one person caught my eye. He was sipping orange juice served by the Bookmark Maid.

"Heretic Inquisitor."

I called out to him.

"Yes?"

"Let's tackle a romance novel together."

"Oho!"

The surrounding hunters looked at us in shock.

Heretic Inquisitor. The ruthless executioner. No matter the twists and turns, he'd torture and execute in any religious conflict. Even among our tower's crazies, he's considered a pure, natural-born psycho.

If you asked who was the least compatible with romance in the world, he'd top the list. Yet, this person smiled innocently like a young boy.

"Yes! Of course! Delighted to oblige King of Death's request!"

To the uninformed, his smile was angelic.

"King of Death, are you crazy...?"

In other words, to those who knew his true nature, it was a devil's smile. The Witch hurriedly whispered in my ear.

"The Inquisitor can't empathize with others! Objectively, he's a psychopath, and even if he seems supportive, he's a sociopath. Bringing such a man into a romance revelation, what are you planning?"

"Black Dragon Witch."

I whispered back.

"I might not know the 'R' in romance, but I know what's most important."

"What's that?"

"Looks."

".....Huh?"

"Looks."

"....."

I was serious.

"Uh..."

"First, you need to be good-looking."

"Aren't there many plain-looking characters in romance too?"

"But they cheat with the cover."

"Ah, you shouldn't have said that out loud... You..."

"Look. Who's the most angelic-looking person in our tower, purely based on appearance? It's the Inquisitor. Even I thought he was a real angel before I knew his true nature."

We sneakily glanced at the Inquisitor.

From afar, he was grinning blissfully.

"You agree, right?"

".....Yeah, his looks are intimidating. Contrarily, so is his personality."

"Plus, the Inquisitor is competent. He uses holy magic. He can handle most accidents, right? And he listens to what I say."

Above all, the Inquisitor's words and thoughts are consistent.

Consistency.

This could be a plus in romance.

"Looks and mindset matching, many find that attractive."

"---This might actually be a clever strategy."

Someone commented on our conversation.

It was the Paladin.

"In rom-fantasy, the more crazy characters, the better. The Inquisitor could be a decent 'mad man' in rom-fantasy. Lacking obsession in love is regrettable, but he has potential. This is interesting. Indeed, King of Death... even in romance, you have a ghostly intuition..."

The library fell silent.

"Hm? Did I say something odd?"

Again, the library was quiet.

Thankfully, no vocal opinions on this professional viewpoint were expressed.

Thanks to that, the romance duo of me and the Inquisitor

was formed without issue.

Seeing our team, the Holed-Up Head Librarian's eyes sparkled.

"Oh, a unique combination for conquest. I'm quite looking forward to what story will unfold."

He picked up [Tales of the Sormewin Academy].

"The season of love! A time when praising love has become natural! Overcoming status, lineage, nationality, and seizing love is now called beautiful!"

The sleeves of the Constellation fluttered.

"Perhaps that's why love has become harder. Love is not just an emotion, but also an attitude and posture. Many are obsessed with romance."

The Holed-Up Head Librarian chuckled.

"Romantic reality or realistic romance. King of Death, it will be quite challenging for you to find a balance. Therefore, I have specially prepared a clear reward for you!"

Clear reward?

"Indeed, you cleared not only the normal stage of [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon] but also its hidden stage. You've received the reward for the normal stage on the 22nd floor, but not yet for the hidden stage. I'll give it to you now."

"What is it?"

"Come closer, protagonist."

I approached.

"I will give you three cards."

Voila, the Holed-Up Head Librarian handed over the cards.

They were written as follows.

+

[Prosopagnosia Card]

[What a coincidence! Well-timed secret eavesdropping! Card]

[Oops! I shouldn't have said that! Accidental slip of the tongue! Card]

+

"....."

Great.

Just by their names, these cards sounded ominous.

I had no idea what effects these cards held, but they seemed

incredibly suspicious.

"Excuse me, these are..."

"All these cards will prove to be extremely useful in a romance novel. They will surely become your army of a thousand. So, don't worry!"

But all I could do was worry.

"Not only this gift. I've prepared one more for you. Once you enter the revelation, you will naturally come across the gift."

"What is it?"

"King of Death. Heretic Inquisitor."

The Holed-Up Head Librarian didn't respond to my question. Instead, he opened the book. Whoosh! Light burst from the pages of the revelation.

"The above two are designated as characters in [Tales of

Sormewin Academy]. When you open your eyes there, you will find yourselves 7 days before the unfortunate cancellation of the story."

Light enveloped us.

"I look forward to seeing a splendid ending from you! Lady! And Butler!"

Lady?

Butler?

Before I could ask what he meant, my vision was completely engulfed in white.

I had never been engrossed in romance.

Lacking the habit of reading and not having friends who were into romance contributed to that. To be more honest, I simply didn't have friends. Even now, I prefer to remain silent on how many people I could call friends.

But if asked about the [most frequently used onomatopoeia in romance genres], even I, a novice, could easily answer.

Slap!!

It's the sound of a slap across the face.

"---How utterly disrespectful!"

A clear voice reached the chandeliers in the ceiling. Before the chandeliers stopped swaying, Slap!! The all-time number one sound in romance echoed again.

As I leisurely observed the sounds, it was clear I wasn't the one being slapped.

".....Ah?"

It was the Heretic Inquisitor.

He tilted his head. Both his cheeks were red, yet he beamed a smile. Smiling towards the one who had slapped him.

"Have I done something wrong? Your hand is quite strong!"

The expression of his counterpart grew fierce. Perhaps she was a lady of noble birth, dressed in a gown embroidered with white lily patterns in silver thread.

For convenience, I mentally labeled her the 'Lady Silver Lily.'

"How dare you remain so calm....! You lowlife! Shameless!"

"Ah-ha."

And from here, the situation took a turn.

Not only the Lady Silver Lily was in a dress.

"Please point out my mistake! If it's reasonable, I'll correct it right away! It's better not to resort to violence!"

The Heretic Inquisitor too was in a dress.

Compared to the Lady Silver Lily's dress, his was much plainer. A dress resembling the inner flesh of lime – a mix of the innocence of yellow and the freshness of green. Yet, all that didn't matter. His face was the real deal. True to the hunter chosen almost solely for his looks, the naturally born face gangster smiled brightly.

"Ah! You, whose name I do not know. Let's have a conversation!"

Slap!

"You truly... truly mock me to the last..."

Lady Silver Lily seemed to be struggling with every word. Her voice seemed to wring out of her contorted spine.

The slapper was the lady, and the slapped was the Heretic Inquisitor, but strangely, as time passed, it was the Lady Silver Lily who grew increasingly breathless.

'Hmm.'

After a moment of disorientation upon entering the

revelation, I began to grasp the situation.

'A social gathering? A ball? Anyway, it's during an event.'

A ballroom under the chandeliers.

Not just us, but dozens were dressed in gowns and formal suits. They looked at us from a distance, faces full of apprehension and tension.

It made sense. The peaceful ball had turned into chaos.

'Lady Silver Lily is the [villainess]...'

I observed the lady.

'Excluding the royal family, she's the highest-ranking person here.'

She's also the one responsible for bringing this world to ruin.

"You, see, look!"

The Lady Silver Lily staggered as she spoke, chewing each syllable. Her voice was a strain to listen to.

"Yes, Lady."

The servants in black tailcoats responded.

"Get rid of them... my eyes cannot bear it! Now!"

"Yes."

Their voices were far from loud. It was a quiet submission. A servant's voice must match the temperament of their master. The Lady Silver Lily was clearly frail, and loud voices were poison to her ears.

"Ah."

Thus, the Heretic Inquisitor was the complete opposite of the Lady Silver Lily.

"Are you perhaps unwell? That's serious! Let me assist you!"

"Quickly... get them out of my sight... lock them up..."

The Heretic Inquisitor, with his naturally loud & bright voice, was her antithesis.

Servants in tailcoats surrounded us like a military unit.

"Excuse me."

"I'm afraid you'll have to come with us."

Their manner was archaic, but their actions were anything but. The servants forcefully dragged us away.

Passing through the ballroom, down corridors, we were transported to a moonlit, pale warehouse.

"Excuse me?"

During the transfer, I spoke up.

By the way, I was dressed in the same type of tailcoat as the servants.

"Where are we being taken? Hello?"

No answer.

"Excuse me? Servants of the Duke's House?"

Bang.

"....."

"....."

The Heretic Inquisitor and I looked at each other. Then Clank! The sound of a key turning. We were locked in an unknown warehouse.

If my common sense was correct, a locked warehouse was essentially a prison.

"Ah-ha."

Bathed in the moonlight filtering through the iron bars, the Heretic Inquisitor spoke.

"King of Death. We're in big trouble!"

Despite his words, the Heretic Inquisitor's smile was as bright as ever.

"It seems I've become the female protagonist!"

Indeed.

And I was her butler.

Chapter 90: Dead Ends are the Norm (3)

"This is such a mess..."

I muttered to myself, feeling overwhelmed.

In the old warehouse, with moonlight streaming through the large iron bars, the Heretic Inquisitor smiled brightly, unsettlingly cheerful for someone essentially imprisoned.

"Ah, I've been cross-dressed in my childhood, but I never thought I'd actually take on the role of a female protagonist. It's quite an experience!"

"I wish I could borrow some of your relentless positivity..."

"The world is a beautiful place, King of Death! Think positively!"

Does this person ever not smile? Even if a meteorite fell right in front of him, he'd probably say, 'Oh no, the world is ending! But that's okay. We did our best!' and still smile.

"What's there to be so positive about?"

"Just this!"

The Heretic Inquisitor wiggled his fingers, forming hand signs, and whispered softly.

"Holy Technique, Transformation."

A light streamed between his slender fingers. It was the Heretic Inquisitor's signature holy technique. 'Transformation' likely meant changing something, but there seemed to be no visible difference at first glance.

However, as soon as he spoke, I realized what had 'transformed.'

"How about this?"

For a moment, I got goosebumps.

"Do I sound more like a lady now?"

"Your voice..."

"Yes! I slightly altered the structure of my vocal cords."

Grinning, the Heretic Inquisitor seemed pleased.

"I've often been told my voice is androgynous. With a little adjustment, it should fit the role. Ah-ha, I can't objectively hear my own voice, though! What do you think?"

"It's remarkable..."

I couldn't help but admire.

"You sound like a refined noble lady. Well, as long as you keep your mouth shut."

"Thank you!"

"Hmm."

I stroked my chin thoughtfully.

Unexpectedly finding ourselves embodying the roles of [Lady Protagonist & Butler], the Heretic Inquisitor and I were well-equipped to handle it. He had his holy techniques, and...

I had my return skill.

'Okay.'

It was definitely worth a try.

"....."

The Heretic Inquisitor peeked up, looking at my face.

"Your complexion seems a bit better."

"Really?"

"Since returning from the Celestial Martial Guild, your face has been quite dark. King of Death. You must have accumulated a lot of stress from conquering the revelations."

I lost my words for a moment.

"Well, losing a precious master would naturally do that! So, I was worried about this conquest too. What if you couldn't perform your best due to your gloomy emotions? But it seems I worried for nothing."

"...So, you can observe a person's face and speculate on their emotions?"

"Yes! I may not understand what 'feeling down' is, but I understand it conceptually! Ah-ha. Like a machine, if not properly maintained, it creaks. Stress is like human grime. If left unattended, it turns into stubborn dirt, so be sure to take care of it!"

Fascinating. He's trying to understand humanity in his own way. A psycho, but a commendable one.

"But, King of Death."

"Yes?"

"I've noticed something strange."

"What's strange?"

"As I understand, we are currently unjustly imprisoned, our freedom of movement restricted."

"That's how I see the current situation too."

"It's a relief we understand each other! And usually, in such cases, the power holder places guards or jailers to watch over the prisoners. If not, escaping would be too easy."

The Heretic Inquisitor tilted his head.

"But currently, there's no sign of anyone outside the door. Instead, we hear noises from the window. Is it customary in this world to place guards around windows rather than doors?"

At that moment.

"Damn it! Attack!"

Shadows burst through the window as the iron bars fell off.

"Kill the man if you must, but don't hurt the woman!"

The shadows wore masks. It was too elaborate for a ballroom dress concept. Clearly, they were uninvited attackers.

"Shiny!"

[Yes, Master.]

I unsheathed the Holy Sword. Clang! The attacker's sword clashed with mine.

No typical exchange of words seen in movie attack scenes like 'Who are you?' 'That's none of your business! But we're backed by immense power!' happened. Both of us were too busy swinging our swords.

But I had a trump card.

"Now!"

The Holy Sword glowed brightly.

"Argh?!"

Blinded momentarily by the sudden light, the attackers, who had adjusted to the dark, instinctively closed their eyes. In a swordfight, a moment can decide the outcome.

I blinked alternatingly to adjust my sight and then severed the wrist of the attacker.

"---Aaack----!!"

His scream was a blend of pain and shock.

"King of Death! Don't kill them! We need to uncover who's behind this!"

So, I held back.

The Heretic Inquisitor, too, was actively engaging, her dress billowing around her.

"This can't be! She's not just a normal girl!"

The attackers were astonished. They weren't particularly skilled. Or perhaps, our skills were excessively superior. They couldn't handle us without using aura.

Soon, all four attackers were subdued. One of them was killed by the Heretic Inquisitor during the fight.

"Ah-ha."

The Heretic Inquisitor casually wiped blood off her face with

her dress sleeve. The attackers looked up at her, their faces pale with fear.

"We heard she was a frail noble lady... how could..."

"You have three choices!"

The Heretic Inquisitor, holding a dagger, grinned broadly.

"First, ask to be killed right here! Second, confess all important information while being tortured! Third, simply spill the beans without death or torture! Which will it be?"

"Huh..."

The oldest-looking attacker, who had lost his wrist to me, snorted.

"Crazy woman. Just kill me!"

"Alright!"

And the Heretic Inquisitor's dress got a little more red.

Thud, a dull sound echoed in the warehouse.

A head rolled onto the floor.

"Yeeek...?!"

Only two attackers remained.

"Have you made your choice?"

"Spare us, Lady. We were just doing our job!"

"It's tough to make a living. I understand."

"But then..."

"However, just as I understand your situation, you must understand mine! Why did you attack us? Tell me, and I'll let

you go. I think that's a very generous offer."

The attackers hesitated.

"Ah. You're struggling to decide. Alright! I'll help you make up your mind!"

"Wh-What do you mean by help?"

"Torture."

The Heretic Inquisitor's smile remained unbroken.

"Pain proves that we are alive. When it peaks, so does our survival instinct. Now, I'll maximize your desire to live."

"Please, spare us!"

"Let us live!"

Insane.

The genre was about to turn into 18+ romance, so I intervened.

“Wait a minute, Heretic Inquisitor.”

“Yes?”

“There’s no need to go that far. Leave it to me.”

“Hmm...?”

The Heretic Inquisitor looked puzzled.

“King of Death, are you also skilled in torture? Unless you are quite adept, I recommend leaving it to me. I am a specialist in interrogation.”

“No, there's no need for torture. And wipe your face, please.”

I handed a handkerchief to the Heretic Inquisitor and approached the attackers.

They sighed in relief, but sorry, I'm not that generous towards people who attack first.

“Gentlemen, let me ask you something.”

“What is it?”

“When you attacked earlier, you came in through the window. The iron bars were cut too easily. Did you know in advance that we would be locked up here and pre-cut the bars?”

"....."

The attackers remained silent, just exchanging glances. However, not speaking doesn't mean I can't find out the truth. 'Character Window.'

Their thoughts were visible to my eyes.

「 We heard a lady would be brought to the warehouse. 」

「 Damn, we thought she was just an ordinary girl, but it was a trap! 」

As I suspected.

They knew in advance that we would be brought here.

“When attacking, you shouted, 'It's okay to kill the man, just don't harm the woman.' Were you trying to kidnap the lady here?”

“That, well... it's...”

The attackers blinked rapidly.

「 The task was to kidnap a woman from here. 」

「 We were strictly told by our employer not to harm her, so we came in a group of four for the ambush. 」

Hmm.

Got it.

“Sigh...”

I sighed. Turning around, I saw the Heretic Inquisitor diligently wiping his face. He resembled a little hamster nibbling sunflower seeds.

“I have an idea who the culprit might be.”

The Heretic Inquisitor perked up his ears.

“Really? Have you already figured it out?”

“Yes.”

“I’m curious to hear your deduction.”

The Heretic Inquisitor's eyes sparkled.

“Firstly, the culprit is someone with immense power, able to hire four assassins to infiltrate the academy. It’s not something achievable without deep knowledge of the academy's security system.”

“Indeed, that makes sense!”

But, the Heretic Inquisitor countered.

“Does the culprit really need to be [someone with immense power]? It's not a palace, but an academy. It seems relatively easy to obtain knowledge about its security system. Even a moderately powerful figure could do it!”

“Your point is sharp, but.”

I shook my head.

“There’s another suspicious detail. Heretic Inquisitor, do you remember what the [Villainess] shouted when she was having us removed?”

“Hmm.”

He pondered, putting the handkerchief into his sleeve.

“Yes, I remember. She definitely said, [Get them out of my sight, lock them up]. Why do you ask?”

“She never specified where to lock us up.”

"....."

“The Villainess only told her servants to remove us from the ballroom. But these attackers knew exactly where we’d be imprisoned and had prepared by cutting the bars in advance. Those who brought us here were the servants of the Villainess.”

“Oho....”

The Heretic Inquisitor's eyes narrowed.

“Indeed. The Villainess might be the mastermind behind

hiring the attackers. She would have just needed to inform her servants about the place of confinement and the attackers about the location. Ah-ha. She is a lady of a duke's family, so she has the power.”

“Yes. But-”

“But, it’s too obvious.”

The Heretic Inquisitor stroked his chin.

“[I] am the protagonist in this world. I am a noble lady romantically linked with the Crown Prince. Would the Villainess really expel me and then attack in the same place? Even for a duke's daughter, that’s too scandalous and politically risky.”

He’s smart.

It's nice to have conversations like this that get straight to the point.

“That means the Villainess isn’t the culprit. Someone wants it to look like she is. The real culprit is someone else.”

“I agree!”

“And this real culprit, who told the attackers not to harm the Heretic Inquisitor at any cost, values you, the female protagonist, a lot. They didn't care about the male butler, me. Lastly, they have the power to bribe the servants of a duke's family.”

“Ah-ha.”

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled with his eyes.

“I'm beginning to see who the real culprit might be!”

“Probably the same person I'm thinking of.”

“Hmm. I don't understand the emotion of love. But I do know the behavior of those who love! If, as you deduced, the culprit truly values [me], they wouldn't really leave me in the hands of such attackers.”

“Yes.”

I nodded.

“They must be waiting nearby, ready to intervene at any moment.”

Bang!

That was when the old door of the warehouse shattered. Dust billowed, and a group of knights poured in.

At the front was a man who looked like he had never dirtied his hands in his life.

“Silvia! Are you alright, Silvia?!”

The man rushed over and tightly embraced the Heretic Inquisitor. His golden hair, like uncooked noodles, fluttered. Not as handsome as the Heretic Inquisitor, but the man was still good-looking. Maybe 0.6 Heretic Inquisitor in terms of looks?

“My goodness, you're covered in blood! I came here worried after hearing you were expelled from the ballroom... to think they would dare do such a vile act...!”

And probably about 0.6 Heretic Inquisitor in terms of being a psychopath.

Without blinking an eye, the man commanded.

“Listen! Capture those suspicious people! I will personally interrogate them and expose everything! I don't know which family did this, but I won't forgive them, even if they're heroes of the empire!”

The knights responded in unison.

“Yes! We obey the Crown Prince's command!”

That's right.

“Silvia, don't worry. I will protect you. No matter how wicked the daughter of the duke's family is, I, the sole heir of the empire, will protect you. You can rely solely on me...”

The man was the male protagonist of [Tales of Sormewin Academy].

And the Crown Prince in love with the Heretic Inquisitor.

Chapter 91: Falling (1)

Last year.

Two ladies received aliases from His Majesty the Emperor...

.....Silvia Evanair, Baroness.....

.....In the midst of the yellow garden, a golden blossom bloomed.....

.....From now on, people will call you.....

Lady Goldencup.

The female protagonist of this world.

.....Raviel Ivansia, Duchess.....

.....A flower coated in silver, refusing to bow its head.....

.....Child, from now on, the citizens of the empire will call you.....

Lady Silver Lily.

The villainess of this revelation.

Daughters of noble families usually get their aliases at debutante balls, where they make their social debut. Royals or high nobles hosting the ball gift them new names.

The grandeur of the alias depends on the nobility of the giver. An alias given by a baron differs in prestige from one given by a count.

The most splendid of all are aliases given by the Emperor of the Empire. Receiving a name from His Majesty is both an honor for the family and a personal triumph.

With two such ladies at the same academy, a tempest was inevitable.

‘Even so.’

I looked at the Crown Prince, who was embracing my colleague, who had assumed the role of Lady Goldencup, the Heretic Inquisitor. The way he tightly held her, her dress clung like fish scales between his fingertips.

‘Isn’t the Crown Prince too frivolous for the ruler of a nation?’

I found it somewhat disagreeable.

Our eyes met. As I was looking at him with a sense of disbelief, I had to quickly lower my gaze. But there was something odd about the Crown Prince’s look.

Contempt. Anger. Scorn.

His eyes harbored negative emotions.

“.....You survived as well.”

Uh.

Was that directed at me? Since I was the only one he was making eye contact with, it seemed so. But his voice sounded like someone chewing on spinach that was three days past its expiration date. It was irritating.

“Yes, Your Highness.”

I mimicked the tone of a historical drama.

“I was fortunate enough to preserve my life.”

“Lucky indeed.”

“How could it be the luck of a humble servant like me? It is all due to Your Highness's blessing.”

"....."

The Crown Prince's elegant eyebrows twitched. I had just subtly hinted that he had orchestrated the attack. A guilty conscience needs no accuser, as they say. Even a casual greeting can sting if it hits home.

“Your words are too much. Are you implying that everything happening in the world is due to my blessing? Your survival, protecting Silvia from the assassins, all of it is your luck. I appreciate it.”

Wow.

He took a step back and seemed to compliment me, but not really. He downplayed my 'skill' as mere 'luck.'

“Lady Goldencup is my master.”

Suddenly.

“And I belong to her.”

Words slipped out of my mouth before I realized.

“Your Highness. How can a sword protecting its master be considered mere luck? A tool simply fulfilled its purpose. Please retract your generous praise.”

I was surprised. Honestly, I just intended to brush it off casually. What’s the point of a butler of a noble family arguing with the Crown Prince of the nation? But my tongue kept moving on its own.

‘Have I finally lost it?’

Just as I felt a bit dazed, a voice reached me.

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

What?

[Your immersion rate is currently 1%.]

Crazy?

“.....Truly, I want to sew your eloquent mouth shut.”

While I was internally screaming in panic, the Crown Prince's face twisted. He was clearly holding back his frustration. I, too, wanted to unleash a string of curses. Seeing his distorted expression, a part of me felt strangely refreshed. The urge to stop was overshadowed by the thought, 'Serves him right.' Crazy. This is madness.

"These days, even baronial households seem to select servants based on their tongues, not their character. His Majesty would surely lament this trend."

Hold on.

Wait. Noodle Hair, the so-called Crown Prince of this world. Don't provoke me any further. Please don't stir up [my] emotions. This stage is....

"How could that be? How could His Majesty's discernment ever be clouded? As Your Highness grows more virtuous day by day in the academy, His Majesty's heart must be filled with joy."

In other words, it was a veiled jab saying, 'Your father would be thrilled to know you're hiring assassins, right?' But my hidden meaning wasn't important at the moment.

I realized the trap of this stage.

And why the Paladin and the Countess, the keepers of our tower's economy and security, were so powerless in their efforts to conquer it.

‘Both of them seemed increasingly consumed by their roles as time went on!’

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

No.

[Your immersion rate is currently 2%.]

This is madness.

“Hmph. Arguing with you is beneath me. I will thoroughly investigate tonight’s incident.”

“Your Highness, your trust is all I ask for. Please uncover the mastermind behind the attack and punish them accordingly.”

“Of course.”

Ah.

‘So this was it!’

This was the twist of this stage!

The Crown Prince glanced at me briefly and spoke.

“Silvia seems quite shaken by tonight's events. There might still be assassins lurking around. Tonight, I will protect her, so just keep that in mind.”

“Your Highness.”

My tongue had evolved into an auto-responder.

“Please forgive my rudeness. At a time like this, one should rest where they feel most comfortable. My master would prefer to stay in her private room as usual.”

“.....Are you saying that she would be uncomfortable in my presence?”

“I apologize. I am merely stating the truth to Your Highness.”

Save me.

Somebody, save me!

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 3%.]

Help me! Help me!

-Hey. What are you doing?

Sword Emperor! Or rather, Sword Emperor, sir!

-Eh. Has this guy gone nuts?

I feel like I'm going insane, so please do something!

-Uh... What do you want me to do?

I don't know. Just snap me out of it!

-Well, if that's the case.

The Guardian Spirit chuckled mischievously.

-Zombie. You seem to be annoyed by the Viper. But whenever you get the chance, you act more like a main character in his fantasies than anyone else....

Ah.

‘Enough. I'm back to my senses. Don't even utter the rest.’

-Okay.

The impudent actions of the Guardian Spirit, daring to joke about Viper, shocked me back to reality. Although he was ready to unleash a full-blown tirade despite my plea for any words, it did stop my immersion rate from soaring.

"....."

Meanwhile...

The Heretic Inquisitor, burying her face in the Crown Prince's chest, was also not normal.

".....? Huh.....?"

The Heretic Inquisitor tilted her head in confusion, repeatedly. For the first time, I saw her expressing 'perplexity.' The indisputable top lunatic, a pure natural psycho, was unable to comprehend the emotion she was experiencing.

Therefore, she pushed the Crown Prince away, freeing herself from his embrace. The Crown Prince, who was locked in a staring contest with me, looked surprised and turned his

gaze to the Heretic Inquisitor, now Lady Goldencup.

"Silvia. Why are you acting like this all of a sudden?"

"Uh?Um? Oh?"

The Heretic Inquisitor cocked her head again.

"This is fascinating."

"What's fascinating, Silvia?"

"Right now, for the first time in my life, I'm feeling an unfamiliar emotion."

The Heretic Inquisitor beamed.

"My heart is racing!"

"....."

“It's pounding fast. Oh, wow. Indeed! This is truly mysterious...”

She closed her eyes and gently placed her hands over her heart. The Heretic Inquisitor, or rather Lady Goldencup, wore a faint smile, as if listening to a beautiful classical piece.

“It seems my body's owner genuinely likes you!”

“Si-Silvia....”

The Crown Prince was overwhelmed. His face was a mix of broth named 'emotion' and rice named 'sensation.'

Fortunately, I had just in time stopped myself from being further immersed. I was back to my senses.

“Lady.”

I firmly called out, "Lady." The Heretic Inquisitor opened her eyes and looked at me.

“Let's return to the dormitory. His Highness has promised to uncover the mastermind behind the attack. The night has grown deep, and you should rest in your quarters. You need to continue with your life tomorrow, don't you?”

We have our 'roles' and a 'purpose.'

The purpose of clearing the stage.

We must not forget this.

“Ah. Right. That's true.”

The Heretic Inquisitor blinked, understanding my meaning immediately. She curtsied towards the Crown Prince.

“Thank you for your concern, but I will return to my quarters with my butler.”

“Ah?”

“Have a good night, Your Highness. I shall take my leave

now!”

Leaving behind a dumbfounded Crown Prince, the Heretic Inquisitor easily turned her back and briskly exited the warehouse.

From behind, the Crown Prince’s voice echoed, “Silvia! Si-Silvia?!” but she just smiled and walked down the corridor without looking back.

“.....Things have become complicated.”

I muttered, closely following the Heretic Inquisitor.

“This immersion trap was unexpected. Damn.”

Now I understood why the Count and the Paladin had failed.

“Ahaha.”

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled mysteriously. Our footsteps echoed in the corridor, bathed in moonlight. The sound of

footsteps resembled heartbeats.

“Indeed, this situation was unforeseen. Kim Gong-Ja, how high did your immersion rate go?”

“It skyrocketed to 3%. Barely managed to stop it.”

“Amazing. Mine shot up to 10 percentage!”

I was at a loss for words.

‘10 percentage? 10%?’

I was dismayed. Just a brief encounter with the Crown Prince, and 10% of her identity had been compromised?

The situation was more serious than I thought.

If we’re not careful, living normally is like walking through a poisonous mist. Slowly poisoned, we might find ourselves trapped with no escape.

“We need to establish a safety mechanism.”

“A safety mechanism?”

“Yes.”

I carefully fiddled with the hilt of my dagger. The familiar texture of the duct tape wrapped around it comforted me.

“Let’s set up a keyword. No matter the situation, no matter how severe, saying this keyword should snap us out of it. For example, if I say [Peach], you respond with [Carrot].”

“Aha. A secret code just for us!”

The Heretic Inquisitor laughed.

“I agree! I’ve seen something similar in a drama. Then, what shall our secret code be...”

Click-clack.

At that moment, the sound of heels echoed from the opposite end of the corridor. The sharp clatter of heels striking the floor was followed by a series of heavier footsteps. A person, followed by several attendants, approached us.

The moon shone.

The moonlight in the corridor was trampled by the sharp heels.

Hair as silver as the moonlight. Lady Silver Lily.

The daughter of the ducal family approached us, leading her retinue. Angered about something, the villainess lady furrowed her brow. Her eyes glared at us.

"Ah."

The Heretic Inquisitor let out a soft moan.

"Kim Gong-Ja."

She stood on tiptoes to whisper in my ear.

“I think I dislike that woman.”

Whisper.

Her voice sounded as usual.

"....."

Slowly, I turned to look at the Heretic Inquisitor.

“Hmm.”

She twirled around, her long dress creating a small whirlwind. The wind pressed against my chest.

“I'm curious, Kim Gong-Ja.”

Stopping, the Heretic Inquisitor spread her hands, folding

all fingers except the index ones.

“Ah, truly curious.”

She pressed her index fingers against her lips, smiling as usual.

“What expression am I making right now?”

But her eyes were not smiling.

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 4%.]

Chapter 92: Falling (2)

Romance Fantasy Rule 1

"Any man near the protagonist is inherently suspicious."

Romance Fantasy Rule 2

"The most ordinary man is actually the most extraordinary."

My heart was pounding, filled with anxiety. Like a broken piano key, my heart beat erratically. To that extent, the Heretic Inquisitor's laughter carried a sinister scent.

A premonition of sliding further into the abyss.

I couldn't fathom the depth of this pit.

"Heretic Inqu---."

"Seems you're unharmed, Lady Goldencup."

Before I could fully address the Tower's Alias, Lady Silver Lily had preempted with her own world's naming.

She took the initiative.

"I heard you were attacked by assassins.... You're truly a girl raised in the outskirts. Tough as a weed. Are assassins a trivial matter for you?"

"Hmmm."

The Heretic Inquisitor curved her lips.

I realized a bit late that it was a sneer.

Words she would never usually utter had just flowed from her lips.

“Did you come all this way late at night just to praise my health? I sincerely thank you, Lady. Just like His Highness, so many care for me, an unworthy one. Tonight's misfortune feels almost like a blessing!”

Lady Silver Lily's eyes turned venomous.

There were two spikes in the Heretic Inquisitor's words.

'You're the mastermind behind the assassins, aren't you?'

Threat.

'The Crown Prince came to me personally out of concern.'

And provocation.

".....Your mind is as unkempt as a weed. There's a fine line between imagination and delusion. It's that boundary that determines human dignity. I hope you maintain the etiquette befitting a noble.”

“Ah, sorry! I didn't realize slapping someone's face at a ball was in keeping with noble etiquette. My mistake. I grew up in a family from the outskirts, unaware of the Ducal family's manners!”

"....."

“If it's not too rude, may I be invited to your salon someday? I wish to learn etiquette directly from you, Lady. Since I'm not accustomed to slapping people, I need to learn the correct angle and strength.”

Her tongue revved like a motorcycle engine.

Wondering where the engine sound came from, I soon realized, what the hell? It was my own heart beating.

Thump, thump.

An ominous premonition wrapped around my heart and then gripped my throat.

“You're impudent, Lady!”

“A lowly baron’s daughter speaking such nonsense...”

The Heretic Inquisitor's tongue waltz infuriated the Ducal family's servants. Among them, there must be some who betrayed their master and were seduced by the Crown Prince. Whether it's one or several, that's not important now.

“I'm sorry!”

I quickly interjected between gold and silver.

Lady Silver Lily's brows narrowed.

“You are...”

“Today's shocking events have greatly disturbed my lady. Considering the turmoil, rest is desperately needed. As it's late, Lady, perhaps it's time for you to retire? Any misunderstanding can be cleared tomorrow.”

"....."

Lady Silver Lily clamped her lips shut.

Behind her, the servants muttered, but that was all.

Once the master raised her hand, everyone stopped their actions. Silence suddenly enveloped the corridor. Such control over subordinates isn't possible unless they're strictly reined in usually.

“Wait, butler, what are you saying?”

To my surprise, it was the Heretic Inquisitor, now Lady Goldencup, who protested against me.

“I still have much to say to the Lady. Don't conclude our conversation so abruptly...”

“Be quiet, please.”

I grabbed the Heretic Inquisitor's wrist. Holding it, I practically dragged her away. She protested, "Ah, wait, butler! Just a moment, please!" but I never let go of her wrist. If we further deepen our immersion in these characters, we're in real trouble.

“Lady.”

Just before exiting the corridor, I looked back. Lady Silver Lily was gazing at us with an indistinct expression.

"...What is it?"

“I have always admired how well-mannered the Ducal family's servants are. Tonight's events proved again how dignified and proper they are compared to someone like me.”

I respectfully bowed my head to her.

“I have learned much. Although unworthy, I offer my respect to you, Lady.”

“Please excuse me now.”

And then, I pulled the Heretic Inquisitor out of the corridor.

Initially resistant, she had now quieted down.

The spring night's garden. Between the ballroom and the dormitory, a vast garden spread out.

Newly bloomed magnolias drooped their heavy heads. Beneath the white trees, the fragrance was thick.

A night insect, intoxicated by the scent, tapped a pale magnolia petal, causing it to fall.

“My goodness.”

The Heretic Inquisitor stepped on the fallen magnolia.

“Ah.”

She stopped, looked up at the night sky, and then turned to look at me. Her face was expressionless, almost stunned.

The hunter, known as the craziest in the Tower, murmured in disbelief at her own actions.

“King of Death..... What did I just say back there?”

As soon as I shut the door to the dormitory, I said,

“Let’s set a password.”

We were silent on the way to the dormitory. No words flowed between us. Silence wound around our ankles, making it slightly difficult to walk.

Was this due to the deepening immersion in our characters? The path from the garden to the dormitory naturally came to mind.

Perhaps as immersion deepens, the memories of the characters become clearer. Whether this is good or bad, it’s hard to judge right now.

“A password...”

The Heretic Inquisitor blinked.

“A secret password...?”

“If we leave it like this, we’re really in danger. We need to stay alert.”

“That’s right. King of Death. You’re correct. Yes...”

The Heretic Inquisitor seemed to struggle to keep her voice from slipping. The speed of her voice outpacing her thoughts was a red alert that the person in front of me was in danger.

I firmly grasped her face with both hands and forced our eyes to meet.

“When spring comes the magnolias fade.”

“Yes...?”

“When I say [When spring comes], you reply [the magnolias fade]. That’s our password. A signal to snap out of it. Now, repeat after me. When spring comes?”

“The magnolias...”

“Again. When spring comes.”

“The magnolias fade.”

The Heretic Inquisitor's focus gradually returned. Her gaze shifted from the distant void to the immediate front. After muttering "Hmm," and nodding "Hmm!" she confirmed.

“Yes! I'm back to my senses!”

“Okay. Good job.”

“Thank you, King of Death! Ah, what a storm of astounding events today. This day will be remembered forever.”

“How about a cup of tea to calm down?”

“Please!”

Good. It's not too late. This chapter isn't lost yet.

I wrapped a blanket around the Heretic Inquisitor and headed to the kitchen. Fitting for a dormitory of a noble academy, Lady Goldencup's room had a small kitchen. I easily found tea leaves and a kettle.

“Wow.”

I was astonished while brewing the tea.

“My body just moves on its own...”

I had never properly brewed tea with loose leaves before, always using tea bags. But now, as if I'd been handling a teapot for a long time, my hands moved automatically. A side effect of immersion.

Even worse, my body was actually enjoying brewing the tea.

'Lady prefers her tea with milk, mixed with a spoonful of honey.'

I hummed to myself.

'Got the precious honey by asking the academy's exclusive servant. Cost a bit, but since she's so frugal and doesn't waste, a little luxury like this should be fine...'

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 6%.]

No, it's not okay!

Not okay at all!

Damn it!!

Stupid romance! Why am I happy about adding honey to black tea? Should I crack open my skull and smear honey on my synapses?! Stuff a beehive in my head!

[Shiny is worried about your condition...]

[But as your weapon, Shiny thinks your butler attire is quite fitting and voices a minority opinion.]

My weapon was gleefully sparkling on its own. Maybe it's just my imagination, but its sparkle seemed even brighter. Its master, me, was crouching, gripping my head in agony.

'I can't let a butler's mentality consume me.'

I clenched my teeth.

'No way. After how hard I've worked to clear the stages until now!'

Determination surged within me.

Even while brewing tea, I resolved not to do it like the original character. I used a teapot I normally wouldn't, chose a teacup I usually wouldn't, and then served the tea to the Heretic Inquisitor.

"King of Death."

After a few sips of tea, the Heretic Inquisitor tilted her head.

“Yes?”

“The tea tastes weird!”

“So?”

“If my taste buds haven't dulled, this bitter, salty taste is salt, right?”

“That's how this tea is supposed to taste.”

“Oh, I see. So, this is closer to saltwater than tea? Objectively, it would be classified as plain saltwater.”

“Just shut up and drink.”

“Understood! I'll shut up and drink well!”

The Heretic Inquisitor slurped up the tea.

“Thank you for the drink! It was very salty!”

The Heretic Inquisitor beamed. Good. This is how it should be. Our natural psycho has finally regained her innocent self.

“So, what’s the plan now?”

“We need to either get Lady Silver Lily hooked up with the Crown Prince or completely shatter the love line between Lady Goldencup and the Crown Prince. Let's aim for one of these endings.”

“A smashing strategy...”

The Heretic Inquisitor whimsically named the operation.

I prefer the latter of the two endings.

I've never experienced romance myself, but---

‘Isn’t breaking them apart easier than pairing them?’

It might be hard to pair Lady Silver Lily with the Crown Prince, but it should be easy to break Lady Goldencup away from him.

On this front, the Heretic Inquisitor and I were in 100% agreement.

“So, to do that, Lady Goldencup’s affection from the Crown Prince must wane! Do you have any brilliant ideas?”

“I do.”

Realization struck while brewing the tea, nearly losing my mind. This stage calls for extraordinary measures.

‘There's a way.’

Not just decreasing Lady Goldencup’s favorability in the Crown Prince’s eyes, but also a method extremely effective in maintaining our sanity.

“What’s this brilliant idea?”

“If the Heretic Inquisitor acts more like [Lady Goldencup] and I act more like [a proper butler], our immersion rates will increase.”

On the other hand...

“What if we do [things Lady Goldencup would never do] and [things a butler would never do]?”

“Our immersion rates might drop. Even if they don’t drop, they won’t increase at least. What do you think?”

The Heretic Inquisitor’s eyes sparkled.

".....Ah, indeed. Simple yet effective. You’re truly a hunter who conquered the impregnable 10th floor and cleared up to the 20th floor in a row!”

"Thanks, but let's focus. So, our conclusion is simple.”

I snapped my fingers, activating a skill.

“From now on, let's become [Delinquent Lady] and [Delinquent Butler].”

The Heretic Inquisitor tilted her head.

“Huh?”

Then, Ghoul Reincarnation unfolded. There was no need to summon many ghouls like in the Chronicles of the Heavenly Demon. Right now, we only needed one particular ghoul.

My shadow wriggled and transformed into the form of one person.

"....."

Ponytail tied back.

Eyes more annoying than any other creature in the universe.

“Hey....”

The Flame Emperor - Yoo Soo-Ha appeared.

Immediately upon being summoned, Yoo Soo-Ha grimaced, his face crumpling like a used tissue, and he started talking.

“You damn brat, what kind of nonsense are you planning to make me do this time---.”

"Let's get along, shall we?"

“---Uhmp, uhmp!! Uhhhhhhhmp!”

As a ghoul, he couldn't defy my commands, even with his harsh language. Yoo Soo-Ha looked like a hostage caught by terrorists, his mouth sealed, grunting “Uhmp! Uhmp!”

Seeing the Flame Emperor in this state somewhat lightened my gloomy mood. How should I put it? Like closing the lid on a trash can? It felt like my heart's fine dust was being cleanly swept away. The Flame Emperor. He was like the dustbin of a vacuum cleaner.

“Heretic Inquisitor.”

“Yes, King of Death!”

“You look too much like a model student from the outside.”

I spoke with a stern expression.

“Whether it's gestures or behavior, it's all too pure. But to truly become a delinquent lady, your current state is far from enough. You're severely lacking.”

“Ah.”

The Heretic Inquisitor perked up her ears.

“Please enlighten me on my shortcomings! I'm eager to learn!”

“Yes, I'll teach you. A one-on-one specialized tutorial.”

I slowly looked at Yoo Soo-Ha.

“The best tutor will guide the Heretic Inquisitor on the path of delinquency.”

“Ah, I’m excited!”

“Uhmp---, uhmp!! Uhhhhhhhmp!”

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled like a puppy. Yoo Soo-Ha scowled like a scoundrel. Between the puppy and the scoundrel, I nodded seriously.

“Let’s become delinquents.”

The next day, Sormewin Academy exploded.

Chapter 93: Falling (3)

Romance Fantasy Rule 3

"If you want to nurture love between two people, first make them hate each other."

"Hatred is like lightning, affection is like thunder. When blinded by the lightning of hatred, the thunder of affection begins to rumble."

"Are you well?"

On the way to Sormewin Academy.

"Yes, I slept deeply. Were you at peace last night, my fellow student?"

“Thanks to you. I had a good dream, so I'm feeling refreshed. I'm thinking of having two slices of toast for breakfast today.”

“Oh, my. I'd love to hear about your dream. How about we have breakfast together?”

“Oh, what a splendid suggestion!”

“Hehe.”

Students exchanged greetings and smiles gracefully. The white path to school was filled with "Oh my" and "Hehe" amidst the blooming magnolias.

Peace. Tranquility.

Even a choir of baby birds couldn't be more peaceful, and a garden full of blooming tulips couldn't be more tranquil. The mere sight was purifying. Moments as sparkling as diamonds existed here.

“Ah, Lady Goldencup. Are you well?”

And then, the diamond turned out to be nothing more than a pretty piece of coal.

It burns really well when lit.

“No! I’m not well at all!”

"Uh."

To the lady who greeted her, the Heretic Inquisitor smiled broadly.

“How could I be? Last night I was almost killed by assassins. Couldn't sleep at all, already feeling wronged, and now you ask if I'm well! Do you even think?”

“Huh?”

“No, of course you don't. If you did, you wouldn't ask someone who might've been killed last night if they are 'well'. Ahaha. It's your brain that should be well! Is your skull safe? Is your brain alright?”

“Uh..... eh? What?”

“Ah! My, my, my tongue twisted because of restlessness. Don't worry. I understand! A healthy mind resides in a healthy body. How could your mental state be sound when your brain's damaged? Better rush to the infirmary. In other words, get out of my sight!”

“.....ah,ah?”

Staggering.

The lady fainted. Thankfully, her servant caught her, or she would have rolled on the school path. The students, who were politely exchanging morning greetings, screamed.

“Lady Magnolia Alba! Are you okay?!”

“My goodness! She's too pale...”

“Everyone, hurry and call the nurse!”

“Breathe! Can you hear me?! You need to breathe!”

“Lady Goldencup! What, what did you just say...!”

Chatter erupted.

Peaceful chirping birds flew away, and the tranquil tulip garden was hit by a bomb. The diamond burst into flames. Ladies from noble families, though adept at caring for their fainted peer, couldn't hide their shock.

The Heretic Inquisitor grinned.

“Why the fuss? I just countered someone's thoughtless ‘are you well’ with ‘is your head okay’!”

A nearby lady's mouth twitched.

“Head is..... okay.....?”

“Ah. You have beautifully red hair. Is it because your skull cracked and some brain leaked out? Ahaha. Pity if your

already lacking intelligence drops further. Better scoop it back in!”

“.....haa.....”

Staggering.

“Lady?!”

“Kyaa! Lady Plum Blossom!”

“Where’s the nurse?! Hasn’t she arrived yet?!”

“That wage thief!”

“Someone fetch water!”

“Guard! Guard!”

Chaos ensued. An apocalyptic scene. Though the Revelations

hadn't ended yet, Sormewin Academy's path to school was delightfully devastated.

“Ahaha.”

Having single-handedly created a disaster zone in a 20-meter radius, the Heretic Inquisitor smiled innocently, despite the dark circles under her eyes from the overnight tutoring.

“King of Death, you're the best! My immersion rate didn't rise at all!”

You're amazing too.

The effects of the Flame Emperor's one-on-one tutoring were phenomenal.

“I'll trust and follow you completely from now on! King of Death's strategies are always reliable!”

I bowed with a butler's elegance.

“Thank you for the compliment, Lady.”

“You’re welcome! But is stepping on my foot also part of keeping the immersion rate down? My big toe hurts a bit.”

“To behave like a delinquent butler, it can’t be helped. Bear with it.”

“I understand!”

That morning, 14 ladies were admitted to the academy infirmary.

The incident in front of the girls’ dorm quickly spread throughout the school.

The incident was dubbed the "Are You Well?" event.

Cafeteria, main building, garden.

Everywhere, students whispered about the incident.

“Lady Goldencup has lost her mind.”

“She changed completely after yesterday's attack.”

“She must be possessed by a devil.”

“Two ladies and one gentleman who boldly went to uncover the truth haven't returned yet.”

“Isn't she more attractive now?”

“So, who ordered Lady Goldencup's assassination?”

“The unofficial Sormewin club ‘All Younger Siblings’ welcomes the change. We urge our fellow students to shift their perceptions.”

“Lady Goldencup's butler was seen mixing salt in the tea. Many witnesses.”

“Dangerous.”

“Assassination.”

“His Highness the Crown Prince is handling it.”

“Lost her mind.”

“Going crazy.”

“Proper salt intake, good for health... Salt in tea, a wellness trend?”

“Lady Goldencup.”

The rumor snowballed into wild tales.

“Lady Goldencup! You have insulted the honor of my master and our family!”

Despite the transformation into wild tales, the fact that 14 ladies fainted was true. Naturally, their servants were enraged.

Though they dared not confront a noble lady, they could challenge me, an equal servant. By lunchtime, angry servants lined up to confront me.

"For the honor of my master and our family, I cannot stand by. Please allow me to duel with the Lady's servant!"

"Hooh."

The Heretic Inquisitor nodded.

"Alright! Resolve it amicably among yourselves---."

"Wait a moment."

I stealthily stepped on the Heretic Inquisitor's foot. She yelped.

"What's wrong?"

"If you've decided to act, stay a delinquent lady to the end. Don't just accept what others say. That's not delinquent

enough.”

"Ah, indeed. So, how should I act more delinquently?"

"Just follow my lead."

We exchanged whispers. The servants who had requested the duel looked at us confusedly. Shortly after, the Heretic Inquisitor spoke with an enlightened face.

"Fine! I'll allow a duel with my servant."

"Ah, thank you. Then let's start right here..."

"Wait! If you want to duel, you need to pay me!"

The servants blinked in surprise.

"..What?"

"If you want something from me, you have to pay."

The Heretic Inquisitor sat on a garden bench, crossing her legs. Her face beamed with a forceful presence. If children saw her now, they'd instinctively call her 'sister'.

"My butler is a property of our family. I'm the only one from our family here at the academy, so he's mine too. What if my property gets hurt during the duel? Will you take responsibility?"

"Uh, uhuh....."

The noble servants were bewildered. Pay for a sacred duel? Too thuggish?

"How much should we pay?"

"Five gold coins will do!"

"....."

“Ahaha.”

Following my instructions, the Heretic Inquisitor delivered the last line.

“Everyone. Surely your loyalty to your young ladies isn’t worth less than five gold coins, is it?”

"....."

The servants began to reluctantly take out their gold coins. It was a bit pitiful to watch. Among them, there were some with saddened faces.

The worried expressions about whether paying for a duel in honor of their mistresses was truly honorable. Faces wondering, ‘Is this really the right thing to do?’

But once a few started paying, others followed suit.

“Here, Lady.”

“Yes!”

“Me too...”

“Yes, received!”

“Sorry, I only have silver coins right now. Can I pay with change...?”

“I’ll accept it all!”

The Heretic Inquisitor efficiently extorted the servants. The dignity of a lady bestowed with a title by the Emperor was buried under the jingling sound of coins.

Like master, like servant.

"Hmm."

I also cracked my neck like a gangster.

Over ten servants were awkwardly staring at me.

“Just asking out of curiosity.”

“Wh-what is it?”

I held up my holy sword still in its sheath.

“Has anyone here starved for more than a week?”

Exciting beating sounds echoed in the garden. It felt like drumming a set of drums as I knocked down the servants one by one. I beat them to dust.

"Ouch!"

“Huh, ack?!”

Many students watched as the servants screamed. Looking around, students gazed at me in horror. Behind me, the Heretic Inquisitor was rolling coins in her hand, humming cheerfully.

Screams, astonishment, and the sound of money.

These three melodies created a perfect trinity.

“S-”

Then, someone hurriedly ran through the crowd of onlooking students.

“Silvia! What on earth is going on here?!”

The man who could be described as the Noodle Hair of this apocalyptic world. The Crown Prince.

The blond Noodle was very flustered. Looking at his puffed-up noodle face, I felt a thrill of satisfaction. Last night, we felt discomfited because of this man, and today we returned the favor.

“Suddenly going berserk, I thought it was just a nasty rumor as usual. But now, what are you doing with the students... You!”

The Crown Prince mumbled in confusion and glared at me. Hmm. For noodle soup, his gaze was quite fierce.

“What are you doing! When the master is tired, the servant should do everything to calm them down! To recklessly wield a sword, you’re a third-rate butler and a disqualified servant! Disqualified!”

“My apologies, Your Highness.”

I sheathed my holy sword and bowed my head.

“I do not seek evaluation from anyone other than my Lady. If my Lady deems me third-rate, then I am a third-rate butler, and if she considers me disqualified, I will step down, but as long as she doesn’t, I remain a faithful butler.”

“You... to cause such trouble and still have the audacity to...”

The Crown Prince twitched his lips, then closed his mouth. He probably thought it was useless to talk with a servant like me.

“Silvia. Haven’t I repeatedly told you? You shouldn’t keep

such a man as a butler. The imperial palace has several well-groomed eunuch candidates. If I ask His Majesty, I can bring one of them for you. Don't worry! His Majesty already holds you in high regard."

Wow.

The onlooking students let out soft gasps. Ladies with smitten faces were seen here and there. The Crown Prince had just expressed his affection too transparently.

The ladies sighed dreamily and whispered among themselves.

"What should we do? The Crown Prince is engaged to Lady Silver Lily..."

"But their betrothal was arranged even before they were born, right? It's such an old story. Since His Majesty cares for Lady Goldencup, perhaps..."

"Ah, what should we do!"

As they fretted, the ladies' eyes sparkled.

Nothing was hotter than a royal romance.

Their own diamonds burning would be a pity, but watching someone else's, especially the most splendid diamond of the empire, burn up would be worth a fortune.

“Silvia, what do you think?”

The Crown Prince approached and grabbed the Heretic Inquisitor's wrist.

“Will you grant my earnest request?”

The Heretic Inquisitor looked at the Crown Prince.

At this moment, I also tensed.

Would the [female protagonist] Lady Goldencup's love flare up more fiercely, or would the Heretic Inquisitor's self, acting as [the delinquent lady], prevail? I had done my best to support the latter, but ultimately, the Heretic Inquisitor herself was the main character in this battle of hearts.

We could lose this gamble.

“...Your Highness.”

The Heretic Inquisitor slowly opened her lips.

“What perfume did you wear today?”

“What?”

“I apologize for mentioning, but it’s a rather unfamiliar scent to me.”

The Heretic Inquisitor's face brightened with a radiant smile.

Swish.

Naturally releasing her wrist from the Crown Prince's grip, she unfolded her fan and smiled coyly behind it.

“Have the culprits behind last night's attack on me been identified?”

“Ah, no... not yet, the investigation is ongoing.”

“If my butler hadn't been with me last night, I might have been harmed! If Your Highness cares for me, please respect my butler as much. Didn't he protect my life and uphold the academy's honor?”

"....."

“Your Highness. I trust my butler the most!”

It was the moment the Noodle's face boiled over.

And the Heretic Inquisitor laughed behind her fully spread fan.

“O-hohohohot!!”

It was the most romantic laugh in the world.

Chapter 94: The Villainess (1)

Is there anyone who cherishes you as I do?

Has anyone else caressed you with such care?

Have you seen eyes more anxious than mine?

Have you ever felt a touch gentler than my hands?

There is none. There never was.

And I will ensure there never will be.

Oh-hohohoho!

A romantic laughter echoed through the garden.

Struck head-on by the laughter, the Crown Prince's face turned utterly crestfallen.

“Si-Silvia...?”

“Ohohoho! Speak, Your Highness!”

“Isn't your laughter somewhat frivolous? Of course, your voice is like a bird's song to me. It always sounds like music to my ears, but still, consider the dignity of a noble...”

“Oh-hohohohot! I am quite satisfied with this laughter!”

“Is, is that so?”

The Crown Prince mumbled uncertainly.

“That, that's how it is... Right... No. On second thought, it's not bad. Hmm... Um, Yes! It's fine. It's perfectly fine! Beautiful, indeed. Today, I've discovered a new charm in you.”

Look at this Noodle Hair!

He still doesn't lose his love for Lady Goldencup despite all this? The students watching all around us have their eyes turned sour, right?

-You're like a zombie.

The Guardian Spirit, who had been quiet since entering this apocalyptic world, spoke up.

-I've been watching your play this time and tried not to interfere, but it's too frustrating to stay silent. Hey, aren't you misunderstanding something?

'Misunderstanding? What do you mean?'

-You think breaking up love is easier than making it, right?

'Yes.'

-Sorry, but that's... it depends.

The Guardian Spirit said, with an expression like a mountain gorilla suddenly trapped in a zoo from ruling the jungle.

‘Depends?’

-Yeah. You exude strong forever-alone vibes, but love is different for everyone who falls in it, kid. No matter how much you try to cut it with scissors, there are loves that won't sever. From what I see, that Crown Prince seems to be one of those cases...

Before the Guardian Spirit could finish, the Crown Prince spoke up.

“Silvia! You are like a kaleidoscope, shining so variably. Yesterday, you were a snowflake, and today, you bloom like a plum blossom. Indeed, a person's laughter isn't determined at birth. Is a noble's laughter defined by law? I should also change my laugh. Eumhahahaha!”

This crazy guy?

And then, a stunning duet echoed high into the sky in the garden.

“Ohoho!”

“Eumhaha!”

“Oh-hohohoho!”

“Eumhahahaha!”

The couple of the century was born right there.

I was at a loss for words.

‘What even is love...?’

I was shocked.

-You’ve never been in a relationship. You don't know romantic feelings, yet you think you can untangle these kids' twisted relationships.

The Guardian Spirit clicked his tongue.

-People have ruined entire nations just to look good in front of their loved ones. Your idea to prevent immersion by becoming delinquent was good, but it's not enough to break love. Yep. It might be insufficient.

Suddenly, the Guardian Spirit seemed very mature. Was I feeling inferior because I'm forever alone? To this mountain gorilla?

Isn't that too damaging to my pride?

"....."

Stomp.

I stepped between the Crown Prince and the Heretic Inquisitor. Making it evident. Naturally, the Crown Prince furrowed his brow at this.

"You..."

“I have been trusted the most by Lady Goldencup.”

Let's see if your love still doesn't cool off.

“Your Highness, you are noble. I am lowly. But while Your Highness is far away, I am always beside my Lady. My Lady's family is my home, and my Lady's life is the life I serve. Your Highness.”

A scream of “Kyaaa!” erupted in the garden. It was the voices of the observing ladies.

-No. Hey. Crazy. Hey. Hey!

The Guardian Spirit shouted desperately.

-Stupid! Ah, this forever-alone guy! He doesn't get it! That guy's a prince of an empire; imagine how strong his pride is! If you act like that, the Crown Prince will only get more jealous...

“Ha!”

The Crown Prince gritted his teeth.

“So under the guise of a butler, you’ve been loitering around the Lady, acting all high and mighty. Fine. Then I’ll take care of Silvia! While at the academy, I’ll look after her, so you can go back to your countryside.”

No.

You’re a prince of a nation!

Have you gone mad with love?

"Oh-hohohoho!"

Heretic Inquisitor, you’re sane now, so stop laughing.

“---What in the world is going on here?”

That’s when it happened. The buzzing of the students suddenly ceased.

Just for a moment. For no more than a second, the commotion quieted down. It was only for a second, but that was enough.

The ladies and gentlemen of the noble families bowed their heads and made way.

“...Lady Silver Lily.”

Only the Crown Prince kept his frown as he watched.

There, a lady with moonlight in her hair was approaching.

“I heard you submitted a sick leave this morning.”

The Crown Prince spoke.

“So I thought you would be absent from the academy today, but it seems you have recovered. Ha. The Lady’s heart is quite mischievous, it seems.”

"....."

Lady Silver Lily didn't respond immediately. Instead, she scanned the crowd once.

Flinch.

When her gaze met theirs, the students bowed deeply. These were students who had been buzzing about the royal scandal. Only after they froze, did Lady Silver Lily finally speak.

"I've been well, thanks to Your Highness's concern. I had a peaceful night."

"...Is that so? That's good to hear. You spend half the year on sick leave, so a day like today must be precious. It's a nice spring day with good sunlight, perfect for a leisurely stroll."

An icy face.

[Enjoy a stroll] meant [Leave from here]. The Crown Prince, who had clung so desperately to the Lady Goldencup, was harsh with Lady Silver Lily.

Maybe even unusually harsh.

‘Even as royalty, it would be difficult to treat a ducal family so rudely, wouldn’t it?’

But Lady Silver Lily remained calm.

“A stroll sounds lovely. If the spring breeze gets just a bit rougher, the leaves of the magnolia will fall. I worry the flowers might feel lonely if I enjoy it alone.”

Unlike last night at the ball, where she struggled, Lady Silver Lily spoke smoothly.

“Your Highness. Do not soil yourself in such a noisy place. Why not join me for a walk and comfort the spring?”

“Ha. Why should I...”

“Lady Goldencup.”

Lady Silver Lily looked at the Heretic Inquisitor.

“Join us for the stroll.”

The Crown Prince shut his mouth.

All eyes were now on the Heretic Inquisitor.

“Hmm.”

The Heretic Inquisitor flicked her fan and sneakily glanced at me.

‘What should I do, King of Death?’ Her eyes asked. ‘Should I follow?’ She was entirely reliant on my judgment.

Is it okay?

Lady Goldencup and the Crown Prince. Both are dangerous. Being with them will only deepen our immersion. The Heretic Inquisitor would become more like the Lady Goldencup, and I would become more like a butler.

As risky as it is, doing nothing won’t solve anything.

“...What's your current immersion rate?”

I whispered so only the Heretic Inquisitor could hear.

“Has it increased?”

“Yes. A bit.”

The Heretic Inquisitor whispered back.

"Currently, my immersion rate is 17 percent. Ahah, it increased by 1 percent while listening to the Crown Prince and another 1 percent upon seeing Lady Silver Lily. It has increased by a total of 2 percent since last night."

2%.

Certainly slower than the skyrocketing rate last night. Should we risk entering the tiger's den now? If not now, then when?

I looked into the Heretic Inquisitor's eyes.

“When spring comes?”

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled brightly.

“The magnolia fades, King of Death.”

Okay.

I made up my mind.

“Alright. Let's follow, Lady.”

“I trust your judgment, butler.”

The Heretic Inquisitor neatly folded her fan.

“Oh-hohoho! How can I refuse when Lady Silver Lily herself invites me for a walk? I gladly accept your invitation!”

Lady Silver Lily frowned slightly and then casually turned

away.

"Follow quietly."

She led us to her residence, not the dormitory. Evidently, due to her family's influence, Lady Silver Lily didn't stay in the dorms. Like living in a villa, she stayed in a separate building.

"This is where you suggest a [stroll]?"

The Crown Prince grumbled, having been somewhat forced to follow.

The Silver Lily Lady's residence was luxurious, unbefitting a student's dwelling. The Crown Prince, raised in the imperial palace, didn't seem overly impressed by such opulence.

"Of course not."

Lady Silver Lily spoke nonchalantly as she walked. Tap. Tap. Her shoes echoed in the hallway.

“The stroll was just an excuse.”

“What?”

“There were too many eyes in the garden. I couldn’t speak the truth. It’s a matter needing secrecy.”

“...Secrecy?”

"Yes."

Tap.

“This is about dealing with assassins who dared to invade the cradle of nobility. Your Highness, we cannot allow the public to be disturbed by speaking rashly.”

"....."

The Crown Prince was silent.

From what I deduced, the mastermind hiring the assassins was the Crown Prince. Although it might be my intuition, Lady Silver Lily's calm tone seemed to say, [I already know what you did].

“...You mean you've caught them? I haven't even grasped the leads yet. How did you?”

“The servant of Lady Goldencup provided me with a clue.”

Tap.

“I dismissed Lady Goldencup and her servant from the ball last night. It was an overreaction. But I never ordered to confine them anywhere. It seems some of my subordinates harbored ill intentions.”

The Silver Lily Lady's residence had stairs leading to a basement. Standing there, she turned back to look at us.

Her face was expressionless.

“Shall we go down, Your Highness?”

“...The servants are not in sight. Strange. Where have the ducal servants gone?”

“Are you worried? That’s likely. I shall lead the way.”

Lady Silver Lily, without waiting for a response, descended the stairs. Tap, Tap. Her steps echoed into the basement. Tap. Tap... She disappeared into the darkness.

The Crown Prince swallowed nervously and followed down.

We trailed behind them.

Descending the stairs, something became more intense. It was something too familiar to my nose, to my life. The smell of blood. The Heretic Inquisitor and I were unfazed, but the Crown Prince ahead of us twitched his shoulders.

“---I apologize for bringing Your Highness to such a humble place.”

In the basement, three people were tied to chairs.

All three were servants of the ducal house I had glimpsed last night.

“These are the masterminds behind the assassins who attacked Lady Goldencup.”

All three were soaked in blood.

"....."

The Crown Prince's hands trembled.

Even I frowned slightly. Among those who descended, only the Heretic Inquisitor and Lady Silver Lily kept the same expression.

It made sense for the Heretic Inquisitor, being the Guild Master of the Temple of the Omnipotent God, accustomed to torture and interrogation.

But the other was a ducal lady, seemingly fragile as moonlight, ready to collapse at any moment. Yet, she stood there as if familiar with such a place.

“After investigating all night.”

And then I remembered.

“These men acted out of personal revenge.”

The Lady in front of me, capable of destroying this world.

“Personal... revenge?”

“Yes. Shall I tell you?”

Lady Silver Lily grabbed the hair of one of the servants. "Aaack!" The servant cried in agony, only opening his left eye. Perhaps his right eye wouldn't open. He looked at us with just his left eye.

“His Highness the Crown Prince is here. Show some respect.”

“Miss, ugh... Miss...”

“You conspired with your colleagues to hire assassins. You targeted Lady Goldencup. Why did you aim for her life? Confess the truth to His Highness.”

“Miss... Miss...”

“If you tell the truth, your family won’t be harmed.”

This woman.

“That, Lady Goldencup, a mere daughter of an insignificant baronial family, had the audacity to allure His Highness... Miss, you’re the rightful... Yes, the fiancée. It was decided long ago. She’s ruining it.”

Is dangerous.

“Ruining it... and so... I acted foolishly in anger and frustration. I apologize. Apologies, Miss. Apologies, Your Highness...”

“Is there someone else behind this, commanding you to hire the assassins?”

“No, there’s no one else... no other mastermind...”

No.

“Is this all just your doing, the three of you?”

It was false testimony.

“Yes... yes, Miss. That's true...”

To protect the Crown Prince.

“Is that really so?”

“Yes, absolutely... Miss...”

“Then, that’s how it is.”

Lady Silver Lily intended to bury the truth underground.

For the Crown Prince.

The man who'd suffer the most if the truth was revealed.

“Your Highness.”

Lady Silver Lily looked up at the Crown Prince.

“Decide their fate.”

The Crown Prince flinched.

“To decide their fate...”

“Those who tried to kill Lady Goldencup, who invaded the cradle of nobility, are criminals. It's only right to punish them, and you have the power to do so. You are the foundation of this nation, Your Highness.”

"....."

“What hesitates you?”

Perhaps, Lady Silver Lily softly opened her lips,

“Is there a different truth behind this case?”

"....."

“As a subject, not as a student, I implore you. If my investigation is inadequate, postpone the punishment. The matter is serious, I'll inform the Emperor's special forces.”

The Emperor's special forces.

Upon hearing that, the 'butler's' memories resurfaced.

The dogs of the empire, second to none, the hunters who don't bow to any other name. Composed of the empire's finest swordsmen and magicians, they are granted absolute independent investigative authority.

The current Crown Prince secured his position precisely

because they eliminated the previous prince involved in corruption.

“But if Your Highness is satisfied with my investigation, there’s no need to complicate matters.”

Lady Silver Lily bowed.

A sword lay on the floor, seemingly prepared beforehand.

“Execute them here,”

Lady Silver Lily rolled up her sleeves.

Her arms, revealed, were covered in countless scars.

“Punish me,”

Cut, slashed, scratched, bitten, whipped, burned scars marred what would have once been arms as white as lilies. Not just her arms. From a long gash extending to her shoulder, I sensed her entire body was battered.

The bowed Lady of the Silver Lily whispered.

“For failing to manage my family's servants.”

The Silver Lily.

The villainess of this world.

“As always, I shall bear the sins.”

The Crown Prince trembled.

Chapter 95: The Villainess (2)

...My beloved daughter.

...Do not harbor any expectations.

...Do not expect anything.

...Expect nothing, hope for nothing. That is the secret of life.

...Every time you whisper to yourself 'maybe this time,' the world will whisper back 'this time for certain.' Being deceived once is an experience, twice is a tragedy. But being deceived a third time is a comedy.

...My beloved daughter, you are a noble. Be careful not to turn your life into a comedy for others. Do not allow yourself three chances.

...Just two wounds are enough to be remembered forever. The ancient emperors mourned their deaths in advance. Do not repeat the folly of erecting monuments in the desert.

...Yet, if I were to entrust you to the world, remember this, daughter. You are not lending your life to others. Do not become someone's debtor. From the beginning, give without expecting anything in return. Give everything.

...Allow people to hold a carnival over your corpse. Give your hair. Give your fingers. From your most innocent sacrifices to your purest joys and hopes, give everything. They will greedily feast upon all you have.

...And then leave this world without leaving anything behind.

Nothing at all.

Mother said so and passed away.

The funeral was a cremation.

The basement was silent.

"Why do you hesitate?"

Only the low voice of Lady Silver Lily echoed. The air was cold. Though the interrogated servants bled, their pooled blood couldn't warm the basement a bit.

"Hurry and pass judgment as the foundation of this nation."

"Hah, ha."

The Crown Prince chuckled faintly.

Was that really a laugh? Barely lifting the corners of his mouth, it was a miserably failed smile.

He glanced at us as if fleeing, the Heretic Inquisitor and me. His eyes seemed to ask, [What do you make of this absurd situation?]

"Your Highness."

But his attempt to escape was cut short. The sharp voice of Lady Silver Lily brought back his gaze.

"Shall I report these crimes to the Emperor's special forces?"

The Crown Prince hesitated.

"Are you planning to follow the deposed Crown Prince's footsteps?"

"Are you testing the Emperor's mercy towards you?"

It was a threat.

Her tone was soft, polite, but Lady Silver Lily, the ducal daughter, was unmistakably pressuring the Crown Prince.

And it was an effective threat.

"Uh."

The empire's heir trembled, clutching the sword handed by Lady Silver Lily. But his resolve stopped at holding the sword. It didn't extend to wielding it.

"Silvia..."

The Prince, unable to act, stared at us. Perhaps hoping someone would step in and save Lady Silver Lily.

"Handle it cleanly!"

But the Heretic Inquisitor merely smiled.

"It's good that you involved us too. Ah, it's perfect. Everyone here becomes an [accomplice], keeping silent. The Crown Prince gets to cover his mistake, and I'm happy to see the Lady punished!"

"Si... Silvia?"

"The problem is, it seems only the Lady gains nothing from this arrangement."

The Heretic Inquisitor's eyes narrowed like an inverted moon.

"What benefit do you gain from this, Lady? Three loyal servants of your house will die. And even taking punishment on behalf of the Crown Prince. What's your real gain?"

"What do you mean? As I said, they are my house's servants, and as its lady, it's only right I bear responsibility for their mistakes..."

"Ah, how lovely! But it's inefficient for a discussion! Let's be frank for a more efficient discourse. Why would you take the punishment for the Crown Prince? Is that your 'love'?"

Silence filled the basement.

Lady Goldencup and Lady Silver Lily exchanged a glance for a moment.

"I'm just doing my duty as a future subject. That's all. Lady Goldencup."

Lady Silver Lily's voice remained calm.

"You might not understand, being from a family from the outskirts."

"So, you expect nothing in return?"

"If you expect any answers, give up. Whether you understand me or not has no bearing on my actions."

"Interesting..."

The Heretic Inquisitor exhaled softly. The meaning behind that breath was beyond me at the moment.

But one thing was clear. Her reaction wasn't what the Crown Prince had hoped for. The Heretic Inquisitor had no intention of stopping Lady Silver Lily. With despair coloring his face, the Crown Prince, who had clung to his love, looked defeated.

"...Please wait a moment, Lady."

That's why I had to speak up.

The Heretic Inquisitor looked at me, slightly tilting her head.

"Yes, Butler? What is it?"

"If these servants truly masterminded the assassination, we too have a right to revenge. It's not right to leave the judgment solely to the Crown Prince."

My mouth felt dry. I turned away. To overcome this politically complex case... I focused on devising the [best strategy], using the butler's knowledge without hesitation.

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 7%.]

My tongue felt parched. It's still manageable.

"...And the same goes for you, Lady Silver Lily. You were betrayed by loyal servants. You have every right to punish them."

"Ho. So?"

"Each person punishes each of the three servants. How about that?"

Silence.

"Hmm."

The Heretic Inquisitor narrowed one eye.

"....."

Lady Silver Lily silently furrowed her brows.

The Crown Prince's face lit up rapidly.

"That's right! The butler's words are wise. The Lady was betrayed by her subordinates. Silvia was attacked. I need to uphold the law! It's fair for each of us to take responsibility for one!"

"Your Highness, a ruler should not share responsibilities---

"Quiet!"

The Crown Prince irritably threw the sword at Lady Silver Lily. Thud! The scabbard hit her leg and bounced off.

Lady Silver Lily remained expressionless, even though the hit must have left a bruise.

"You only know how to kill! Punish! Execute! How many people do you think I've disposed of till now?"

"It's the duty of the future emperor."

"I'm not a murderer! A butcher! A monster! If you're so thirsty for blood, start with yourself!"

The Crown Prince fumed. Lady Silver Lily just stared at him. Time seemed to freeze.

The ice in the air shattered as Lady Silver Lily slowly bent

her waist. She picked up the sword with practiced movements, left hand on the scabbard and right on the hilt.

"Your Highness."

The blade's color resembled her moonlit hair.

"Then at least give me an order."

"An order?"

"Yes. Your Highness, command me to execute. Why are you hesitating? Have you forgotten how to command? Are you renouncing your royal authority?"

The Crown Prince took a deep breath.

"Kill,"

He uttered, as if stumbling over the word.

"Kill them..."

But Lady Silver Lily did not falter.

Blood splattered.

The air in the basement split, followed by a more weighty severance of flesh.

"Hah."

With a sigh akin to a subtle shrug of her shoulders, Lady Silver Lily ended a life with a single breath. She then turned to look at us.

"....."

A sense of foreboding surged. My heart raced disquietingly.

I realized what I felt towards Lady Silver Lily.

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 8%.]

It was an instinctive intuition that [she will eventually hinder Lady Goldencup's path].

An obsession that I must deal with this person before me.

"Ahaha, I find you increasingly interesting! Well, alright!"

My immersion rate was rising crazily.

"It's problematic to leave the person who ordered the assassination alive. Hand me the sword. I'll take care of the second one. Shall we become accomplices?"

How many had the Heretic Inquisitor killed until now?

I didn't know yet, but it was clear she was no amateur in this area.

As soon as she received the sword, the Heretic Inquisitor executed the second servant with a swift strike.

Only one servant remained.

"Ah..."

Only one person left to administer punishment.

The Crown Prince stared, gaping at the Heretic Inquisitor, not expecting her to carry out the execution so easily.

"Ugh, ugh!"

Then, astonishingly, or rather shockingly, the Crown Prince began to retreat, attempting to escape. Before Lady Silver Lily could say anything, and just as the Heretic Inquisitor exclaimed "Ah!", the Crown Prince ran.

No one anticipated this, so the Crown Prince nearly escaped. If I, who had been at the back of the group, hadn't blocked the basement stairs.

"How dare you! A mere servant blocking my path!"

"You."

I grabbed and squeezed the Crown Prince's wrist firmly.

The Crown Prince struggled to break free but failed. A low whimper escaped him. He stood no chance against my grip.

"Let go at once! How dare you defy me!"

"This is your doing."

My voice sounded chillingly cold, even to my own ears.

"None of this would have happened if you hadn't foolishly ordered an assassination. Falling madly in love and kidnapping is one thing, but to shirk responsibility is another."

I glared at the Crown Prince.

"Hold it."

"Hold what...?"

"The sword. Hold it."

The Crown Prince flinched.

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 9%.]

Despite the deepening immersion, it didn't matter. My feelings were identical to the butler's. Rage against someone cowardly escaping.

I dragged the Crown Prince. He resisted, but I ignored his struggles and led him forward.

"Grasp the hilt properly."

"Release me! I command you! Is anyone there?!"

He didn't want to, so I forced him to.

"Raise the sword."

The Crown Prince was powerless against me.

"So much for blaming others for your life. You probably passed all the dirty, sordid, and distasteful tasks to Lady Silver Lily. For a prince of a nation, that's low."

"Silvia! Restrain your servant! I beg you, Silvia!"

"Strike down with the sword."

He didn't act, so I acted for him.

"Ah."

The scent of blood grew stronger in the basement. The bound servant's body slumped lifelessly from the chair.

The Crown Prince stood there, stunned. At his feet, Lady Silver Lily slowly knelt down, her skirt soaking up the blood, staining it red.

"The nation's foundation has righted the law, a blessing for all, Your Highness."

"....."

The Crown Prince didn't respond. He turned and left. I let go this time.

"Strengthen your resolve and continue to uphold the principles of reward and punishment."

The Crown Prince's heavy footsteps ascended the basement stairs. Thud, thud.... All the while, Lady Silver Lily continued her advice. Her voice gently echoed around the basement, striking the Crown Prince's back.

"The fate of the empire and its people depend on Your

Highness's attitude. You may seem alone, but you are not. Your actions and decisions greatly impact the empire. Please..."

Footsteps faded away. We continued to look at the still bowing Lady Silver Lily.

"Become stronger."

I found myself wanting to understand this person.

Chapter 96: The Villainess (3)

Three days after falling into the Apocalypse, Lady Silver Lily was absent from the academy.

"She's bedridden due to illness," they say.

"Is that so..."

"Yes. She has always been prone to sickness. Moreover, she must have been exhausted from interrogating the servants all night."

The Heretic Inquisitor delicately sipped her sodium-rich healthy tea.

"Physical strength is power! No matter how grand the ideals one harbors, if the body is weak, it's hard to achieve them. Mm, it's regrettable. Lady Silver Lily is indeed a talent worth considering for the empire..."

"The Crown Prince has also been absent, I heard."

"Ahaha, yes, all thanks to the butler. He must be shocked, right? He might even consider taking a break from school."

In a corner of the garden, under the fully bloomed magnolias, we enjoyed our tea time. Other students who passed by were startled upon noticing us.

"Crazy master and servant!"

"That's Lady Goldencup!"

"Don't get too close!"

Ladies clutched their dresses and young masters rolled up their trousers as they hurried away.

Thanks to that, we had the vast garden to ourselves. Sweet.

"Heretic Inquisitor, you just called me [Butler] instead of [King of Death]. Be careful."

"Ah! My apologies. It was a mistake. With my immersion rate over 20%, things are not going as I wish. Oh, this salted tea is surprisingly charming! Another cup, please, Butler."

"There you go, calling me Butler again..."

Sighing, I still refilled her cup with tea.

Trickle.

"Hmm."

Humming, I realized the depth of the tea ceremony after taking on the role of a butler. The way the tea drops from the pot and settles into the cup, each droplet creating ripples, was beautiful. Truly a culture befitting the lady...

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 10%.]

"Aaah?!"

The Heretic Inquisitor jumped.

"Butler, why did you suddenly spill tea on me! It's hot! You've damaged my delicate hair!"

"[Aaah]?! You never screamed like that before! Are you really becoming Lady Goldencup? Say it once. When spring comes!"

"The magnolia fades, and so does the butler's hair!"

"Aaaaah!"

We experienced a moment of terror over hair loss.

We calmed down and ceased our quarrel. As a servant, I combed the Heretic Inquisitor's hair.

In just a few days, the back of her hair had grown a bit. Was it the effect of the Holy Transformation Technique or was she increasingly resembling Lady Goldencup?

"Your emotional expressions have become much more

varied, Heretic Inquisitor."

My fingers brushed through her golden hair. I had never combed someone else's hair before, but my hands moved on their own.

"Before, you always smiled. But thinking about it, that's the same as never smiling. It felt more like smiling was just your default expression."

"Ah, has it changed now?"

"Yes, there's more emotion. It feels more vivid. Now, when you smile, I feel like I understand why. Whether you're genuinely happy or mocking."

"That's interesting. I'm aware of it too. Do you think this is a good trend, King of Death?"

I quietly looked down at the Heretic Inquisitor's small head, small body, small shoulders, small arms. How many had this small figure killed?

Heretic Inquisitor.

Originating from Bulgaria in Europe, a 1st-generation hunter.

Age unknown.

Number of killings unknown.

"Yes. I think it's a good trend."

I opened up.

"Honestly, I was wondering what to do with you."

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"You're a psychopathic mass murderer."

I gently tied her hair back, recalling how I cared for younger siblings in the orphanage.

"But I couldn't just kill you outright. Even the Black Dragon Witch, who probably hates someone like you the most, and even the Sword Saint kept you alive. There must be a reason not to kill you."

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled. Even when told I contemplated killing her, she wasn't shocked. She found it amusing.

"Accurate insight!"

"Why do you kill people?"

I asked the Heretic Inquisitor.

"You're a psychopath who understands others. You have your own way of understanding people. So why do you kill?"

"Hmm."

The Heretic Inquisitor tapped her chin, deep in thought. Laughter from students beyond the flower bushes softly reached us.

She turned to me and began whispering, audible only to me.

"First, I must tell you that I'm competent."

The Heretic Inquisitor formed a hand seal.

"Holy Technique, God of Cloaking!"

One of her gloves disappeared.

"This is one of the Holy Techniques I can use. It can make anything vanish from this world. Naturally, that includes murder evidence and corpses."

Her bare fingers danced in the air.

"If a ruler doesn't kill well, it's not because they're kind, King of Death! It's simply because hiding corpses and fearing discovery is troublesome. I don't have to worry about such annoyances and fears!"

"..."

"The tower was chaotic during the 1st-generation era."

The Heretic Inquisitor's face remained cheerfully bright.

"Resurgence of slavery. Racial and ethnic discrimination. Terrorism. Puppet forces. Massacres. Propaganda and fabrications. Ideological conflicts. It was like compressing human history into a pill and melting it in the mouth. The sense of crisis, 'If we continue like this, we'll all perish,' spread among the minor warlords, now the 5 great guilds."

Black Dragon. Sang-Ryun. Temple of the Omnipotent God. Celestial Martial Guild. Vigilante Corps.

"All five have gathered."

It was like a recitation of a hero's epic.

"The Black Dragon Witch spoke first!"

[Let's skip the nonsense. Let's form an eternal non-aggression pact.]

"The Countess set a condition."

[Guarantee exclusive rights to external world goods for Sang-Ryun.]

"I added!"

[It would be nice if each guild had its exclusive domain! That's the condition for cooperating in case concealment!]

"The Viper grumbled."

[The craziest ones turn out to be the most trustworthy. Tsk tsk. End times, indeed. ...But what's with this coffee? Why so bitter? Who ordered this coffee for me? Hey. Hey there? Hey?]

"The Sword Saint concluded!"

[We won't say 'we're doing what needs to be done.' Let's say 'we're doing what we want to do.' Tonight, we kill people based on our beliefs, our judgments, our methods.]

"That night, 4653 people died."

The Heretic Inquisitor's smile remained unchangingly bright.

"The next night, 10171 died. The night after, 8275. Then 7412, and the next night, 23781."

Died.

Died.

Died. Reciting this, the Heretic Inquisitor suddenly spoke cheerfully.

"And then,"

That day came unexpectedly, she said.

"That night, nobody died."

The end of the long cleanup operation.

That night, the Black Dragon Witch cried out loud.

And the Sword Saint.

[I will take responsibility and resign.]

The Sword Saint was the leader of the Vigilante Corps then.

[And never mention this incident again. I endorsed the massacre. Participated. I did it knowing I shouldn't. I'll hate you forever. And hate myself a little more.]

Separation.

After that day, the position of the guild master of the Vigilante Corps remained eternally vacant.

"Then the Paladin took over the Vigilante Corps."

The Paladin.

The Vice-Captain of the Vigilante Corps. Always introducing herself as such, and always referred to as such.

"The Paladin regretted it."

I suddenly remembered the night the Paladin and the Apothecary confronted the Sword Saint. Was that subtle tension because of this?

"I didn't regret it! It was a necessary sacrifice!"

The Heretic Inquisitor grinned brightly.

"But, maybe it's the influence of being immersed in Lady Goldencup, I now have a slightly odd thought."

"What is it?"

"King of Death. If you were there in those times, maybe things would have been different."

“It's fascinating. I've never been immersed in such feelings before.”

The Heretic Inquisitor lifted her head. The whispers had ceased. Above her, the magnolias bloomed in the sky.

“Is this how you always feel? Living adrift in thoughts of what could have been done differently then, or what might have been done at that moment. Wandering through such reflections, yet still managing to go on living.”

“That's impressive.”

The Heretic Inquisitor sighed deeply.

“Therefore,”

The 5th-ranked hunter spoke as if lamenting.

“That's probably why you all are so beautiful, and so endearing.”

“Heretic Inquisitor...”

“If only I were like you...”

The Heretic Inquisitor’s words paused momentarily.

“Hmm.”

They resumed.

"Umm."

And then.

“It’s difficult, Butler. I find myself increasingly wanting to stay in this world.”

The moment the Heretic Inquisitor smiled, a voice echoed.

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 11%.]

I realized something.

I probably won't be able to kill this person.

I can't kill someone who knows regret.

“Lady.”

“Yes.”

“When spring comes.”

The Heretic Inquisitor waved her hand. The glove that had disappeared earlier had returned, covering her bare hand. A white glove with a petal pattern. She smiled brightly.

“Spring is nice. Shall we go for a walk, Butler?”

It felt as if time had stopped.

I wasn't sure what expression I wore. The Heretic Inquisitor looked at my face, chuckled softly, then burst into laughter.

“Ahahaha! Ha! You look so pale, King of Death! You turned blue in an instant! You look like a corpse!”

“You... even your pranks...”

“I'm sorry. Gaining emotions has made me a bit of a prankster! Ah, I understand now. The kind of feelings you have towards me, King of Death! It's like looking up to a reliable older brother!”

“Older brother? You're a 1st-generation. Aren't you actually older than me?”

“No comment on that!”

But, the Heretic Inquisitor continued.

“It’s clear I’m rapidly immersing into Lady Goldencup! While we talk, my rate has increased by 1%. Currently, my immersion rate is 32%. Perhaps it will exceed 50% by tomorrow! That’s how addicted I am to experiencing these ‘emotions’.”

She fiddled with the hair I had tied up.

“I’m the protagonist of this Apocalypse’s story. But the end of the story belongs to you, King of Death. Before I drown in the identity of Lady Goldencup, swept away by emotions, please save the ending.”

“Yes.”

I nodded.

“I promise.”

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled.

“I trust you. My Butler.”

That night, the Heretic Inquisitor's immersion rate exceeded 50%.

‘The one who ultimately brings about the end of this world is Lady Silver Lily.’

I headed to Lady Silver Lily's residence, using the excuse of a sick visit.

‘She's the key. I need to understand her. Her love, jealousy, permissiveness, pride, possessiveness... I need to grasp it all to conclude this Apocalypse. And I will.’

The Lady's residence was bustling with servants, unlike yesterday.

“Excuse me.”

I spoke politely.

“May I see the Lady?”

“Who are you?”

“I’m here on behalf of Lady Goldencup for a sick visit.”

The servants' faces hardened. They were well aware of the bad blood between their mistress and Lady Goldencup. “Please wait a moment!” a servant shouted, rushing into the residence.

Shortly after, the servant returned with a reluctant face.

“...This way, please. The Lady has granted your request for a visit.”

“Thank you.”

I followed the servant's lead. The destination wasn't the Lady's bedroom or reception room, but her office. Many servants were coming in and out with reports.

“Letters from Lapanor region have arrived, Lady.”

“Put them on the left side of my desk.”

“Lady. Viscount Blue Waxflower has sent a letter in place of the head of her family. Considering the season, it seems to be a request regarding crop rotation...”

“Send it to the finance department for review, then bring it to me.”

“Lady.”

"Hm."

As Lady Silver Lily looked through documents at her desk, she lifted her head. Her red eyes briefly scanned me. Indifferently, she spoke.

“Guests have arrived. Everyone, leave.”

Lady Silver Lily flipped an hourglass on her desk.

“I’ll give you a 15-minute break.”

The servants hurried out.

In the spacious office, only Lady Silver Lily and I remained.

“So.”

She put down her quill.

“Lady Goldencup has sent a sick visit? That’s commendable. Just a few days ago, she would grind her teeth at the mere sight of me. People change so quickly.”

“I heard you collapsed from illness. I’m surprised to see you well. It’s a relief.”

“I’m a student, after all. Skipping classes requires a proper excuse. Not that I’d say I’m in good health, mind you.”

Lady Silver Lily coughed lightly.

“I’ve been watching your actions. You quickly noticed the spies I had placed under my command. You’ve changed too,

not just Lady Goldencup. This time, the [Actor] chosen seems to have a good head on their shoulders. A blessing for the Empire."

"If I hadn't been smart enough, you wouldn't have accepted my visit."

Suddenly, I didn't understand.

"Excuse me?"

"Hm."

Lady Silver Lily narrowed her eyes.

"I thought you were smart, but you have some dull moments."

"What do you mean...?"

"I'm on my 14th round."

Her voice flowed calmly.

"Still, I'm just a returner repeating the last ten days of life. This is my 13th time facing an [Actor] like you."

Then, a voice sounded.

I was speechless upon hearing it.

[The silver-clad heart watches you.]

Lady Silver Lily.

"How many rounds have you been through?"

She was a returner of this world.

Chapter 97: Your Heart (1)

"Quite the dumbfounded expression."

Lady Silver Lily remarked.

"Didn't the Constellation that sent you explain anything to you? That's rare. Usually, when a Constellation sends an Apostle, they provide as much information as possible. Are you on bad terms with your Constellation?"

"Apostle...?"

"Truly clueless. Interesting."

Lady Silver Lily opened a drawer. Another hourglass, identical to the one she had just flipped, was inside. Clang! She lightly pressed the desk bell.

The office door opened.

“Did you call, Lady?”

“Add 15 minutes more. There might be further extensions, so everyone take a break.”

“Seems you’re enjoying the conversation. Shall I bring some tea?”

“Hmm. Zernis mountain tea.”

“Understood.”

An elderly servant bowed and left.

I stood there awkwardly, unsure of what to say next. Observing my demeanor, Lady Silver Lily slightly raised the corners of her eyes.

“Relax. Just stand comfortably.”

It wasn't an invitation to sit.

"Which Constellation sent you? Mutia? The Three-Horned Star? Hisimet Cretsu? Nasaro? Psyme? Hmm. Judging by your face, it seems you've never heard of them. Who are you representing?"

"The Librarian of All Knowledge..."

My head was spinning. I sensed the Lady wasn't ordinary, but this was beyond my expectations. I only managed to recall the Librarian's title, barely clinging to my last thread of sanity.

"No, the Holed-Up Head Librarian sent me."

"The library."

Lady Silver Lily twirled a quill in her left hand.

"The Holed-Up... Ah, Hamusutra?"

Hamusutra.

His true name.

She knows the true name of a Constellation.

“Did Hamusutra not explain anything to you?”

“...The Head Librarian tries to minimize intervention in the Apocalypse. Rather than giving us information, he prefers we find out for ourselves.”

“Apocalypse?”

“A world where barriers have fallen due to the absence of Constellations. A world doomed to destruction, as the Head Librarian calls it.”

Lady Silver Lily’s eyes narrowed with amusement. Even narrowed, her gaze was intense, overwhelming anyone she looked at. She possessed a dominating presence.

“Typical of a Constellation. Arrogantly naming others’ worlds as they please. Apocalypse, you say? Hmm. Not entirely incorrect. Eventually, all worlds face destruction. But I can’t simply hand over my soul so easily.”

I blinked.

“...Wait, you still don't understand? You, possessing a commoner and not a noble, have come to seek my soul?”

I shook my head. This was completely new to me.

"....."

Lady Silver Lily closed her lips. Her eyes began to show a hint of curiosity. Rattle. She opened a drawer and pulled out something. A third hourglass.

Clang.

“Did you call, Lady? I've brought the tea.”

“Take another 15 minutes.”

“The children will be very happy today.”

The servant left.

While sipping her tea, Lady Silver Lily continued to observe me over the rim of her cup.

“Look here, Butler of Lady Goldencup.”

“Uh, call me Kim Gong-Ja, please. That’s my real name.”

“No. How dare you ask me to address you by your real name? You’re not a noble, just a commoner possessing a Butler. Blame yourself for that.”

Isn’t this person subtly being snooty?

“Anyway, I see that you are a blank slate. You haven’t received a [Strategy Guide], it seems.”

Strategy Guide? What’s that?

“Something like this.”

Lady Silver Lily pulled out a paper from the drawer.

On an A4-sized paper, round handwriting was scribbled.

+

1. Lady Silver Lily is sensitive to sunlight. Prefer evening and night for dates rather than daytime.

2. She has a dull sense of taste and likes spicy food.

3. She likes white flowers, but she's tired of lilies. Keep that in mind when choosing gifts.

4. She's a pragmatist. Prefers politics, diplomacy, and money topics. Romantic poems won't work.

.

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10. Lady Silver Lily is loyal. It's fine if she talks bad about the Empire or the Crown Prince, but she won't tolerate others doing so. Be careful.

+

I was speechless. Crazy. What is this?

“An Apostle who came to woo me during the 6th round had this, sent by the Constellation Mahos. He called it a [Strategy Route].”

My mouth dropped.

“A Strategy Route...”

“He was so unbelievable that I poisoned him and took it after his death.”

Lady Silver Lily spoke plainly.

“When he died in my hands, he screamed, [I followed the strategy to the letter, why didn’t it work?]. As if he was wronged. But I was the one wronged. Can a person’s heart be captured by a strategy guide?”

[The silver-clad heart expresses dissatisfaction.]

“How trivially people view others. If one truly wishes to win my heart, they should approach me honestly. But strategy guides and routes? Such rotten seeds.”

“That’s... true.”

“Finally, a sensible response.”

Lady Silver Lily set down her teacup.

“The reason I rated you highly is not just for your intelligence, but also because you view the people of my world as [humans].”

“That’s... obvious, isn’t it?”

“Many have failed even that basic criterion. Beasts who don’t view others as humans. Yet, they staunchly consider themselves human. Filthy creatures.”

I held my breath for a moment.

Lady Silver Lily noticed my reaction and leaned on her chin.

“Hmm?”

After a brief groan, she nodded.

“I see.”

Thump.

“This talk seems to mean something to you.”

Thump.

“Have you seen many of those kinds? Or have you been viewed that way?”

Thump.

“If not, then I see. Perhaps someone important to you once said something similar---”

“Lady.”

I cut in.

I couldn't bear it any longer, this sensation of having my heart dissected and examined under a magnifying glass.

[The silver-clad heart watches you.]

I couldn't let her take control anymore.

I spoke.

“But you, Lady, also looked down on me for possessing a commoner, not a noble.”

Lady Silver Lily didn't even blink.

“What? Are you so upset that I didn't call you by your real name?”

“It's just that you're not in a position to talk down to others.”

“Such a comment fits the rebellious Butler who blew up the Academy.”

Yet, the tone of Lady Silver Lily seemed oddly amused.

“But I acknowledge the validity of your point.”

So, shall we get back to the main topic? With that, Lady Silver Lily coughed lightly.

“So?”

“Yes?”

“What do you seek in crossing the boundary to this world? This is a world where the same 10 days repeat forever.”

[The silver-clad heart doubts your intentions.]

“Surely the Constellation didn’t exile you here out of dislike. Hamusutra is considered moderate. But then, you wouldn’t be here for a vacation or relaxation. Speak up, Actor and Butler of Lady Goldencup.”

“I am...”

“Don’t lie. The moment you utter even a shred of falsehood, regardless of your purpose, obtaining anything from me will become impossible. I don’t show my heart to those who don’t reveal theirs first.”

I pondered.

‘I want your world to become the 25th floor.’

Do I really need this stage? No. Choosing another stage wouldn't make much difference to our tower.

'I have a fragment of the Holy Sword in this world.'

Do I need to complete the Holy Sword? That's also a no. Finding its fragments would strengthen me as its owner, but it's just a power boost.

"....."

The reason for my stay in this stage.

"...I still don't understand love."

"What?"

"Romantic feelings, that sort of thing, I'm ignorant of them. This world's genre includes [Romance]. I think this is a fitting place to learn about love."

When my master fought her last duel.

The Guardian Spirit shouted at her:

「Gong-Ja hasn't yet experienced the joy of the world.」

「Do you know? Heavenly Demon, this guy hasn't even fallen in love yet. Ridiculous! He's never even dated!」

Those words were deeply etched in my heart.

"I want to learn about what I lack. No, I want to know. Leaving it unknown feels unfair. It doesn't feel like living a full 100%."

Lady Silver Lily observed my face intently. Her crimson eyes seemed, perhaps it was my imagination, slightly perplexed.

“So you want to learn about love?”

“Yes.”

“From me?”

“That... I’m not sure.”

“Explain.”

I gathered my thoughts.

“To be precise, I want to learn about love in this ‘world’.”

“The world.”

“Yes, I want to know what I lack. I want to feel it.”

“Then why not go to your Lady, Goldencup? Wouldn’t that be quicker?”

The Heretic Inquisitor.

Lady Goldencup.

“It won’t work.”

“Why? Do you dislike the character you’re possessed by?”

“No, it’s not a matter of like or dislike. That person is...”

‘If I were like you,’ she had said.

Said it.

“That person is even more inexperienced than I am.”

"....."

“To learn, one must seek someone more knowledgeable.”

Lady Silver Lily sipped her tea. A brief silence.

“Well, the current Goldencup doesn’t seem fit to teach love to anyone. Rather, she seems to be in a position to be taught.”

“Yes.”

“Yet, I still see no reason for you to come to me.”

“There is a reason.”

I said firmly.

The thoughts I had in the underground prison came to mind.

“I want to understand you.”

She seemed taken aback by my words. A splashed droplet of tea stained the hem of her dress.

She blinked and then said,

“Understand me...?”

“Yes. Whether it’s for the Crown Prince or for the Empire, I don’t know yet, but Lady, you are dedicating your life to loyalty. I wonder how you can do that. What feelings and heart drive you. If it’s because of love, I’d like to experience that

too.”

"....."

"A bit embarrassing and awkward to say, but that's my honest answer."

Lady Silver Lily fell silent for a while.

"This is,"

Now it was clear.

"Truly a first for me."

Lady Silver Lily was flustered.

"To want to know love is already a fearless statement. And to want to understand me? One should not use the word 'understand' lightly. It's a word that can lead to poison. Understanding is not different from responsibility. Yet."

“Head Librarian.”

I looked up at the sky. Of course, the Head Librarian wasn't there.

But she would be listening to our conversation, and the hunters of the tower would be watching.

“Please pause the broadcast for a moment.”

The office air went still.

“I have something I wish to say only to Lady Silver Lily.”

After a brief pause, a voice responded to my request.

[The Holed-Up Head Librarian gladly accepts your request.]

[You are granted a ‘Scene Skip’ for 10 minutes.]

Okay.

I looked back at Lady Silver Lily.

“I’m also a Returner.”

I began.

“But my nature of returning is slightly different from yours.”

“How so?”

“You said you repeat the last 10 days of your life. I return to a day before upon death.”

"....."

“It’s not just a simple return. If someone kills me, I can glimpse into their trauma.”

“Trauma?”

“Yes.”

My voice softly flowed in the office.

“The deepest wounds, memories, scenes that people keep in their hearts. If the wound is about something precious being destroyed, I see that very moment of destruction.”

There was no need to carefully choose my words. As soon as I opened my mouth, let my tongue loose, the words I wanted to convey naturally flowed out. As I shared my secret with Lady Silver Lily, I suddenly realized.

“That is, I can [easily] understand others.”

Me.

I wanted to talk about myself to someone.

To someone in a similar situation, living a life like mine.

"....."

Lady Silver Lily was quiet. As my story continued, her eyes gradually became more serene. I could feel that she was listening to me seriously.

"It's kind of a skill, a technique. I'm afraid of becoming too accustomed to understanding others easily. One of the people I trust most said, [Never get too comfortable with your skills]. But..."

"That's so."

"Yet, if it's a one-sided understanding..."

"That wouldn't be understanding."

"That's right, and yet, I can't just ignore people. Because..."

"If I give up, they'll wither, twist, and die."

"....."

“Even if it’s hypocrisy, I want to let them know that I’m here, watching over this place, thinking about them. What a blessed life that is. Isn’t it?”

I suddenly choked up.

".....Yes."

"Foolish."

Lady Silver Lily closed her eyes.

"Understanding is momentary, but responsibility is eternal."

You’re willingly walking into hell.

After murmuring that, Lady Silver Lily fell silent.

[The Holed-Up Head Librarian announces the end of the ‘Scene Skip’.]

Lady Silver Lily opened her eyes.

"Very well, Butler of Lady Goldencup."

She picked up one of the upside-down hourglasses on her desk. Watching the grains of sand slide down the glass, Lady Silver Lily spoke softly.

"I shall teach you about love."

Chapter 98: Your Heart (2)

Lady Silver Lily began, "However,"

"From today for a week, until the world meets its end, you must become not the butler of Lady Goldencup, but my exclusive servant."

"Your exclusive servant..."

"Yes. I know my own love, but I've never taught love to others. The only way is to openly show you how I love. So, observe well and learn well. Watch and learn."

"....."

"It feels like I'm at a loss. No, I certainly am at a loss. I'm exposing my private life, something to be embarrassed about. Treat it as the fortune of three lifetimes, commoner."

Truly a haughty noble.

The next day, my dual contract life began.

Not only serving Lady Goldencup but now also Lady Silver Lily.

“Hmm. You’re here?”

"Yes."

Lady Silver Lily welcomed me in her dressing room.

5 AM.

The Lady was already awake. Four attendants simultaneously attended to her dressing. It was a big breach of etiquette to enter the toilette, the dressing room, but Lady Silver Lily dismissed it with "It's annoying, don't worry about it."

As soon as I entered, she said,

“Show him.”

“Yes, Lady.”

The white-haired butler crisply pulled out a board. It was decorated with lily patterns. Written on it was a sentence in elegant handwriting.

+

LESSON 1. (Basic)

Love begins by experiencing a bitch.

+

"....."

“Last night, I pondered how to teach you love. I’m not leisurely enough to focus only on you, nor can I find your first love for you. Right?”

I was speechless and dazed, while Lady Silver Lily spoke indifferently. Her attendants, mirroring their mistress, emotionlessly trimmed her fingernails.

“So I decided to gradually teach you the truths you need to know in advance. Listen up. Repeat after me. Love begins by experiencing a bitch.”

“Lo-love begins by experiencing a bitch...?”

“Yes. A bitch. Or maybe bitches.”

Lady Silver Lily drew a fan with her left hand. Whoosh! The fan unfolded with a crisp, clear sound. She covered her lower face with the fan.

“There might exist lovers who have a perfect relationship from the first love. People who know how to love and care from the first sight till they’re buried together, sharing a romantic love. But that’s not you.”

"....."

"Your lovers, with 99% certainty, will be bitches. Even if they're not bitches at first, they will become one eventually. Why? Simple. It's almost impossible for humans to not be a bitch all year round. Similarly,"

Swish.

Lady Silver Lily folded the fan and pointed at the white-haired butler. As if prepared, the butler emotionlessly flipped the board, revealing another message.

+

LESSON 1. (Advanced)

You're also a bitch.

+

"There's a high chance that you too are a bitch."

"....."

"Don't be too negative. Humans are creatures of experience. Those who have been betrayed by a bitch won't easily fall for another. Someone who's been a bitch to another might not be so next time. You should learn [what kind of person is a bitch], [when do I become a bitch], [how not to be a bitch]."

My mind was numb.

"Can't I just do well from the start?"

"Butler."

Lady Silver Lily was expressionless.

"Don't expect too much from humans."

"....."

"Humans forget their own words. They make resolutions and then give up. Forgetfulness and abandonment. These two

words should be the basic principles of love. If you truly want to do well in love, learn how to [remember] and [make resolutions].”

“R-remembering and making resolutions are also learned?”

“You’re completely a child...”

Lady Silver Lily sighed. What did I do wrong? I really don't understand.

“Seeing is believing. I'll show you directly.”

Directly show me?

How?

"Even though you've seen it with your own eyes, you still don't understand."

Lady Silver Lily stood up. The attendants, like kittens around her, stepped back at once. Surrounded by her

attendants, she declared confidently,

“The greatest bitch in the world is the one I love.”

Huh.

Why does it sound so cool?

“Come.”

Lady Silver Lily walked, and I followed. Not just me, but also her attendants. Though I didn't understand why, they carried buckets.

We arrived at the most extravagant residence in the academy. The place where the Crown Prince stayed.

“L-Lady Silver Lily.”

The Crown Prince's attendants greeted us nervously. They seemed overwhelmed. Even though Lady Silver Lily was from a ducal family, they seemed unable to raise their heads before

her.

“Have you eaten?”

“I have.”

“It’s not even dawn yet...”

“Is there nobody there? Somebody help me...”

“Close the door.”

Thud. The door to the bedroom closed. There was not a single servant from the royal family inside, only the expressionless attendants of Lady Silver Lily. The Crown Prince was shivering in bed.

“Eek?!”

“Your Highness, it’s dawn, and you’re still in bed. That’s unacceptable. His Majesty wakes up every day at 4 AM to attend to imperial affairs. How can you, the heir to the throne,

be lazier?”

“Somebody, anybody...”

Lady Silver Lily opened her lips.

“Butler.”

“Yes, yes.”

“I shall impart to you the second lesson.”

The Lady pointed her chin at the white-haired butler.

He then raised another prepared sheet of paper.

+

LESSON 2. (Basic)

If you can't avoid a bitch, enjoy it.

+

“En-enjoy it...?”

“If you’re going to fall in love, you’ll inevitably meet a bitch as your first love. My advice to you is, since that’s going to happen anyway, you might as well enjoy it.”

Lady Silver Lily snapped her fingers.

"And there is only one way to enjoy encounters with bitches."

The white-haired butler skillfully flipped the board.

+

LESSON 2. (Advanced)

Become an even bigger bitch than the other person.

+

Splash!

The attendants lifted buckets and poured water onto the bed. This was why they had brought the buckets all the way here.

“Huh?!”

The Crown Prince, drenched by the sudden deluge, jumped up. His noodle-like hair swelled up.

“---Love with a bitch is war.”

Lady Silver Lily calmly observed the prince.

"If possible, it's better to avoid war. Peace is of the highest value. Is your partner kind? Then be kind. Are they good? Then be good too. But if they're unavoidably a bitch,

remember this."

Lady Silver Lily took out another fan. It was different from the previous one. Astonishingly, this fan too had letters carved on it.

+

Today's motto:

Don't be kind to bitches.

+

Crazy.

"Repeat after me. Don't be kind."

"Do-don't be kind."

"Humans want to appear good to others. Some want to appear smart, others want to appear knowledgeable, and there are those who want to appear kind. From what I see, you belong to the latter category. Restrain yourself."

But the Lady didn't restrain herself at all. Not in the slightest.

"Open the door."

The attendants opened the door. Outside in the corridor, the royal attendants were anxiously waiting.

"What are you doing?"

Lady Silver Lily spoke nonchalantly.

"The Crown Prince is wet. Despite the cool spring weather, I fear his royal health might suffer. Quickly assist him in changing."

"Yo-Your Highness!"

The royal attendants rushed in. They seemed prepared, each holding a towel as if they knew this would happen. It was clear this wasn't the first time Lady Silver Lily had used the water bucket strategy.

"Remember this. This is the equation of love."

Lady Silver Lily slowly walked down the hallway.

"Good-looking people lose to smart ones. Smart ones lose to bitches. Therefore, those who reach the pinnacle of love are beautiful geniuses who are as cunning as bitches. Butler, you must realize this truth and diligently refine yourself."

"Uh..."

I turned around to see the Crown Prince's bedroom still in chaos.

"The love I thought of is quite different. I imagined something more..."

"More romantic?"

"Yes, and..."

"Thought love was about the heart, not the mind?"

"Yes....."

"That's correct too."

Lady Silver Lily tossed her fan. Whoosh. The white-haired butler skillfully caught it and stored it away. We walked and talked on our way to the reception room.

"However, that depends on your fortune. It's not easy to meet someone at first sight and have your heart beat faster. It also depends on the life you've led, which determines whom you'll be attracted to at first sight. Falling in love at first sight, in fact, means seeing at a glance what kind of life the other person has led."

"Such a difficult concept..."

"Difficult indeed."

Her red eyes narrowed.

"If it's too hard, would you like to test it?"

A test.

"What kind of test?"

"Let's test if you can make my heart flutter.."

"How can I make it flutter?"

"Do something impressive."

Impressive.

"What does that mean?"

"Do I have to tell you everything? Should I find and bring you a lover myself? Think and ponder for yourself. Butler,

you're smart, you might just succeed."

"....."

"I'll tell you for free whether it's right or wrong."

We reached the reception room. Despite being in the Crown Prince's residence, Lady Silver Lily walked around as if it were her own bedroom. She dismissed all attendants except me and sat in a chair.

A room with a red carpet.

Eyes the same color as the bottom looked at me quietly.

Hmm.

"Huh..."

I took a deep breath. The breath that entered my throat solidified in my lungs like a hard core. Even though it was just breathing, I decided to treat it as evidence of my resolve.

I took out a card from my pocket.

+

[Prosopagnosia Card]

[What a coincidence? Well-timed secret eavesdropping!
Card]

[Oops! I shouldn't have said that! I accidentally misspoke!
Card]

+

Before entering the Revelation, the Holed-Up Head Librarian gave them to me as gifts, saying they would be my 'mighty army.' Originally, these cards were intended for use in this stage. Lady Silver Lily tilted her head.

".....? What is it?"

"Cards given to me by the Holed-Up Head Librarian."

And...

"According to the Lady, these too would be a kind of 'strategy guide.'"

Ziiiik!

I tore the cards without hesitation.

The torn cards scattered like colorful sand grains, disappearing without a trace.

[The Holed-Up Head Librarian is amazed by your decision.]

Perhaps those cards could have really helped conquer the stage. But showing my sincerity to the human in front of me was more important.

At least, that's what I believed.

[The Holed-Up Head Librarian applauds your intentions.]

Rewards are just rewards.

Shortcuts only matter when they remain shortcuts.

There's no need for me to obsess over rewards or to find meaning in a path that's no longer a shortcut.

".....Wow."

Lady Silver Lily rested her chin and observed me.

"Indeed."

Impressive.

Lady Silver Lily lightly gestured.

"Come here."

I approached.

"Your chin is too high. Bow your head."

I bowed.

Lady Silver Lily whispered in my ear.

"Well done."

She took a vial from her pocket. At first, I didn't understand what it was. But when the lid popped open, I realized. A blue fragrance. Perfume.

Lady Silver Lily took off her glove.

She ran her pinky finger around the bottle's rim and then...

"I should tell you in advance."

She reached for my neck and, swish, dabbed behind my ears.

"I won't take responsibility for you."

Fragrance.

A strong floral scent that made my head dizzy.

"-----."

The scent of white lilies.

For a moment, my head spun.

"Do you like the fragrance?"

Lady Silver Lily held my right hand. I only realized a little later that our fingers were interlocked. The scent was clouding my mind, making time stutter.

"Yes....."

"Do you like it?"

".....Yes."

Lady Silver Lily's red eyes slanted.

"It pleases me too. It's my favorite scent. I love it."

Softly. Her voice crawled up my neck.

"Since you confessed and destroyed your secrets for me, I'm not displeased. Continue to serve me. Tonight, I too will share a secret with you."

My heart was racing.

[Your immersion into the character is intensifying.]

This is serious.

[Your immersion rate is currently 15%.]

I think I'm falling for this person.

Chapter 99: Your Heart (3)

Dazed.

-Zombie, hey, Kim Zombie.

In this world, there's an onomatopoeia "멍" (dazed). It signifies nonsense, as well as a state of being mentally stunned.

Dazed.

-Kim Zombie? Kim Sparrow? Vice-lord? Hey, King of Death, are you listening to me?

I am dazed. There's no distinction between '멍' and me. I am '멍', and '멍' is me.

The only scene coming to my mind right now is singular.

Red carpet. Red eyes. Blue fragrance. Voice. Touch.

-This guy's smitten. Seriously smitten. Those eyes, just like that rascal from the JeGal Clan when he fell for the Ice Palace Lord.

What is love...?

Confucius says, love is a lily flower.

Lady Silver Lily.....

-Sorry, Zombie. This is all my fault. It's a different level. Far too different. Because of me, you've fallen for someone way out of your league.

While staring dazedly, Guardian Spirit was picking his nose. What an absolute worst posture one could adopt while apologizing.

Ah, this guy is not a person, but a ghost...

-But honestly, it's hilarious. Keep going, more.

I muttered dazedly within.

'Suicide...'

-What?

'If I commit suicide, I can experience the same thing as a little while ago, right?'

-You're insane... But at least you haven't lost all your wits to mention suicide regression out loud. That's something, at least. Remember, this is all being broadcast inside the tower...

"Suicide....."

-There go your wits! You crazy guy! Hey, Shiny!

[Shiny leaps up and smacks the head of our hero.]

"Ouch!"

I rolled around the academy's lawn, holding my head.

"I know I'm not in my right mind right now! But I can't help but keep picturing the Lady!"

-Now she's already the 'Lady' to you. This is getting serious...

"Ah, I absolutely must not wash my face today. Even if I do, I mustn't wash behind my ears. The lily scent is still there, don't you think? Want to smell my ear?"

-That's twice...

"That Crown Prince with his noodle-like hair, what did he do in his past life to be loved by the Lady? Argh, damn it. Internet. I need the internet and a computer. Quickly, on every visible post, I must comment 'I want to become like the Crown Prince'..."

-That's three times...

"Ah, love! Sweet poison! Irresistible addiction! My heart!

-I knew it. This guy would be the most annoying in the universe once he falls in love. I saw it coming, yet I advised him, making me truly a terrible person.

"It's not just me!"

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 21%.]

"Look! Even the original butler's immersion rate is rising. It means he's harboring the same feelings as me. What does this mean? The butler is also falling for Lady Silver Lily!"

-Wait. Didn't that butler originally like Goldencup or whatever?

"Ha. You know nothing. Does love have to focus on just one person? Love isn't like that, you know? Love is... well, love is just... love."

-Wow. This guy, not even half a day into his first love, and...

I sprawled out on the grass. There was broad daylight. During academy class hours. Right now, the Heretic Inquisitor, the Crown Prince, and Lady Silver Lily must be in class.

"How can I save Lady Silver Lily? No, save her, what am I saying? Who am I to say such a thing? Just, how can I make the Lady happy?"

-As the one who unleashed your insanity into the world, I feel responsible and will give you advice.

The Guardian Spirit groaned.

-It's not yet time to think about that, young one.

"Then, what should I think about, elder?"

-You need to know more about the other person.

"I know the other person."

-When you're in a relationship, it's important to keep making an impression. It's embarrassing to do so in public, but you're currently her exclusive butler. Even if you do nothing, you have guaranteed time together. You have a geographical advantage.

"Geographical advantage....."

-Yes. So relax and observe her more.

"But..."

-But?

"The world is going to end soon. This world."

-Hmm.

The Guardian Spirit crossed his arms.

-That is indeed a problem.

His tone was subtly different. It seemed like the 'problem' I mentioned and the 'problem' he referred to were different things.

But since the bell rang signaling the end of classes, I couldn't ask why his tone was subtle.

The true nature of the problem was revealed that very night.

It was a night swallowed by clouds, dark as could be.

The candles lit in the dormitory struggled against the darkness to no avail. The Sormewin Academy was submerged in shadows.

"Consider this a reward for the impressive act you showed me."

In such darkness, Lady Silver Lily led the way, holding a lantern.

I carefully followed her, making sure not to step on her shadow.

"I will reveal my secret to you."

"....."

Lady Silver Lily was wearing her nightgown. The loose white dress fluttered with every step, making my heart skip along. Was it because, as Guardian Spirit said, I was primed for insanity? But this feeling was too tender to be just insanity.

"Follow me."

Lady Silver Lily walked on. The night corridors were deserted. I followed, staring intently at her fingers illuminated by the lantern light.

"What are you thinking about?"

Suddenly, Lady Silver Lily spoke.

"Me?"

"What are you thinking? I can feel your gaze. I'm curious."

"....."

"Although temporary, you are my exclusive butler. It would be disloyal to ignore a question from your master. Since I've expressed curiosity, you should rightfully respond."

I hesitated.

"Well, that's..."

"Speak."

"...I thought about holding your hand, Lady."

As soon as I spoke, it felt as if my heart, not my tongue, had leapt out of my mouth. It was the emotion of embarrassment.

Even when I heard the epic of the Hero from Shiny, it wasn't this embarrassing. Truly. My face burned with shame.

"Hmm."

At that moment, something wrapped around my left hand.

It was the hand of Lady Silver Lily.

Skin. Texture. Cool temperature. The moment her slender fingers interlocked with mine, I almost mistook it for my heart being captured. The scent of flowers clouded my mind.

Just from holding hands.

"Lady."

"Have you thought about me all day?"

My tongue was dry.

"Did you long for my touch and scent? Did you fantasize?"

"That's..."

"Answer. If you're not honest, I will let go of your hand."

"Ye-yes, I thought about it."

"Clearly."

My head spun.

"All day, I only thought about you, Lady."

The scent of flowers whispered in my ear.

"Well said. You are my loyal servant."

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 29%.]

Now...

I can't even tell what's what anymore.

I just don't know.

"This, this isn't right."

"What's not right?"

Think.

I must think.

"I am from beyond this world... merely borrowing the body of a butler,"

"And so?"

[The silver-clad heart looks at you.]

"You regard me as a 'human', don't you?"

"I..."

"Was it a lie?"

[The silver-clad heart looks at you.]

"Are you, like the other apostles, considering me merely a 'native' or 'indigenous'? Or, in the terms used by Hamusutra who sent you, a 'Character'?"

[The silver-clad heart,]

"I..."

I barely managed to speak.

"I am... or rather, my original master is Lady Goldencup."

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 30%.]

"As such, I only agreed to serve Lady Silver Lily temporarily for a mission, therefore..."

"That's also an odd thing to say."

Lady Silver Lily looked at me.

"You said you thought only of me today. Doesn't that imply you didn't think about Goldencup?"

"That's..."

"Was it a lie?"

[The silver-clad heart...]

"No, it's not a lie, I..."

My head.

My breath.

"Then, aren't I already your master?"

"That's..."

"Call me your master."

The grip of our interlocked hands tightened slightly.

"Just once is fine. Call me sincerely."

"If you can utter those words, I'll reward you."

A real reward.

"Why, upon hearing that, did my heart sweeten?"

On the brink of speaking,

-Kim Gong-Ja.

A soft call.

[Shiny trembles to bring back the hero's senses.]

A warning from the Sword Constellation.

Both their reactions, this languid addiction I'm feeling now,
I've had this premonition before.

In the basement, when I saw Lady Silver Lily interrogating
the servants, the same sensation.

A feeling of danger.

"Uh-hm?"

Lady Silver Lily turned to look at me, still expressionless, her red eyes observing.

"Why are you hesitating?"

"The reward, do you not want it?"

The reward.

"Just once is enough."

Just once...

Once might be okay. Despite feeling danger, I have the power to turn back time if something goes wrong. Yes... I have that power. So, taking a risk once is justifiable. Even considering it a risk isn't quite right. It's more about gathering information by uttering those words. Like when the traitor appeared among the rankers, and when I first faced the Demon King of Autumn Rain, isn't this situation somewhat similar?

So, it's okay, right? Just uttering it once. If something goes wrong, I can just turn back time. It's just that simple. I have that ability.

Then once, just once, saying such a word...

"But you know I'm the Flame Emperor. So, you should just die."

"King of Death."

"My Lord."

"My dear disciple."

My neck cooled.

"Lord."

My fingertips froze.

"My Lord."

My head...

"My disciple."

Cleared up.

My mind was clear. Thoughts raced as if compensating for the previous standstill.

Am I someone who can easily submit?

Is the weight on my shoulders that light?

No.

I am Preta's Lord

And the Vice-lord of the Demonic Cult.

I have lived to not become like Yoo Soo-Ha.

That's why I didn't accept death as natural and fled across

the snowfields from the Apothecary.

"I'm sorry, Lady."

I placed my palm on the back of Lady Silver Lily's hand. Even if it's just words.

Because it's just words.

"What are you apologizing for?"

"I cannot recognize you as my true master."

I want to learn the joy of love. I'm learning it. But even so, I don't intend to lose [myself] to that extent. At least, I can't form a one-sided relationship with anyone.

"If you truly want my heart, Lady, you must use a different method."

"Speak. I will listen."

"You serve me as your master, and I will serve you in return."

"....."

"I will value your judgment over mine, heed your advice more than my beliefs, and not hold myself most dear. I will follow you. But in return."

I looked into Lady Silver Lily's face. Our hands intertwined, we were very close. Red eyes. I knew they matched the color of the heart.

"Please treat me the same way."

"....."

"If you do something wrong, I will tell you. I will confess my sincere thoughts, views, and feelings to you, without any deceit. But I cannot be in a one-sided relationship. If I give you my heart, how will I breathe? I will suffocate and die. Only if you give me your heart, can I continue to live."

I gripped Lady Silver Lily's hand a bit tighter.

"If you want to see me go crazy, then go crazy for me too."

And then Lady Silver Lily shook off my hand. She stepped back two steps as if struck unexpectedly.

"...Indeed."

Yet her expression remained unbroken.

"You're different from the other simple-minded apostles. I thought you were just an innocent child... Perhaps I rushed too much, considering you're unfamiliar with love."

"You tried to seduce me to become your subordinate?"

"My mistake. I underestimated you."

Lady Silver Lily bit her lip momentarily. Even that face was terrifyingly beautiful. The night corridor. Even the moonlight became a shadow when it shone on her.

"Yes. I am not an easy man."

"Regrettable. It would have been easier for you to give yourself to me completely."

"You said understanding and responsibility are not different. One-sided responsibility is just one-sided understanding. I didn't approach you for that."

I felt my heart race but held back.

"So, what's this secret you said you'd tell me?"

"....."

Lady Silver Lily turned and walked away.

"...My family has an heirloom passed down for generations. A sword with a playful legend attached. A sword that grants any wish you make."

The end of the corridor.

Where even moonlight ceased to flow, a bundle of curtains

lay. Thick red curtains seemed to hide something.

"But there's a condition."

Lady Silver Lily's fingertips grasped the curtain. Whisk, the curtain was drawn. Behind it was a full-length mirror that seemed to belong in a toilet room.

And,

"You must stab your heart with the sword when making a wish."

A sword was embedded in the middle of the mirror.

Lady Silver Lily stood in front of it.

The point where the blade was stuck coincidentally aligned with her heart.

[Shiny senses the presence of its sister sword.]

My waist-bound holy sword trembled.

[Shiny identifies it as the third sister sword of the holy swords.]

Drip, drop.

Blood dripped from the mirror with the sword. The curtain that had been covering the mirror wasn't originally red. It was dyed red from the blood flowing from the mirror's heart.

[It's called the Sword of Prayer.]

"Before I became a returner. The Crown Prince was betrothed to Lady Goldencup. I was so heartbroken, I leaned on the family sword and made a wish."

"What wish...?"

Lady Silver Lily's lips moved.

-Please let my love last forever.

"And then, my life became eternal."

"I can't die. My feelings for the Crown Prince remain unchanged. Since that day, my heart has been stuck."

Lady Silver Lily grabbed my hand.

She pulled it towards her chest.

Where the heart should be. Where it should beat.

"Do you want my heart?"

But...

There was no heartbeat.

"Sorry."

Lady Silver Lily spoke.

"I have no heart to give you."

[The silver-clad heart looks at you.]

And from the mirror, the blood that flowed began to form a small figure.

Although smaller, it resembled the being that killed the Paladin and the Countess in a previous round.

A demon's shape.

Why the blood from the mirror formed such a thing, whether it was summoned or created, I did not know.

"Come."

But Lady Silver Lily confidently wielded the sword.

"Help me."

The sword was aimed at the little demon.

"It's time to take care of today's task."

Volume 5 – Chapters 100-125

Chapter 100:

Drama (1)

Blood flowed from the mirror, engulfing everything around.

Initially, only a few drops fell, like a tap not fully closed. But then, ding... ding... as the distant grandfather clock chimed, the flow of blood changed dramatically. Blood gushed uncontrollably from the cracks of the mirror.

Ding...

Midnight. Twelve chimes.

A single drop turned into a stream.

One stream split into six.

The corridor was covered in blood.

A sea of red.

The last bell tolled from the grandfather clock.

We stood in the middle of a carpet made of blood.

"Lady."

Instinctively, I wrapped my arms around Lady Silver Lily. Our ankles were submerged in the blood puddle. It felt slimy, an ominous sensation.

"This is..."

"My nightmare."

Lady Silver Lily whispered from my embrace.

"Don't let your guard down. Butler. This place is no different from another realm. Others do not know or see what happens here."

Burble!

Bubbles surged from the sea of blood.

Thousands of bubbles formed and burst.

However, some formed complete shapes instead of vanishing like bubbles.

[The silver-clad heart manifests itself.]

They were demons resembling lips. No, they were lips themselves. No face, no body, just red lips and tongues.

They snickered wickedly.

-Crown Prince.

-I despise you.

The blood bubbles' lips kept forming and bursting, their murmurs barely coherent, abruptly cut off. A discordant chorus.

-Gentle Crown Prince.

-When you were not yet a prince, you picked flowers for me.

-You wiped my tears with your sleeve. You're a good person.

-Kind-hearted, that's why.

-Even so,

Snap!

Lady Silver Lily thrust her rapier through a blood bubble's lips. The demon burst. But twice, thrice as many tongues surged from the blood sea.

The demons' laughter echoed in red.

-Lovely.

I swung my sword too.

-What's the point of loving someone born privileged?

The demons were weak in combat. They didn't resist us.
They meekly accepted the blade.

It's just that...

-Flawed, but...

-Embracing and guiding a flawed person is true love.

It was irritating.

It wasn't a physical attack, but a mental one.

-I love you, Your Highness.

-I too know how to love.

-I'm a noble in love.

I bit my lip. It was unpleasant. I slashed the blood bubbles faster.

-Will you kill me?

-Useless. Tragedy becomes sweeter the more it's trampled.

-Did you see Lady Goldencup flirting with the Crown Prince?

-Disgusting.

The blood sea laughed as it surged.

-The Prince is so naive, still dreaming of a romantic life. He doesn't love Goldencup. He just uses her as an escape from the throne.

-Pitiful Prince.

-Poor Prince.

Damn.

I've witnessed a similar phenomenon before.

'Demon King of the Autumn Rain!'

Before being taken in as Preta. Back then, the constellation was like this. The Demon King poured blood from the sky, freely summoning monster legions.

This is the power of a constellation.

These demons are Lady Silver Lily's familiars.

[The silver-clad heart's existence becomes better defined.]

Something other than lips emerged from the blood sea.

Hands.

Like a bride and groom at a wedding, two hands clasped each other.

-Raviel. Our families arranged our engagement.

-An engagement?

-Yes. But I don't want a political marriage.

The demons' hands intertwined.

-Disregard the engagement our parents arranged. Regardless of them, I will love you. I've come to formally propose to you today.

-Prince.

-Raviel. Once we're a bit older, will you marry me?

Dozens of lips surrounded us.

Simultaneously, they responded.

-Yes.

-I will definitely love you.

-I too will love you, Prince.

Such a bitch.

To say such things and not take responsibility?

-Probably the Prince has forgotten.

-A childhood promise.

-Can't be helped.

-People easily forget.

The lips of the blood bubbles laughed.

-Can't be helped!

I couldn't take it anymore.

I was boiling with anger.

Squelch! I stepped forward, concentrating aura in my forefoot.

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Eighth Form.

Sword of Scorching Death.

As the blood wave spread, my aura expanded too.

I incinerated the blood sea covering the corridor with my aura.

-Oh.

Behind me, the Sword Emperor commented.

-Not even a challenge with these small fries anymore? You've grown a lot, my dear scrub.

Normally, I would have responded to his teasing. But not in the mood now. I swept the corridor. The demons burned up, vanishing without even a scream. Instead, they laughed to the end, infuriating me.

"Damn it."

I burned the demons in one strike, but my insides still boiled.

Anger and contempt for the Crown Prince.

That someone noble like Lady Silver Lily was hurt because of such a man, turning her wish into an eternal curse. That infuriated me.

"Since when...!"

I inhaled sharply, steadying my voice. I didn't want to raise my voice to Lady Silver Lily, no matter how angry I was.

"...Since when did you become a constellation? These are constellation's familiars. You created them, didn't you?"

That's why they recognized us as allies and didn't resist.

Lady Silver Lily nodded as if she knew this.

"It happened the moment I plunged the sword into my heart."

Gradually, the blood began returning to the mirror.

Squirming and squelching, the streams of blood crept back into the mirror's cracks.

Reversal. Lady Silver Lily watched the leech-like squirming blood droplets with a calm gaze.

"It seems this world originally had no constellations. Whether they were killed or never existed in the first place, it's hard to tell."

Probably Leafanta Aegim killed the constellations. But now is not the time to discuss that. I listened carefully to Lady Silver Lily's words.

"As time passed, the demons became stronger and their numbers vast. Their forms also grew larger. Controlling them as now becomes difficult. And on the tenth day..."

On the tenth day.

There, Lady Silver Lily paused, then shook her head slightly before continuing.

"...Anyway, as the tenth day kept repeating, I inadvertently

became the 'Representative of the World.' Whether I wanted it or not, the world's clock revolves around me."

-Hmm.

The Sword Emperor stroked his chin.

-It's not a normal ascension. In terms of martial arts, it's not the orthodox path but the unorthodox. That sword stuck in the mirror, though just a fragmented relic, was once a relic of the 'Goddess of Protection.'

Sword Emperor muttered to himself,

-Sticking such a thing in your heart, you'll ascend to a constellation, albeit reluctantly... Especially if you keep returning, it's a karma that a human body can't handle. A half-baked constellation, but still, a result of many coincidences.

'Can one become a constellation against their will?'

-Yeah. Did you choose to be born a human, zombie?

Really, this man's way of speaking...

-It's about conditions, not will. There are many who suffer as humans and as constellations. It's easy to make life miserable. Understand, Vice-lord of the Demonic Cult?

"Huh..."

I suppressed the anger towards the Crown Prince within me. The suppressed anger left a bitter taste in my mouth.

Lady Silver Lily observed me.

"Strange. Aren't you disappointed in this ugly side of me?"

"Disappointed?"

I let out a breath involuntarily. It wasn't a sigh. It was a breath filtering my anger.

"Ugly? If there's one thing I know for sure, it's that you're not ugly, Lady. Truly ugly people, you see, never show their

hearts to others. Always pretending to be calm and composed, only knowing how to hurt others."

Flame Emperor, the bastard.

"Rather, I'm worse. If you knew what I think inside, you'd be disgusted, wouldn't you?"

"I'm curious now."

"If you brought me here to drive me away, you thought wrong. Lady, I didn't start to love you because you're an untarnished person."

Lady Silver Lily hesitated for a moment at the word 'love.' I too felt my face burning, but I didn't hesitate to speak.

"I've only started to adore you today. How eloquent."

"Is it a problem because it's only been a day? Will it be okay if I love you for a year? After 1000 days? Should I come back then?"

"..."

"I can see what you despise and loathe. What you're hurt and pained by. I love how you live your life. Because we're living the same life."

Did my words reach her? Did I express myself correctly?

I don't know.

I've never said such things to anyone else. It's unfamiliar. But, I want the person in front of me. Lady Silver Lily wants me. I want us to share a life together.

"I like you as much as I like myself. I hope you'll come to love me as much as you love yourself."

That's my sincerity.

And I only know how to give my all to my sincerity.

"I'll definitely make you love me. I won't tell you to abandon

the Crown Prince. Even without me saying, you'll eventually leave him."

"My heart..."

"Yes, whether your heart is mortgaged to the world doesn't matter. If that's the problem, I'll solve it. But if you still love the Crown Prince, I'll become an overwhelmingly better person than him and linger in front of you."

"..."

"Did the Crown Prince give you unforgettable memories in childhood? That doesn't matter either."

I whispered into Lady Silver Lily's ear.

"We're both returners. The only two in this world."

I knew my face was red. But I said what I needed to say.

"There will be plenty of time only you and I can enjoy in this

world. During that time, I'll gift you memories so breathtaking that they'll outshine the Crown Prince's. I'll try my best."

"Hmm."

The corners of Lady Silver Lily's eyes rose.

"Planning to infinitely repeat the last ten days? You'll wear out and collapse."

"I'm not threatened. It's not my first time repeating the same days."

"What if I get tired of you and ask you to disappear from my sight?"

"I'll disappear, but..."

I moved my hand. Moving it, I caught the fingertips of Lady Silver Lily, who had lost her lantern during the fight with the demons. It required courage. A lot. Fortunately, I had enough courage.

"There won't be such a thing in the first place."

"Why?"

"Because you haven't grown weary of the Crown Prince, and I am a better person than him. If I'm troublesome, please tell me now. I'll disappear."

Silence.

Lady Silver Lily looked at my face.

"...How troublesome."

The Lady's lips parted.

"I should find you bothersome, but right now, I don't. I don't seem likely to easily get annoyed."

That moment.

"...ler! ..."

A voice echoed from afar down the corridor. It was urgent. Lady Silver Lily's quarters, silent with all the servants asleep, suddenly became noisy.

"...Where...! But...!"

Soon, footsteps thundered. The servants had woken up. Lights lit up here and there, and shortly after, one of the half-white servants rushed to us.

"I apologize, Miss."

Lady Silver Lily released my hand.

"What's this commotion at such a late hour?"

"I regret to report..."

Then, a voice, clearer than before, reached us.

"Butler! Where are you, Butler!"

My face hardened.

All too familiar a voice.

The half-white servant bowed to us.

"Baroness Goldencup is causing a commotion."

Chapter 101: Drama (2)

The moon was slightly reddish, tainted with sand.

The sky turns red when dust clouds it, and people turn red when they bleed. This coincidental similarity made me uneasy.

'It's as if the moon is bleeding.'

I walked, dragging my uneasy mind like a shadow.

From a distance, the chatter and murmuring of the servants were audible.

"You mustn't do this here, Lady!"

"This is the Ivansia Duke's residence!"

"Even if you are favored by the Crown Prince, at this hour..."

Lady Silver Lily, walking with me, muttered,

"There's no uninvited guest like her."

Her tone conveyed disdain for the Heretic Inquisitor, no, for Goldencup.

"Looking at the time she barged in, it's clear she didn't come to have tea with me. Butler, was this visit scheduled?"

"No."

I was also surprised. Wasn't it past midnight already? There was no reason for the Heretic Inquisitor to meet Lady Silver Lily at this hour.

Just the day before, we had talked.

'I'll work as the exclusive butler of Lady Silver Lily for a while,' I said. 'To gather information about her and to conquer

this stage,' I added.

"Hmm."

The Heretic Inquisitor showed a brief, subtle expression.

Nevertheless, she beamed as usual.

"Yes! It's unavoidable for the mission."

"I'm fine with it. Go, King of Death!"

That's how we agreed.

We had an agreement.

"Bring my butler here!"

As we walked, her voice grew closer.

"Butler! I know you're here!"

The residence's garden.

The dark night sky couldn't completely hide the spring lingering in the flower garden. The white magnolias drooped, burdened by the weight of spring they bore. The moon was red. The moonlight reflecting off the magnolia leaves tinged red, making it seem as if red magnolias were in full bloom.

"Ah!"

A magnolia leaf fell.

"You were here after all! Butler!"

The Heretic Inquisitor pushed past the gate guards. Unable to roughhouse the Baroness, the guards hesitated.

During their hesitation, the Heretic Inquisitor, with her skirt hem rolled up, strode into the garden. Crunch. The earlier fallen red magnolia was trampled under the Heretic Inquisitor's shoe.

"I was worried because you hadn't returned despite the late hour."

"....."

"Really. Making your master worry and causing her to visit, isn't that a failure as a butler?"

My anxiety peaked the moment I saw the Heretic Inquisitor.

Hair.

The Heretic Inquisitor's blonde hair, illuminated by the moonlight, had grown longer than yesterday.

"Miss...."

"Not only your hair. Face. Appearance. Although traces of the Heretic Inquisitor remain, something about you feels unfamiliar."

'Did she use Holy Technique to change her appearance?'

Why?

"Anyway, you shouldn't be here. Even the flower garden seems poisonous. Come, butler. Let's go back together."

"Such impudence."

Lady Silver Lily stepped forward to block the Heretic Inquisitor's approach.

"How dare you make such a racket at night, deserving punishment just for that. Do you know where you are? How dare you raise your voice here. Kneel down and confess your mistake right away."

"Is that so? Will you whip my shins with a cane?"

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled slyly.

"If you're going to whip, do it hard and properly, Lady. If I show the Crown Prince the scars on my shins, I wonder what would happen. It will be another memory for the Crown Prince and me."

"How outrageous...!"

The Ivansia's servants shivered. Officially, Lady Silver Lily was the Crown Prince's fiancée. The Baroness was talking about her shins and memories in front of his fiancée. The servants glared at the Heretic Inquisitor with reddened faces.

Lady Silver Lily muttered softly,

"Is that so?"

The servants flinched at her voice.

I felt a chill in my heart for a moment.

"So it shall be."

Her voice was icy cold.

"You want to create school memories. How nice. After all, at the Baroness's age, even rolling in mud is romanticized. Since you desire sweet memories, I, as a noble of the empire, will

assist you."

Lady Silver Lily raised her left hand.

"Bring the cane."

The servants trembled.

"Yo-Young Duke....."

"I told you not to address me that way here."

"If the Crown Prince learns of this..."

"Do you think I'll let this disturbance go unpunished? If I let her go, the name of our family will be tarnished. The law takes precedence over everything, and the Crown Prince himself must uphold it."

The servants swallowed, not quite convinced. 'But still,' their silent protest said, 'the Crown Prince isn't that kind of person.'

No one dared to voice their objection.

"My left hand is still empty."

Lady Silver Lily's voice flowed.

"Bring the cane. I won't repeat the same order twice."

The servants scurried across the path lined with fallen red magnolias to fetch the cane from the residence.

All heads were bowed, as if they feared their faces being illuminated by the moonlight. Only two people, Lady Silver Lily and the Heretic Inquisitor, stood with their heads held high.

"Lady."

I had no choice but to approach the Heretic Inquisitor.

"What's going on? Why are you here at this time?"

"I've come to take back what's mine. You're making me state the obvious."

The Heretic Inquisitor beamed.

"I waited all morning, but the butler didn't return. At first, I thought something urgent came up, but then I faintly heard that the butler was with the Lady. "

The Heretic Inquisitor tapped her cheek.

"I realized immediately. The Lady must have blackmailed the butler by exploiting his weakness. Poor butler, being tossed around because of the Crown Prince and me..."

"....."

I couldn't understand.

What was she talking about?

"Don't worry."

The Heretic Inquisitor's smile remained bright.

"I won't let the Lady take anything from me anymore. Whether it's the Crown Prince's affection or the butler's loyalty. A cane? Whip as much as you want. I'll save the butler. After all, the one who will be hurt by the whipping is the Lady."

"No... I'm sorry, excuse me for a moment."

I moved closer to the Heretic Inquisitor, ensuring our conversation couldn't be overheard by those around. Fortunately, no one tried to stop me.

"Lady."

"Yes."

I swallowed and whispered to the Heretic Inquisitor.

"Heretic Inquisitor."

Silence.

"Yes?"

My heart raced.

My lips were dry. My tongue wouldn't move. It was so hard to twist words into a sentence, to weave them into a line. Slowly, I opened my mouth.

"When spring comes."

"Yes?"

My heart.

"Heretic Inquisitor..."

"What are you talking about, Butler?"

"I'll be really angry if this is a joke like last time. I'm serious. I'm asking seriously, so please answer me properly. What is your immersion rate now?"

The Heretic Inquisitor blinked.

"Huh? Butler, you seem to be joking. Are you reminiscing about the past? Or did you become a bit strange after spending the day with the Lady? Butler, really. I'll understand with gentle leniency."

"When spring comes..."

"It has already."

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled.

"Spring is here, Butler."

No.

"What a beautiful season, isn't it?"

Goldencup smiled.

"We have brought the item you ordered..."

The servants who had dispersed to the residence returned. They bowed their heads and presented the cane to Lady Silver Lily.

It was slender.

I guessed they had frantically searched for the slenderest cane in the mansion. Perhaps that was the extent of the servants' loyalty they could offer to their master.

"Come back again."

However, Lady Silver Lily was ruthless. The servants flinched as they moved away.

"Come back again."

The command was repeated four times. With each

repetition, the thickness of the cane increased. The servant, biting his lip, brought the fourth cane, and Lady Silver Lily grasped it in her left hand.

"Baroness Goldencup."

"Call me by my name, Lady."

"Silvia Evanair."

"Yes, Raviel Ivansia."

The moon and sun faced each other.

"You have recklessly invaded Ivansia's territory and caused a disturbance. You have not uttered a word of apology. In the empire, where there is a clear hierarchy, your insolence is appalling. In the name of the title granted by His Majesty, I will punish you."

"A crime? I know my crime best."

Goldencup smiled brightly.

"My crime is being favored by the Crown Prince despite my humble origin from a peripheral baron family."

That was not something to be said to the Crown Prince's fiancée.

"I apologize for being loved."

Goldencup lightly grasped her skirt. A single goldencup descended into the magnolia-filled garden, bowing to the lily in front of her.

Her manners were perfect.

"I apologize for being loved more than Raviel Ivansia."

"....."

"Is that a sufficient apology?"

The wind blew.

"But, Raviel Ivansia, I wonder. Is this really my crime? Love only has meaning when it is reciprocated. Am I solely responsible for the divide between the lover and the beloved? Maybe..."

Goldencup didn't finish her next words. Instead, she let out a laugh. A petal fell from a black branch.

Lady Silver Lily quietly raised her left hand.

"Despicable thing."

The night air was cut by the cane.

"-----."

Goldencup didn't scream or moan. She stood upright. Even the smile carved on Goldencup's face remained unshaken.

She, he, was certain of victory.

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

That's why the moon seemed to bleed to me.

[Your immersion rate is currently 40%.]

That day, the moon was slightly reddish, tainted with sand.

When the moon was buried in dust in the sky, it turned red, and when humans bled on the ground, they turned red. Cough, the air was acrid, and Lady Silver Lily coughed. It was a dry cough.

No one said a word.

Only the sound of coughing and the cane echoed in the night garden.

"Silvia!"

A torch flickered.

"Silvia! Are you there, Silvia!"

Footsteps broke the silence. Beyond the gate. The Crown Prince rushed in, holding a torch himself. The guards scurried around, attending to the Prince. Such a commotion couldn't have escaped the Crown Prince.

"Sil..."

The Crown Prince stopped at the gate.

"....."

He looked at the garden and fell silent for a moment.

"Raviel...!!"

He called Lady Silver Lily with a different tone than when he called Goldencup.

"Out of the way!"

The Crown Prince pushed past the Ivansia's guards. No one there could stop the sovereign's movement. The Prince immediately rushed to Goldencup's side.

"How could you... Even so... How could you...!"

"I'm fine, Your Highness."

"I'm not fine! Foolishly...!"

The Crown Prince checked on Goldencup.

Then turned his head to glare at Lady Silver Lily.

"Vicious woman!"

Words become wounds.

"How could you treat Silvia so harshly!"

Those who inflict wounds without seeing them don't know they've done so.

"The laws of the empire. Your Highness."

"Is the law more important than a person!"

"They're more important than an individual."

"That's why you're harsh! Witch-like!"

Perhaps the world is divided between those who know and those who don't, and the Crown Prince was among the latter.

Lady Silver Lily coughed and breathed.

"Will you punish me?"

"....."

The Crown Prince's face contorted. Just contorted. Despite shaking his head as if it wasn't worth answering, it was just an escape.

The Prince lacked the courage and ability to face or take responsibility for Lady Silver Lily.

"Let's go, Silvia!

You shouldn't be here."

"Ah."

The Crown Prince picked up Goldencup.

As she was held in the Prince's arms, Goldencup looked at me.

"Butler."

The Heretic Inquisitor.

"Butler, come with me too."

"....."

I didn't respond.

Looking at him, I murmured in my mind like a prayer.

'Character Window.'

Chararuk.

Letters bloomed before my eyes.

+

Name: Silvia Evanair

Favorability: 90

Preferred Genres: [Romance]

Disliked Genres: [Political Drama]

Preferred Characters: [Those who love me], [Crown Prince], [Butler], [Teacher], [Senior], [Junior], [Classmate]

Disliked Characters: [Raviel Ivansia]

Preferred Plots: [Victory of the Strong], [True Love]

Disliked Plots: [Defeat of the Weak], [Betrayal]

Psychological State: 'Raviel Ivansia. I will leave you nothing.'

+

The name Heretic Inquisitor wasn't there.

The words [Fairy Tales] that were displayed in the preferred

genre section and the word [Humans] displayed in the preferred character section were no longer visible.

"Butler?"

The Heretic Inquisitor had been consumed by the role of Goldencup.

"Will you come with me?"

And I sensed the end of this round.

Chapter 102:

Drama (3)

"I will..."

I tried not to stutter as I spoke.

"I plan to stay by Lady Silver Lily's side for a while."

Silence.

"...That is truly incomprehensible."

Lady Goldencup's eyes, raised at the corners, froze. Was it because her emotions had frozen? Even the Crown Prince felt the chill in her voice and stopped in his tracks.

"I have requested your company to come with me. Butler. Although it's not my preference to boast of wounds, I even

endured some humiliation to free you from under the Lady's control."

"Yes, I'm aware."

"And yet you reject my request?"

A bitter taste rose in my mouth.

It's hard to tell if this is my conflicted feeling of losing the Heretic Inquisitor or the rebellious spirit of a butler who's refusing his original master's request. Either way, it's painful to look into those blue eyes, now belonging to Goldencup.

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 42%.]

So I averted my gaze, bowing my head.

"I'm sorry."

"....."

"I still have things to do."

"A convenient excuse. Could it be that the Butler is simply enchanted by the Lady?"

I remained silent. "Ha," Goldencup laughed mockingly, not at me but at Lady Silver Lily.

"Understood, Lady. I don't know what grand scheme you might be plotting this time, but our friendship, between me and the Butler, will not waver. Please take good care of my Butler."

"Keep staying in your delusions. Get out of my sight, Baroness."

"Yes, I will leave."

Lady Goldencup, still in the Prince's arms, reached out her hand. She caressed the Prince's cheek, whispering, but loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Would you like to leave with me, Your Highness?"

"Ah. Aaah."

The Crown Prince blushed.

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 43%.]

The two left with the guards.

The disturbance past midnight thus came to an end.

The garden quickly became tranquil.

"Lady..."

The servants sadly worried about their master. Though the

Ivansia's had initiated the expulsion, the atmosphere seemed as if they were the ones expelled.

"It's late."

Lady Silver Lily spoke.

"You've worked hard. You may go in now."

"What will you do, my Lady?"

"I'll watch the flowers here for a while. I wish to be alone, so everyone leave."

Lady Silver Lily, in her nightwear, gazed up at the night sky. She blended into the darkness as if born from the night. The servants, unable to disobey their master, returned to the residence.

"Lady."

Only I remained to approach her.

-Zombie. Look at her now! She's weakened! Can't you see the pitiful atmosphere? She looks emotionless, but she's vulnerable. Good for us! Crisis is an opportunity! The goalie's gone. It's already hard enough to romance a high-level player, so go for it now.

'Be quiet.'

The ghost was consistent, consistently failing to read the mood.

"You should rest too, Butler."

"I'm fine even if I stay up all night. Aren't you the one who's tired, Lady?"

"I want to deny it but... Yes, a bit."

Lady Silver Lily sighed.

"It's already the 14th time. For 140 days, I've tried to correct the Crown Prince. Even if I accept that my love won't be fulfilled, the Prince will ascend to the throne. If I don't at least hold him back, the country's safety will be in jeopardy... It's

hard."

"You're not alone anymore."

"There's more than one returner in the world." I said that meaningfully.

"I'm here. Just having one person who understands you by your side, a person can endure anything."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, surprisingly."

Lady Silver Lily turned her gaze from the night sky to me.

"You're making one mistake."

A mistake?

"I repeat the final ten days. You return to a day before when you die. It seems like we're sharing the same cycle of return, but in reality, we aren't."

I let her continue. Our conversation was probably being broadcast to the people in the tower.

Even so, it's okay.

I've already decided to go to the next round.

"Butler, one of us will [return first]."

Lady Silver Lily bent down.

"If I return first, you will forget the current life. If you return first, conversely, I forget. Someone's time is consumed by the other."

Swoosh, swoosh.

She drew parallel lines in the dirt with the cane.

"We are parallel lines that will never meet."

My heart twinged.

"I can understand you. You can understand me. But that's it. We can't live together. You can't take responsibility for me, and I can't take responsibility for you."

Lady Silver Lily's voice was calm.

"Your confession about wanting to share the same time as me was passionate and beautiful. But it can't become reality. Perhaps that's why it sounded more beautiful."

"What if it could happen?"

I looked straight into Lady Silver Lily's eyes.

"If? There's no if."

"I keep my word. Always. I didn't propose using things I can't do just to win over your heart. I'm not the type to inflate

empty words like a balloon to attract people."

"....."

"If I can help you escape these eternal ten days, will you do it?"

The nightjar cried out.

"...How presumptuous. I am enough for my life."

"You might think so. So do I. But I want to help you. Is it arrogant to want to help the person I love? Then I'll gladly be arrogant."

Lady Silver Lily closed her lips. She, too, in her own way, was trying to help the Crown Prince. Whether she admits it or not, we are similar.

"What do you want from me?"

"Be with me until this world ends."

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

After seeing the Heretic Inquisitor reach 100% immersion, I realized the trick to breaking this stage. It's a bit unconventional and tricky, but... it might be possible.

As long as I keep my wits about me.

"And if you could, make me like you more. If I could be so enchanted by the Lady that I can't escape, that would be perfect."

"You're asking me to do that?"

"It's fine. I'm an easy man. Just holding hands with the Lady makes my heart race."

Lady Silver Lily looked at me as if I were shameless.

"Bold... Fine. I did say I'd teach you love, so I should be

responsible for that."

Lady Silver Lily took my hand. It was soft. Her bare hand wrapped around my right hand. I remembered her applying perfume last night, and my heart fluttered.

"Is this enough?"

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 44%.]

My face heated up.

"Yes. E-enough."

"My, I might have been charmed, but you seem a bit too naive. How did you survive in this harsh world?"

"I died. A lot."

"....."

"Does showing such a weak side make the Lady's heart flutter a bit? I read in a magazine once that sometimes acting weak works wonders."

"Ha."

Lady Silver Lily scoffed. Though her eyes did not smile, the laughter was still laughter. She must have been quite upset due to the Crown Prince's folly. If it lightened her mood even a little, I was glad.

"Are you picking a fight with a child who's barely known love for a day?"

"Seeing Lady Goldencup fight earlier, I realized something. The Lady is wise, but if provoked, you never back down. Is it pride? Even at your own loss, you crush provocations. So, I wanted to provoke you too."

"...Quite astute."

"Should I provoke a bit more?"

"Try it. If you dare."

We were close to each other.

We became closer.

Our shadows overlapped.

Neither of us intended to back down.

"Lady, you speak of yourself as a master of love, but is that really the case? Isn't it just as important to be loved as it is to love? Loving the Crown Prince and drawing his love are both crucial. However, you failed the latter."

"Hmm."

"In that sense, maybe Baroness Goldencup understands love better than you. After all, she's receiving love from the Crown Prince. If it's about who excels in love, surprisingly, Goldencup might be the superior one."

"Oh?"

"You know how to love, Lady. But you don't know how to be loved. At least not better than Lady Goldencup. So..."

Then.

"So?"

Lady Silver Lily's hand gripped my chin.

"....."

"Keep talking. Your voice isn't unpleasant to hear."

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 45%.]

"...So, it's natural that Lady Goldencup could snatch the

Crown Prince from you. You should have more carefully understood the Prince's tastes and preferences."

"Your teeth are really white."

".....Yes. But you didn't do that. You were complacent. That's why Lady Goldencup has become so rampant, partly due to your responsibility."

"Your tongue is red and pretty."

Lady Silver Lily pulled my chin closer.

Her gaze lingered inside my mouth.

"Why did you stop talking? If you close your lips, I can't see your tongue. It's interesting to watch. Keep talking."

".....,"

"Are you surrendering?"

"Yes....."

"[It would be perfect if I get so entangled with the Lady that I can't escape.]"

Those were my words just moments ago.

"Choosing only the most terrifying words to say. How fearless you are. I'm not sure what brilliant plan you've come up with, but you really are bold."

Lady Silver Lily pulled my chin even closer.

I felt like I was being drawn in, as if I had lost gravity.

"14 rounds have passed, so maybe I should experience some deviation too."

"That means...?"

"An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth."

Lady Silver Lily's index finger brushed my lower lip.

"Starting today, I'll have an affair with you."

"....."

Uh.

"Do you love me?"

"No."

"Do you have even a slight intention of dating me?"

"No."

"Then why..."

"But you are Goldencup's cherished butler. Using her words, the only butler and childhood friend. If she hears that you're

dating me, I wonder what face Goldencup will make. The Crown Prince will surely be startled too."

In other words.

"You're pretending to date me just to spite them...?"

"Why?"

Her breath came closer.

"Is that disagreeable?"

I couldn't respond. My heart pounded madly, my thoughts scattering. My love, my first love. The pounding. To do it this way. Romance should be more. Something more romantic.

"Sit."

I carefully sat down in the garden. The moon was hidden by clouds, casting darkness. It felt like kneeling in a bottomless swamp.

Lady Silver Lily and I exchanged gazes.

"I'll give you a choice."

Lady Silver Lily looked down at me.

"If you dislike my offer, close your eyes tightly. I'll quietly disappear before you open them. But if you accept my proposal to pretend to be lovers, if you want to play this act until this life ends---"

The red moon in the night sky was obscured.

More crimson than the moon, her eyes were right before me.

"Say my name."

Her name.

I...

"Raviel...."

Wait.

"Raviel Ivansia."

Why are my lips opening?

"Yes. Do you remember the first lesson I gave when I said I'd teach you love?"

"Love begins by experiencing being a scoundrel..."

"Well remembered."

Lady Silver Lily's hands covered my cheeks.

And.

"I'll be your first scoundrel."

The moon was swallowed by darkness.

"....."

The scent of lilies.

Soft and sweet.

A deadly, intoxicating fragrance.

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 50%.]

Breathless.

Beautiful.

-Both are crazy and fit each other well. After all, how could you possibly date a normal person? Birds of a feather flock

together, an eternal truth. The voice of the ghost echoed from afar.

-Congratulations on Day 1 of your relationship, little bird.

Magnolia leaves fell around us.

-Even though it's just an affair.

Chapter 103: His Way of Loving (1)

In the white dawn, I woke up and washed my face. Now quite accustomed to the black butler's attire, I slowly stood in front of the mirror.

There, I still saw [myself].

"Hmm."

Once, Black Dragon Witch mentioned I had [a slightly sly impression].

The man in the mirror slowly opened his lips.

"Raviel."

Thump.

"Raviel Ivansia."

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 62%.]

I merely murmured my beloved's name. Yet my heart raced, breath quickened, and the man in the mirror's face slightly reddened. Even to myself, my expression was easy to read.

".....I really am in love."

It was surprising.

Amazed at my own emotions, I proceeded with the next task.

"Status Window."

Words slowly emerged before my eyes.

+

Name: King of Death

Rank: D

Skills (6/6)

1. I Want to Become Just Like You (S+)

2. Returner's Winding Clock (EX)

3. Sword Constellation (A+)

4. Goblin High Society (F)

5. Ghoul Reincarnation (SSS)

6. Demonic Heavenly God Art (A+)

*You have a Blessing from the God of Beauty.

*You have a Blessing from the Goddess of Death.

+

There lay the path I had traversed, the one I had passed by.

My jealousy. My secret. My fate. My humor. My will. Even my happiness.

The life of [Kim Gong-Ja] is expressed so plainly.

"....."

I took a deep breath.

"Character Window."

Then, letters I had never seen before were etched before my

eyes.

+

Name: Kim Gong-Ja

Favorability: 90

Preferred Genres: [Martial Arts], [Romance], [Mystery], [Adventure]

Disliked Genres: None

Preferred Characters: [Master], [Lover], [Noble Hero], [Victim], [Hard Worker], [Child], [Sage], [One Who Doubts Themselves], [One Who Treats Others Well], [One Who Recognizes Me]

Disliked Characters: [Psychopath]

Preferred Plots: [Poetic Justice], [Friendship], [Love]

Disliked Plots: [Self-Loathing], [Giving Up], [Running Away],
[Forgetfulness], [Distrust], [Monopoly]

Psychological State: 'I wonder how I show up.'

+

I swallowed hard.

"Okay."

I'm still Kim Gong-Ja. I haven't been consumed by a role like
the Heretic Inquisitor. My plan should proceed smoothly.

Definitely.

"Sword Emperor."

-Huh?

The ghost, invisible in the mirror, responded.

"If I ever get buried in the role of a butler, I have a favor to ask of you."

-What is it?

"If my immersion rate reaches 100%, I might not even hear your voice. I might forget how to use my skills. No matter what, you must prevent me from exceeding 99% immersion. That's the absolute limit. If I ever seem to go beyond 99%, by any means necessary, stop me."

-Huh.

The ghost chuckled.

-You worry too much. Someone as prideful and egoistic as you reaching 99%? Unlikely.

"Yes, I will."

I adjusted my outfit one last time.

A perfect butler's appearance was reflected in the mirror.

"Because I intend to raise it that high myself."

-What?

The ghost was startled.

-Why? You'll fail the stage and get trapped in this world.

"I can't tell you now. In fact, no one else should know. I'm going to exploit a loophole in the Tower's system to conquer this stage."

The Tower is still watching us.

If it learns what my strategy is, it might quickly patch the loophole. That can't happen.

While the Tower still has a systemic error, an overlooked flaw, now is my chance. I must quickly clear [Tales of the Sormewin Academy].

"If I'm in danger, help me."

"I trust you. The one who promised to be my master."

And then I realized Black Dragon Witch was right.

The man in the mirror was grinning slyly.

"Then I shall go to help my beloved."

Though Lady Silver Lily and I became a couple, sadly, we couldn't enjoy outdoor dates. She ended up confined to her bed.

Lady Silver Lily was always frail. Weak to sunlight. Even in my memories as a [butler], she missed more days at the Academy than she attended.

And yet, she stayed up and overworked for the past few nights, so collapsing was inevitable.

"Don't worry. It's been like this since the first regression."

Lying in bed, Lady Silver Lily spoke.

"To be more precise, since birth. I could hardly ever go outside, spending most of my time in the mansion. After embedding the sword in the mirror and losing my heart, my condition worsened."

"....."

"Here's Hot tea. Please drink."

I handed her the prepared tea. Lady Silver Lily said, "Thank you," and took a sip. Her eyebrows raised slightly in surprise.

".....You added a lot of honey. It's exactly to my taste. How did you know?"

I smiled.

"You told me yourself, Lady."

Lady Silver Lily had shared this during her love lessons to me. During the 6th cycle, an apostle tried to conquer her with a strategy book. It was written in that book.

+

1. Lady Silver Lily is sensitive to sunlight.

2. She has a dull sense of taste and likes spicy food.

+

I simply remembered and used that information.

"Hm. So, you're using a strategy guide too?"

"It's more of a reference than a strategy guide since you shared it with me first. I appreciate your understanding."

"Turns out you're quite cunning too."

Lady Silver Lily tilted her tea cup.

The sound of tea echoed quietly in the bedroom.

"So, what's the plan you've come up with? Even sharing this cozy time now is just a fleeting amusement. One of us will inevitably forget the time spent with the other. There's no solution to that, is there?"

"You've never entrusted your life to someone else, have you, Lady?"

"Hm?"

"Trust me."

"....."

"Even if it's a fake romance, you've chosen to date someone. And that someone is no incompetent man."

Lady Silver Lily gazed intently at my face.

"Sometimes you need help from others in life. Right now, Lady, that's you."

I received help from Sword Saint and Black Dragon Witch to save the Aegim Empire, from Apothecary, Viper, and Medicine King to break through the Celestial Martial Chronicles. I'll never say it out loud, but I'm always indebted to the ghost too.

I've never thought of myself as alone.

Different from my lover before me.

"You, Lady, have taken on too much alone. [The empire must remain strong after my death], [I must correct the Crown Prince], [I have to deal with the Blood Demon]. You've been doing this for 140 days, haven't you?"

"Do you think I'm tired?"

"Yes."

"....."

"Please take a break."

I placed freshly picked spring flowers in a vase next to her bed.

"I don't like it when the person I love tries to bear everything alone. No, I dislike it. When I'm tired, I want my partner to take the responsibility, and when they're tired, I want to take it for them."

"We are merely enjoying a fake romance."

"It doesn't matter since I'm sincere."

".....Don't you feel humiliated?"

"Ah. You still don't know me, Lady."

How can someone be so adorable? I couldn't help but smile softly.

"I'm an optimist. Do you think I would be depressed or suffer from an inferiority complex because Lady is pretending to date me? Not at all. I see it as an opportunity. Eventually, Lady will fall in love with me."

"What on earth is the source of such confidence?"

"Because only I will get to spend time with you, Lady. Until you tell me that you're tired, I will never give up on you."

"....."

No matter what.

"I will strive to be your support."

Lady Silver Lily didn't respond. Instead, she quietly drank her tea.

Day by day, my lover became more emaciated.

The [Demons] that appeared every midnight at 12 grew stronger over time.

Initially, the demons barely possessed the form of [tongues] and [lips]. But with each passing day, they changed. [Arms] and [legs] emerged.

-Kyarrar.

When limbs appeared, I realized the demons resembled Lady Silver Lily. If Lady Silver Lily were simplified and shrunk, they would look exactly like these creatures.

-Are you going to kill us?

-Will you kill me?

Each night, I silently dealt with the demons. Lady Silver Lily wanted to help, but I firmly refused. She needed peace and quiet rest more than anything right now.

Paperwork requiring Lady Silver Lily's approval? I stopped it all.

There are only a few days left until this world perishes. If the empire collapses just because the Lady hasn't attended to it for a few days, then it might as well perish.

Rest.

A personal holiday.

That was the first gift I gave Lady Silver Lily.

".....It's my first time experiencing days like these."

Lady Silver Lily murmured, seemingly troubled.

"Is it really okay to just stay still like this?"

Right now, we were sitting under a cherry tree, leisurely looking at the lake. I carried Lady Silver Lily to this spot.

That's all.

No complicated paperwork, no Blood Demons, and no students gossiping about Lady Silver Lily.

"It's fine."

"But..."

"It's fine, Lady."

Lady Silver Lily closed her lips. She seemed to find it difficult to accept this peaceful time she had stumbled upon.

"I'll make sure it's okay."

"I don't want to rely on you."

"Did I ever say I would only help you forever? When I need help, please assist me. Let's help each other. Let's live by helping."

"....."

The day passed quietly.

It was the 'tenth day' as Lady Silver Lily mentioned.

"Are you thirsty? I made milk tea with a hint of honey today. It should suit your taste."

"Once the sunlight becomes milder, let's enjoy a boat ride on the lake. I'll row."

That day, Lady Silver Lily did nothing.

I woke her in the morning and helped her wash up. I served her a simple meal. In the morning, I read her favorite poetry book. In the afternoon, I packed a snack and we strolled to the academy's lake.

Whooooosh-

The spring wind whistled, scattering magnolia and cherry

blossoms. Floating in the sky, the white petals were admired quietly by Lady Silver Lily. The lake's surface rippled with cherry blossoms.

"....."

For an hour, she said nothing.

Even when I carried her onto the boat, she remained silent. Quietly, she watched the flowing petals on the water. Splash. Slosh. The lake gently parted its way with my rowing.

"Spring is white."

Lady Silver Lily murmured.

"In the empire, this time is called [White Spring]. There's a period when magnolias fade just as cherry blossoms bloom. An old poet I admire said [White blooms amidst white, spring blossoms within spring. The white left by winter breathes its last breath]."

Her speech mirrored the pace of the cherry blossoms in the sky.

"It's a beautiful season."

"Yes."

The sunset reddened.

"How long it's been since I've seen such a season."

The gentle spring flowed.

"....."

"....."

We were intoxicated by the season. A pleasant daze. The drowsy spring air filled our minds.

[The silver-clad heart's existence becomes better defined.]

So when the time of world destruction approached, we were

not at all perturbed. No. We didn't even exchange any words.

[The silver-clad heart manifests itself.]

The reddened sunset turned even more crimson.

On the other side of the academy, faint screams of students could be heard. Likely, the blood overflowing from the mirror rapidly engulfed the academy and tainted the edge of the lake red.

"Butler."

"Yes."

"It's comfortable being with you."

We were in the middle of the lake on the boat.

The red blood seeping from the edges hadn't yet invaded our sanctuary.

"Is it really okay to trust you?"

I let go of the oars.

"Lady said we're like parallel lines, destined never to meet, with the one who dies first always returning first. So, we can never be together."

"Hm."

"From now on."

I grasped Lady Silver Lily's hand.

"I will wrap my aura around Lady's body. Not just physically, but also in your mind. And I will do the same to my body and mind."

Then...

"We'll burst both our heads at the exact same moment."

"....."

Lady Silver Lily's breath halted for a moment.

Her eyes widened as her breath quieted.

"That means..."

"We die together."

After a while.

She nodded.

And so, we did just that.

Chapter 104: His Way of Loving (2)

Just like people manage their daily routines, I managed my death.

There was always an easier way for me to die. Wrap my brain in aura. Burst it. In an instant, I could end my life painlessly. Easy, simple, and convenient.

That's why I chose not to die that way.

'Because it's easy, simple, and convenient.'

Familiarity with ease, simplicity, and convenience makes humans complacent. Even the sharpest mind dulls over time.

'It was complacency that led to the Flame Emperor's death at my hands.'

I chose a more painful death, stubbornly relying on my dagger. To keep my senses and judgment vivid and raw. That was my way.

But today would be different.

"It's okay. It will be over in an instant."

I slowly channeled aura into Lady Silver Lily's hand. Perhaps because it was an unfamiliar sensation, she flinched slightly as she absorbed my redness.

".....It's warm."

"Yes."

"It feels like warm water seeping through my veins. If this resembles your body temperature, Butler, then you must be slightly warmer than me."

Lady Silver Lily looked into my eyes.

"I'm anxious."

"....."

"I've never felt anxious through all my returns. I was content as long as I didn't lose myself. But... today, I don't want to lose you. If I return first and you forget me...."

Would I be a bitch for being pleased by her anxiety? If I'm happy because she's anxious because of me?

Yes. Perhaps I would be a bitch.

"Don't worry."

But a bitch solely for her.

"I'll be with you."

Even as we felt each other's warmth, the world was ending.

Crack, crash! The ground split open. Blood gushed from the broken fissures.

Demons, once Lady Silver Lily's familiars, now rampaged beyond her control. Their numbers were like droplets in the sea, and each drop was as large as a mountain.

"Ah?"

Distant screams reached us.

"Demons! Demons have appeared!"

"Unfortunate timing."

People screamed.

The predetermined ten days. Lady Silver Lily's constrained love, a love that couldn't be restrained by a half-formed Constellation, was now running wild.

Yet, amidst this chaos, Lady Silver Lily remained calm, her

heart as if coated in silver.

"I won't tolerate any mistakes."

"Yes."

"If I die even 0.1 seconds before you, or if you die 0.1 seconds before me, I will never forgive you. Remember my words deep in your heart. This is the only chance I give you."

"Yes."

"Again."

[The silver-coated heart watches you.]

"Live up to the trust you've inspired in me."

"....."

I held her hand a bit tighter.

"Okay."

As demons raged on the ground and invaders descended from the shattered sky, the sunset sky cracked like a mirror.

The flood of blood poured down.

The world turned increasingly red. The echoing screams drowned in a bubble-like silence.

It wasn't just Lady Silver Lily's rampage that led to the world's demise.

[The Apostle of 'Ruin-Harvesting Cow' manifests.]

The Apostles of the other half-formed Constellations she mentioned once.

[The Apostle of 'Warhorse of the Eternal Plains' manifests.]

[The Apostle of 'The Immortal Missionary of Happiness' manifests.]

Beings from another realm descended through the rifts in the sky.

The half-formed Constellation, Lady Silver Lily. As her barrier crumbled, these beings, ignoring any pretense of strategy, commenced a full-scale invasion.

"As usual, no sense of mood in these creatures."

Their forms were as varied as the Constellations that sent them.

"That's right."

And so, I could easily remember their appearances.

"A lesson is in order."

"What kind of lesson?"

"A lesson that intruding into someone else's love affair will lead to one's downfall."

"I like that."

Lady Silver Lily smiled.

"But that can wait for later."

Indeed. There was no time now.

"Lady."

The sky was shattering, blood raining endlessly.

Demons crawling up from underground, invaders descending from the sky - amidst this apocalyptic scene, Lady Silver Lily had borne it all alone.

Until today.

"Butler."

Lady Silver Lily spoke.

"Kill me."

In a world turned red, only Lady Silver Lily, me, our boat, and a 3-meter radius of water surface remained untouched by the blood-red paint. Countless tongues and lips emerged from the blood-tainted lake, mocking us.

There.

For the first time, I allowed a peaceful death.

I enveloped us both in aura.

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Ninth Form.

Sword of Self Death.

Without a hint of error or deviation.

[You have died.]

We died.

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.

When I opened my eyes, I was leaning against a white tree.

It was evening.

The sky was ripening into a golden hue.

Waking up here wasn't strange. Ever since I decided to become Lady Silver Lily's exclusive Butler, I've been taking her for evening walks.

As I was about to get up quickly...

"---Have you awakened?"

Whisper.

A voice came from right beside me.

"You've finally come back to your senses."

I turned to look.

"Such a reprehensible Butler you are."

Lady Silver Lily stood there, her back to the bright sunset. Holding an umbrella, casting a shadow beneath her feet. The wind blew, tousling her silver hair, and I inadvertently held my breath.

'Did it succeed?'

My heart pounded.

'Or did I fail?'

I still couldn't tell.

Uncertain, I just looked at Lady Silver Lily.

Her fingers gripping the umbrella handle, the way she gently swept aside her wind-tousled hair, her lips tightly closed as usual. Each of Lady Silver Lily's movements resonated with me profoundly.

"Butler. You lied to me a little."

Lady Silver Lily began.

"You promised to spend the same time with me. But you returned nine days later than I did."

Ah.

"Even though it was a fake romance, leaving your beloved alone for nine days is a serious offense."

I succeeded.

"I waited for you alone for nine days. The anxiety I felt while waiting is entirely my burden. You swore to be there but failed to keep your promise. Isn't that negligence and dereliction?"

I succeeded.

"To atone for your sin this time, you'll have to suffer quite a bit."

I succeeded.

"Uhm. I'm thirsty. Butler, the tea you brought me..."

Lady Silver Lily couldn't finish her sentence.

Because I stood up and embraced her.

I couldn't bear not to hold her.

"....."

The wind blew. The umbrella Lady Silver Lily was holding fell and rolled across the grass.

Even though I was already holding her, it wasn't enough. More. More. I wanted to hold her even closer. I realized then, it wasn't just her body I wanted to embrace, but her heart.

"I'm sorry."

For making you wait alone for nine days.

"It's okay."

Lady Silver Lily wrapped her arms around my back.

"Now it's okay. Watching you not spend the last day with me wasn't completely unenjoyable."

"You're lying."

"Yes, it was a lie. It wasn't very enjoyable. But it's okay. I'm very good at waiting."

"I'm sorry."

"Forgive me."

Lady Silver Lily stroked my neck.

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 71%.]

I want to love you madly.

"Are you crying?"

"No."

"That's a lie."

"Yes."

"I dislike lies. Jokes are okay, but don't utter lies to me. I, too, will not lie to you. Not only in words but also in gestures and glances."

"Are you crying?"

"....."

"When you don't want to speak, use the right to silence. I won't pry. I won't press. If you wait patiently until the other person is ready to talk, that would be nice."

"Hmm."

I'm glad.

I'm glad to be someone who can love her.

"Lady."

"What is it?"

May I kiss you?

I held back.

"I'm really sorry, but could you wait a little longer?"

"How much longer?"

"8 days."

"Why?"

"7 days."

"Uhm?"

"6 days."

"....."

"I'll count down each day."

"....."

"Until we can be together on the first day."

Silence.

".....How audacious."

Lady Silver Lily whispered in my ear.

"So you're saying you'll kill me 9 more times?"

"Did it hurt?"

"It didn't hurt. Just like you said, it was over in an instant. But even after taking my life once, your intention to take it more is cruel."

"May I kiss you?"

"....."

"....."

Sorry.

I couldn't hold back.

Lady Silver Lily moved her head to meet my eyes.

Red.

The color I will come to love the most was there.

"I exercise my right to silence."

So I kissed her.

We embraced each other.

From breath to breath, from lips to lips, I offered the warmth of my heart, flowing my aura. I'm thankful my aura's color is red. Our breaths mingled.

And then.

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

The next moment I opened my eyes, Lady Silver Lily was still by my side. We didn't speak. Maybe we had already said enough. Lady Silver Lily held my hand, and I kissed her.

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

To get closer to you.

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

To Lady Silver Lily, who said we would forever draw parallel lines, I tilted my head a bit more and kissed her. Before our times overlapped, our lips met.

In the cool corridor of the dormitory.

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

In a dark basement.

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

Under the white magnolia leaves.

"Lady."

I sighed deeply.

"Before you came, did you brush your teeth?"

"It seems like a question where I can exercise my right to silence."

"That's sly, Lady Silver Lily."

"There are two moments in this world when one can be forgiven for being sly. One is during war, and the other is when sharing love. Besides,"

I return 24 hours back to the past upon dying, but Lady Silver Lily goes back to the first day of the ball.

She calculated the difference in our time.

"You made me wait for 9 days, 8 days, 7 days... adding up to 39 days in total. My appropriate slyness will actually help lessen your guilt. You should be thankful."

"So, 39 days of kissing..."

"Stop being so frivolous."

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

The next time I opened my eyes, I was in Viscountess Goldencup's private room.

"King of Death!"

The Heretic Inquisitor, who had not yet become Goldencup, laughed heartily. My timeline continued, and the Heretic Inquisitor's was not connected. Thus, while my immersion rate remained, the Heretic Inquisitor's immersion reset as it approached the first day.

"Lady Silver Lily came to visit! Ahaha. What could it be at this late hour? I heard she doesn't stay in the dorm but has separate accommodations. If she's come all this way at this time, maybe it's..."

"Where is she now?"

"Ah. She said she would wait in the garden in front of the dorm."

I opened the door and ran. The Heretic Inquisitor called out "Death King?" from behind, but I had no time to respond. Someone was waiting for me.

A little faster.

Just a bit more, hurry.

Lady Silver Lily was standing under the magnolia tree.

The white lotus blooming in the night sky.

The wilted lotus resembled a heart devoid of red.

"....."

Perhaps someone was secretly watching the garden from a dorm window. But we approached each other closely, embraced, and kissed.

I whispered.

"Do you know?"

"I don't. Brag to me."

"My name is Gong-Ja, and I call you Lady. When our names are put together, it becomes Lady and Gong-Ja. Of course, it sounds different in Lady's language, but still..."

"Are you saying we are a match made in heaven?"

"I'd like to think so."

"You're getting carried away over a coincidence."

"I love you."

Our lips met.

Breaths intertwined.

Time overlapped.

[You have died.]

Finally.

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

When I opened my eyes, I was at a splendid ballroom.

Chandeliers hung from the ceiling, draping down like weeping willows.

Below them, dozens of ladies and gentlemen paired up, dancing slowly.

Where we first met.

Where the Heretic Inquisitor was slapped.

Our time first intersected on this stage.

Day 1.

"....."

"....."

In the middle of the ballroom, we stood facing each other.

I moved my foot.

Lady Silver Lily also stepped forward.

Without distinguishing who was first, under the white chandeliers, amidst the swirling shadows, we kissed.

No words were needed.

Surprised voices around us were heard. I ignored them. The musicians at the ball stopped playing, and the ladies and gentlemen ceased dancing to watch us, but I ignored them.

Lady Silver Lily's eyes. Her voice. The outline of her existence was all that occupied me.

"We,"

I leaned my forehead against Lady Silver Lily's.

"Is it still Day 1?"

Lady Silver Lily smiled.

"Now it's Day 1. It's forever Day 1, if we wish."

"Forever?"

"If you and I wish it to be."

And we kissed again.

Savoring a moment as if it were eternity.

Only our low breaths echoed in the vast ballroom.

"Huh...?"

After a while, the Heretic Inquisitor spoke from behind us.

"Uh, did I miss something?"

No one could answer.

Chapter 105: His Way of Loving (3)

Being with you makes me happy.

It would be an exaggeration to say that I have lived my life for you. However, it's no lie that I will live for you. I'm fortunate to say this without a shred of falsehood.

"Are you crying again?"

I could be that kind of person.

"Let's make a promise."

I could be a person who cares for someone else.

"Speak. I want to hear it."

"Don't purposely ask if the other person is crying when they are. Honestly, Lady, you're just teasing me, aren't you? Right?"

"Hmm. I am occasionally surprised by you. Specifically, how unexpectedly clever you are. However, as clever as you may be, you cannot act cleverly towards me. It's rare to find someone as amusing to tease as you..."

"I wish you'd agree to the promise."

"No."

Ah. Lady Silver Lily saying 'no' to me is wonderful.

I really like it...

I love you...

-Aaagh! Kaak! Ah! My eyes! Aaagh! My eyyyes!

Sword Emperor rolled around dramatically.

-Save me! Save this ghost! Why do I, who couldn't peacefully pass away, have to suffer such misfortune even after dying! Why do I have to witness you blushing in real-time?! Damn it, my eyes! Save my existence!

'Ah, Sword Emperor. I pity you for not understanding the charm of love.'

-Shut uuup!

'Lady Raviel Ivansia, the mistress of my heart...'

-Stop it. Just stop it already!

Hmm.

Strangely, Sword Emperor's voice sounded more distant than usual. His voice, which used to reverberate like a steam train whistle, seemed slightly toned down.

'Is he finally starting to react?'

It wasn't just the Sword Emperor who began to react.

The ballroom froze at the sight of Lady Silver Lily and my kiss. The frozen air was slowly beginning to thaw.

"Uh, Lady Silver Lily. Wha-what are you doing...?"

Oh. Interesting.

Noodle-Hair can talk?

Looking again, he's like a trash can.

"My apologies for causing a disturbance."

Lady Silver Lily leaned heavily on my shoulder.

"It was inappropriate to behave in such a manner in public. I have carelessly ruined the modesty of the Sormewin ball and, on a larger scale, tarnished the honor of the royal family. My guilt is immense."

Lady Silver Lily spoke in a murmur. That was enough. Her voice always had a chilly yet attractive pull. Everyone present in the ballroom stared at her blankly.

"I am guilty, so please punish me. I'll accept it gracefully."

"Punish? But how?"

"Is it difficult to decide what punishment to give? I understand. It must be hard. Therefore, I'll take it upon myself to decide my punishment. From today, I will not attend the academy to avoid critical eyes, and I'll quietly reflect for a while. And also."

Lady Silver Lily pulled out a small paper envelope. The Crown Prince, still dazed, mechanically received it.

"What's this...?"

Lady Silver Lily slowly opened her mouth.

"A letter of withdrawal."

"....."

A second blizzard hit the ballroom that was just beginning to thaw. The ladies and gentlemen, especially the golden trash, were shocked.

"Until my withdrawal is accepted, I will keep to myself as promised. I won't receive visitors, so please grant me the punishment I've chosen, Your Highness."

"La-Lady..."

"I appreciate your permission, Your Highness."

Lady Silver Lily still leaned on my shoulder. In that posture, she bowed her head to the Crown Prince. It was more of a nod than a bow.

'I know Lady Silver Lily still has feelings for the Crown Prince because of the sword in the mirror...'

Is this really okay? I briefly wondered.

But then again, Lady Silver Lily had the Crown Prince's spies beheaded, right? It's fine. This is nothing compared to that. Most importantly, Raviel looks happy, so it doesn't matter.

Lady Silver Lily took my hand.

"Let's go."

"Ah. Yes."

So, amid the shock and horror of the ballroom, what did we do? We left.

Just left.

Why. What. Nobody could stop us.

They might be able to stop me. They could even try to hold back Lady Silver Lily. But 'us'? If we want to leave, we leave. Who would dare stop us? Forget it. How do you stop a pair of returnees?

"King of Death! King of Death!"

Only the Heretic Inquisitor tried to stop us. She hurriedly followed us as we left the ballroom.

"What about the stage strategy? And what did that peck mean? I don't understand at all!"

The Heretic Inquisitor referred to the kiss as a peck. Astonishing. I've heard there are such factions in the world, but who would have thought the Heretic Inquisitor belonged to one...

"Heretic Inquisitor."

"Yes, King of Death! Ah, by the way, ever since seeing the King of Death and that lady together, my heart keeps fluttering. Hmm, what could this be a sign of...?"

"It's angina. Be careful."

"Really. Is it angina?"

"Yes. And I'll handle the stage alone. Heretic Inquisitor, consider yourself on vacation. I'll call you if needed."

"Ah. I see."

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled brightly.

"Understood! I'll act freely and according to my judgment!"

His boundless cheerfulness was unsettling.

".....Heretic Inquisitor."

"Yes!"

"Don't kill people."

"Ah. Understood!"

"And no torture."

"Understood."

"Don't kidnap or imprison people while extracting information."

"King of Death."

The Heretic Inquisitor looked at me with difficulty.

"If I can't do that, then I have nothing left to do?"

"Just stay in your room and read fairy tales."

"Hmm. Yes. Understood..."

The Heretic Inquisitor looked dejected. Like a Welsh Corgi with drooping ears, I sighed and patted his shoulder.

"There will be work for you later. Just stay quiet until then."

The Heretic Inquisitor looked up at me earnestly. After tilting his head three times, he opened his mouth.

"King of Death. I hear my immersion rate is increasing, but what is that?"

"It's angina."

Just stay quiet, please.

"The empire will be buzzing starting tomorrow."

As we left the academy, Lady Silver Lily spoke calmly.

"Is that so?"

"I am a public figure, after all."

We were in a carriage. It belonged to Lady Silver Lily. "I want to get away from the academy for a change," she said, and of course, I had no reason to object.

"First, about 200 letters will pour in from the capital's social circles. Another 20 from my hometown's social circles, and out of those, 10 will be from my father. Finally, His Majesty the Emperor might even send a messenger. Gong-Ja, suggest a solution."

"Hmm..."

I started to speak but stopped. Wait. Didn't Lady just call me 'Gong-Ja' instead of 'Butler'? Being called by my name is a first for her.

"Why so?"

Lady Silver Lily's eyes were slightly upturned.

"Your face is red. Gong-Ja, do you have a cold?"

"....."

"Spring nights are chilly. Gong-Ja, even if your body temperature is high, be careful. That way, you can quickly answer my questions, Gong-Ja."

Uh.

I must retaliate a little.

"So, when did you write your withdrawal letter? Doing such things secretly while I'm away. Wow. Even if you planned to repeat this day, that's a bit cute."

"Cute, Gong-Ja. Do you think calling me cute will fluster me? Gong-Ja. Are you calling that a counterattack against me? That itself is cute. Do you wish to receive cuteness, Gong-Ja?"

"....."

"I'll consider that a surrender."

Today, Lady Silver Lily achieves a smooth victory again.

Even though I think this is signing up for a captured future, on the other hand, the thought arises, 'Isn't living a life captured by Lady a truly victorious life?' At this point, I'm already done for.

"It's so small."

Lady Silver Lily suddenly spoke. She was looking out the carriage window at the increasingly distant Sormewin Academy.

"Sormewin is an institution intentionally established to strengthen imperial authority. It forcibly admits the offspring of noble and influential families from across the empire. The same education, the same language, the same schedule is shared to instill the identity of 'One United Empire.'"

"That sounds complicated."

"I've been there too long."

Lady Silver Lily murmured.

"Beyond those small gates lie jealousy, vanity, pride, monopoly, desire, everything. They're merely covered by traditions and order. Ultimately, what we must rule over isn't there at the academy. It's outside. I wonder if the Crown Prince realizes this..."

"Raviel."

Lady Silver Lily paused.

"Worry about the empire later. You're overworking."

"....."

"Please, think only of me now. That alone is enough to overwhelm your mind."

The carriage jolted.

"Gong-Ja."

"Yes."

"If you scar my heart, I'll kill you."

A chill ran down my neck.

"Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand."

"Tell me what you understand."

"Whatever happens, I will never harm your soul. If I unknowingly hurt you, I'll apologize."

"You need to understand a bit more."

Lady Silver Lily sat up and moved next to me.

Press.

She placed her palm on the back of my hand. My heart raced, but my nape still felt cold. The person I fell in love with had fire in her eyes and ice in her voice.

"If you ever betray me, Gong-Ja."

"Yes."

"Strangle me with your hands. Don't use aura or anything. Kill me until the fact that we met in this world is erased. Whether it takes hundreds or thousands of days, it doesn't matter. I'll condemn you to my death."

Lady Silver Lily lightly gripped her hand. She brought my hand to her neck. Pale skin. Cold temperature. Faintly, I could feel the ice lodged in her throat.

"And live forever, remembering that I'll never forgive you."

"You can live forever if you wish."

I swallowed.

"Yes."

"Know that if you betray me, you'll be banished to eternal hell."

Lady Silver Lily whispered.

"Do you understand?"

I opened my mouth.

"I understand, Raviel."

"If you have any secrets to confess, do it now."

"I have a skill called Ghoul Reincarnation."

Without hesitation, I confessed.

"Those who die by my hand can be summoned even after death. Although they can't inherit their abilities from their previous life, if I wish, they can inherit their appearance and memories."

"I see. I could also be summoned."

"Raviel, since you died with me 9 times, summoning 9 Raviels is also possible."

"I forbid it."

"Yes."

I never intended to summon Lady Silver Lily, no matter what. But once again, her voice and words blocked that possibility.

A relationship is a sacred promise and contract.

We are creating our own code of law.

"Add one more thing to do when you betray me. Destroy that skill."

"I will."

And, I chose my words carefully. She is the person I love. The person who will love me. I must cherish and be careful

with her more than anyone else in the world.

"I'm sorry for not telling you sooner."

"Promise me one thing, and I'll forgive you."

"I'm listening."

"Do not choose to die without my permission."

"....."

"Even if it seems like an easy escape, don't die. You are my lover, not someone who can throw away their life carelessly. Even if it seems impossible to avoid death, struggle until the very end."

I remained silent.

Etching the promises we made into my heart.

"Yes."

"Tell me what you want from me."

"When I ask you to trust me, please trust me."

"I will always trust you."

The carriage jolted again. Using the small vibration as an excuse, Lady Silver Lily and I leaned on each other. Our lips overlapped.

From that day on.

We became each other's love.

Chapter 106: 1 DAYS (1)

"My Lady."

"What is it?"

"Let's just lose our minds and take a vacation for exactly ten days."

I suggested.

"Who else has lived as diligently as you, Lady? Both publicly and privately, you've done your best. So, for the next ten days, let's drop all seriousness and recklessly use our return skills..."

"Enjoy a pastime that ordinary people can't?"

"Precisely."

"Hmm."

Lady Silver Lily was calm.

"Even if we create a mess, no one will remember after we return to the day before, so it won't be a loss for us."

"Lady Silver Lily, you understand my words so well."

"Aren't we playing a bit irresponsibly?"

"Let's be irresponsible for once."

"Hmm. I seem to have taken a very bad man as my lover..."

"Ten days, deal?"

Lady Silver Lily pulled out her fan and flicked it open.

"Ten days seem too short, let's make it fifteen."

"Deal."

We indulged in life as if making up for our past.

Sormewin Academy is near the capital. Just a short carriage ride away, there are dazzling entertainments. And my love is the most prominent successor of the most prominent noble family in the empire.

"Where should I seat you?"

Simply put, power and wealth were overflowing.

She is the most prominent lady in the world.

To the polite theatre staff, Lady Silver Lily bluntly said,

"Rent us the entire theatre for the day."

"Excuse me?"

"I said I want to rent the theatre for the whole day. Did you not understand? Do I need to repeat myself three times? Is repeating the same line three times part of this theatre's acting practice?"

"No, no! My apologies! I'll immediately inquire with the theatre owner!"

Theatre and opera day rentals were standard.

"Gong-Ja, there's something I've always wanted to try."

"What is it?"

"Hiring six theatre companies at the same time."

Lady Silver Lily's tone was calm. But I knew she was having fun like a mischievous child.

"And have them perform simultaneously on a giant stage. Three plays will be tragedies, two comedies, and one opera."

"Uh, won't that just be chaos?"

"Exactly. I want to see chaos."

"Then let's watch."

We summoned the six most expensive theatre companies in the capital. No theatre owner could refuse the call of the heiress of the Ivansia Duke family.

What? Will this outrage lower the reputation and honor of the Ivansia family? It's okay. We are a couple of returnees. Play for a day and return, that's all. What can they do?

"Ah, what a tremendous chaos. I wanted to see this..."

My beloved fanned herself contentedly,

"Phwoohahahahak!!"

And I rolled around laughing.

Serious tragic lines became hilarious next to comedians performing comedies. With six plays performed simultaneously, even the most solemn lines seemed funny. The actors sweated throughout the runtime.

"Let's sweep the casinos in the capital!"

"Excellent idea. Accepted."

We, as a couple, headed to an exclusive noble casino. It was a place where people wore masks like a masquerade ball to hide their identities. But who is my beloved? No noble could fail to recognize her moonlight-flowing silver hair.

"Call."

"C-call."

When Lady Silver Lily said to call, the opponents would shrink back and call.

"Die."

"D-die."

When Lady Silver Lily said to die, the opponents would obediently lay down their cards.

"Raise the bet."

"R-raise..."

"Raise it higher."

"R-raise..."

The bet kept rising as she commanded.

"All in. Everyone."

"All... in..."

It was a miracle akin to the parting of the Red Sea in the

luxurious casino. I decided to establish the [Lily Religion] for our beloved and write the casino scene as the first verse of its holy text.

Ah, how beautiful is the villainess lady, bringing ruin for her own pleasure.

"This is tyranny!"

After about sixteen nobles cried while offering their diamond rings and necklaces to us, the casino owner rushed over in a hurry. He was a man with a Kaiser mustache.

"Even if you're Lady, you can't do this in the store..."

"Oh? Do you know who I am? Curious. I heard this place strictly hides the identity of customers and even if they recognize someone, they keep silent as a virtue and rule. It seems I was misinformed."

"No, no! Of course, I don't know... but..."

"How dare you not know who I am? Do you wish for your head to fly off?"

"....."

The casino owner stammered. Although he was a noble, his lineage was different. He sank within a minute of rushing over.

"Ah, look at this man. You dare not answer Lady's question!"

I was closely sticking to my beloved, acting like a treacherous villain, shouting at him. It's quite warm beside our beloved.

"You dare to trifle with Lady's question with your tongue! Are you plotting to insult the Lady's family!"

"No, no! Of course not. I just... please show a little more consideration for my small business..."

"Ah, Lady, this won't do. His arrogance reaches the heavens. You should decapitate him for disrespect!"

"Eek?!"

Lady Silver Lily casually fanned herself.

"It's fine. Although Baron Rebe secretly built a drug lab in the basement and is distributing illegal drugs throughout the capital, should I just decapitate him for that?"

Twitch.

The Kaiser mustache man shuddered. He doubted if he heard correctly. Soon his face turned pale. He was genuinely shocked.

"What... what are you talking about..."

"Sit down."

"....."

"Sit there and play ten rounds with me, then I'll let you off for tonight."

Eventually, we wiped the casino owner's wallet clean. We

scattered mountains of gold coins and jewels on the streets of the empire.

It was like a dream.

Days that were dreams yet so beautiful.

We did whatever we wanted, played as we wished. We rented the most luxurious accommodation in the capital and indulged in a lavish room. I grabbed Lady Silver Lily and jumped onto an enormous bed.

"Hmm."

The first day.

Lady Silver Lily's eyes lifted at the corners.

"Hmm,"

The second day.

Lady Silver Lily lifted her lips.

"...Aha."

By the third day, Lady Silver Lily smiled. Not a sneer, but a smile of pure joy. My lover's smile was as pure as a child learning to smile for the first time.

"Gong-Ja."

Lady Silver Lily buried her face in my chest.

"Are you happy?"

"You exist in this world. That's why I can live a little longer."

I became happy.

The minimum unit for a person to be happy was two.

“Starting today, I’ll write a diary.”

“For me to see?”

“There’s someone among my colleagues who’s good with instruments. I’ll learn music from them.”

“To play for me, I see.”

“I will survive no matter what.”

One day, I bribed the guards and yelled at them, clearing the busiest street in the capital for an hour. Just the two of us rented out the whole place.

One day, I showed up at the palace and said everything that should and shouldn’t be said in front of the Emperor. When Lady Silver Lily said, “Please take good care of your son, Your Majesty. There’s no bigger scoundrel than him,” the Emperor nearly slipped off his throne. “Your Majesty?!” The surrounding officials were in an uproar.

Day after day.

We treated time like a holiday destination and traveled.

‘It’s just like a honeymoon.’

I didn't say it out loud, as even thinking it made my face hot. But I believed Lady Silver Lily must have been thinking the same.

On the last day.

"....."

"....."

On the last day, we didn't go anywhere.

We just sat side by side at the fountain in the capital's square. From noon until evening.

Holding hands, we silently watched the shadows of countless people passing through the square. A newsboy hurried through the alley between the fruit store and the tavern.

“We did something really bad, didn’t we?”

After half a day, the Lady spoke.

“Yes. We’re such wicked bastards.”

I gripped her hand tightly.

A trip was not for those already in love, but to fall deeper in love. Now, after repeating a day for half a month, I found myself loving her more. And I wanted to love her even more.

“It’s only the two of us that matter.”

“We’re partners in crime.”

A soft laugh.

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 81%.]

That was my proof of happiness.

“Raviel. Do you remember what I told you in the carriage?”

“I remember every word you said to me.”

“When I ask you to trust me, please do.”

“Of course.”

“Please keep that promise.”

Lady Silver Lily looked at me.

“It seems you’re plotting something suspicious, Gong-Ja. It would be better for your heart to confess willingly.”

“From now on, I’ll raise my immersion rate to 99%.”

"....."

During our day of traveling, Lady Silver Lily and I shared many stories. So many stories. About the world I came from, what [Revelations] and [Immersion Rate] are. Lady Silver Lily learned all this from me.

"I need to become almost entirely the butler. I have to become someone born and raised in this world."

"Why is that?"

"I cannot tell you the reason."

Lady Silver Lily rested her chin on her hand.

".....If you can't even tell me, it means this strategy can only succeed if you alone know it in your heart."

"Indeed."

"The reason you're telling me this now is that you have a

favor to ask of me, correct?”

“That’s right.”

Lady Silver Lily sighed deeply, as if she had been tricked.

“.....You’ve been planning for this moment from the start with your [trust me] promise. You’re more cunning than you look. I should have been more cautious and listened to you more carefully. What do you need me to do?”

It was time to execute the plan.

First, I went back to [the first day]. The starting point of this stage. The moment the ball began.

We hurriedly left the ballroom and went to Lady Silver Lily's residence.

“First, please tie my hands and feet tightly to the chair.”

Lady Silver Lily's expression became complicated.

“Gong-Ja, I think it's too early for us to move into that territory...”

“I don't know what the princess is thinking and I shouldn't know, but right now, I'm very satisfied with my life, so please don't worry.”

“I promised to trust you, so I have no choice but to believe...”

Lady Silver Lily firmly tied me to the chair.

I tried moving my limbs as a test, but they didn't budge.

This should be safe enough.

-Hey, Kim ■-bi. What are you doing? I'm slightly worried.

[Shiny is concerned about Gong-■'s actions.]

My immersion rate had already exceeded 80%.

I think, perhaps the original owner of this body, the ‘butler’, harbored feelings not just for Lady Goldencup but also for Lady Silver Lily. An unattainable love for either side. The butler must have silently closed off his heart.

The Crown Prince was two-timing Lady Silver Lily and Lady Goldencup. Lady Goldencup was two-timing the Crown Prince and the butler. The butler was two-timing Lady Silver Lily and Lady Goldencup. Now, Lady Silver Lily was two-timing the Crown Prince and me.

‘Such a dog-like romance.’

But.

‘Thank you.’

Right now, I was only grateful to the butler who also harbored feelings for Lady Silver Lily.

Thanks to him, I was able to devise this plan.

I steeled myself.

“Please bring a mirror in front of me.”

“Hmm.”

Lady Silver Lily had the servants move a large mirror in front of me. My image, tightly bound to the chair and unable to move, was reflected in the mirror.

“Character Window.”

The characters slid across the mirror surface.

+

Name: Kim Gong-Ja

Favorability: 90

Preferred Genres: [Martial Arts], [Romance], [Mystery], [Adventure]

Disliked Genres: None

Preferred Characters: [Master], [Lover], [Noble Hero], [Victim], [Hard Worker], [Child], [Sage], [One Who Doubts Themselves], [One Who Treats Others Well], [One Who Recognizes Me]

+

More characters continued below.

Almost everything about me.

While keeping the character window in front of me, I looked up at Lady Silver Lily.

"Raviel."

"I'm listening."

"From now on, please kiss me wildly. To make me like Raviel even more."

"Is being kissed while tied up your preference? If you had told me sooner, I might have considered it."

"At some point, I will no longer remain as [me]."

"....."

When the immersion rate exceeds 90% and approaches 100%.

Seeing the Heretic Inquisitor, who had completely immersed himself in Lady Goldencup, still retain his [hair] despite transforming into her. That's when I realized.

That's it.

That was the key to shattering this stage in the way I desired.

“When that time comes, kill me with your own hands,
Lady.”

Lady Silver Lily stopped.

Chapter 107: 1 DAYS (2)

Lady Silver Lily reacted after a moment of pause.

"What?"

"Lady, think about it. You will come to the exact same conclusion I did. Because you, too, are a Returner like me."

"....."

Lady Silver Lily furrowed her brows and rested her chin on her hand, deep in thought. Soon, her eyebrows raised as if she had realized something.

"Indeed."

As expected. I knew Lady Silver Lily would catch on.

“Yes.”

"But, Gong-ja, it's dangerous. This is nothing short of a gamble."

"At the point where it's almost a gamble, we have already won. Because this is a mistake made by the tower, a flaw. By just pointing out that flaw, we are at a significant advantage."

"There's another problem."

Lady Silver Lily glared at me.

"I will not remember you."

"It's okay. I will find a way, no matter what. But if I end up being unable to leave this world by myself, please help me say [Transfer]. That's all I ask. Raviel."

I opened my mouth.

"Please trust me."

Silence.

Lady Silver Lily remained silent for a while.

"Alright."

She approached me.

"Since I became your first bitch, you will become my last bitch. If something is taken, something else must be given in return."

Lady Silver Lily grasped my chin.

"Truly, I've ended up with a bad man as my lover."

And she kissed me.

"....."

I quietly accepted Lady Silver Lily's breath.

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 83%.]

In the last round.

The moment I saw the Heretic Inquisitor sinking into Lady Goldencup, I sensed something odd.

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 85%.]

Why is the 'Transformation' still active?

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 85%.]

Isn't that strange?

The Heretic Inquisitor could freely change his appearance using his Holy Technique, even grow his hair. But that was a skill owned by 'Heretic Inquisitor', not by 'Lady Goldencup'.

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 85%.]

Yet, traces of the transformation remained ambiguously.

There's only one conclusion.

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 87%.]

Our skills don't disappear even when we're immersed.

Lady Goldencup still has the skills of the Heretic Inquisitor.

She just forgets how to use them.

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 88%.]

And the same will be true for me.

".....!"

As the immersion rate neared 90%, my head spun dizzily.

A torrent of memories came.

Memories of the original owner of this body flooded in like a deluge. Until now, I had merely peeked into the owner's memories and shared his emotions. But now, it was different.

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 89%.]

My memories are fading.

The sound of the orphanage director reading Romance of the Three Kingdoms. The memory of not wanting to go to the bathroom because it was too cold in winter. The laughter of the older brother and sister who occasionally played with us.

-Hey! Kim ■-Ja! What the ■ are you doing?

[■■ is appealing to ■ to stop at once!]

Even the voices of Guardian Spirit and Holy Sword.

“Are you okay?”

Only Lady Silver Lily’s voice was clear.

“Yes..... Still, I’m okay..... more.”

“More kisses, is that it? My lover is such a spoiled child.”

I felt breathless.

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 90%.]

I felt dizzy.

Amidst the dizziness, I barely opened my eyes to sneak a peek at the mirror reflecting the two of us.

+

Name: Kim Gong-Ja

Favorability: 91

Preferred Genres: [Martial Arts], [Romance], [Mystery], [Adventure]

Disliked Genres: None

Preferred Characters: [Teacher], [Lover], [Noble ■■■], [Victim], [Hard ■■■], [Child], [Sage], [One Who ■■■ Self-Doubt], [One Who ■■■ Others Kindly], [One Who Recognizes ■]

+

I'm being...

My existence is being overlaid with something else.

“Are you still okay?”

“Raviel.”

I was scared.

"I love you. I love you, Raviel....."

"I know."

"Even if I'm reborn, I will love you. So, make sure I never forget you. Even if I die, make sure I never forget you....."

"I understand."

Our lips met.

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 91%.]

My memories are disappearing.

+

Na■e: Kim Gong-Ja

Favorability: 9■

Preferred [Martial Arts], [Romance], [Myst■■], [Adventure]

Disliked Genres: None

Preferred Characters: [Teacher], [Lover], [Noble ■■■],
[Victim], [Hard ■■■], [Child], [Sage], [One Who ■■■ Self-
Doubt], [One Who ■■■■ Others Kindly], [One Who
■■■■■■ Me]

+

My existence is thinning.

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 92%.]

A cheap dagger.

'No sheath, but it'll do.'

My beginning.

'This is the best you can afford.'

My limit.

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 93%.]

A small room.

Torn walls.

Newspapers and photos.

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 94%.]

A handsome man with a ponytail

Standing with a flaming spear,

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 95%.]

The internet.

Alleys.

‘But brother, my face,’

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 96%.]

I was burning.

Hellfire mansion.

‘Kind sir.’

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 97%.]

The day of heavy red rain.

In the acacia flower garden, ‘I!’

‘I didn’t know!’ cried someone tremblingly,

In the acacia flower garden.

+

Name: ■ Gong-Ja

Favorability: 9■

Preferred [Martial ■■ts], [Romance], [■■■■], [■■■■■]

Disliked Genres: None

Preferred Characters: [Teacher], [Lover], [Noble ■■■■], [Victim], [Hard ■■■■], [Child], [Sage], [One Who ■■■■■■■■■■], [One Who ■■■■■ Kindly], [One Who ■■■■■■■■■■ Me]

+

Snow.

A snowy field.

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 98%.]

A red peony.

A single petal.

+

Name: ■■

Favorability: ☐

Preferred [Ma■■■], [■■■■■■], [■■■■], [■■■■■■]

Dis■■■■■ Genres

Preferred Ch■■■■■: [Teacher], [Lover], [Noble ■■■■■],
[Victim], [Hard ■■■■], [Child], [Sage], [One Who
■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■], [One Who ■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■],

[One Who ■■■■■■■■■■]

+

So.

‘I’ll teach him ways to be happy!’ someone once said to me,

So I am.

[Immersion into your character is intensifying.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 99%.]

I am.

Who am I?

+

Name: ■■■

Favorite: ■■

Preferred [■■], [■■■■], [■■], [■■]

Dis■■■■ed Genres: [■■■■]

Preferred Ch■■r■■■: [■■■■], [■■■■], [■■■■ ■■], [■■■■], [■■■■],
[■■■■■], [■■], [■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■ ■], [■■■■■ ■■■■ ■],

[■■ ■■■■■■]

+

"....."

Something,

- ■■■■ ■■■■! ■, ■, ■■■!

[■■■■ is calling out to ■■■■.]

It's noisy.

Like a hive of bees buzzing in my head.

My vision is blurry... a mirror? Why a mirror?

Where am I?

“Are you okay?”

"....."

I gaze blankly in the direction of the voice.

Even through the blurred vision, the figure in front of me has an overwhelming presence.

I know who this person is.

“Gong-ja.”

Raviel Ivansia.

The legitimate daughter of the Ivansia Duchy.

“I asked if you were okay.”

My master, Lady Goldencup's rival.

“What is this...”

I tried to move but then realized. I am bound. Not just my limbs, but my entire body is tightly tied with ropes. As soon as I became aware that I was tied up, my foggy mind cleared sharply.

“My goodness, Duchess, could it be that you've kidnapped me right now?”

“This is too much. Even for the power of the Ivansia Duchy that covers the sky, this is too much. Do you despise Lady

Goldencup so much that you threaten her servant like this?”

The silver lady quietly looked down at me.

Seeing her face strangely made my heart ache.

“Is that so.”

A sad face.

“That's how it is.”

All the empire's poison passes through her fingertips, and all the empire's conspiracies come from her heart. Although somewhat malicious, these rumors contain truths.

And there she is, Lady Silver Lily, in front of me, undoubtedly, with a sad expression.

“I thought the heart capable of being hurt was already gone. But this is definitely painful. Did you say your martial arts prove life through pain? Then be happy. Your sword has

undoubtedly cut through my heart.”

“What are you talking about...”

I couldn’t understand.

Neither Lady Silver Lily’s words nor my own feelings. Why does my heart feel heavy? Did they use drugs when they kidnapped me? But I, serving Lady Goldencup, am well-versed in various poisons.

This symptom... I’ve never heard of it.

“Gong-Ja.”

My heart pounded.

For some reason.

“...Who are you looking for?”

“My lover. And the man who gave his heart to me, and the man to whom I will give my heart.”

If she's referring to someone, it must be the Crown Prince.

But Lady Silver Lily's red eyes are focused only on me.

This further confuses me.

“So, Lady Duchess.”

This is strange.

Why do I sweat coldly just calling the Duchess a Duchess?

『Gong-Ja.』

Something. It feels like I've done something terribly wrong.
An overwhelming sense of guilt.

『I'll kill you if you scar my heart.』

I couldn't breathe.

Voices unknown tore through my mind. I felt like I was going mad. Hallucinations? Is it a hallucinogenic drug? Is that why sweat is running down my neck and my heart is pounding in my chest?

“Gong-Ja.”

I couldn't respond.

I saw Lady Silver Lily drawing her rapier clearly, and it was an ominously bad sign, I had to say something, to stop or persuade her.

“Go on your way.”

But I said nothing.

“I will be...”

[The silver-clad heart watches you.]

“waiting for you.”

My heart was torn apart.

"-----!!"

I screamed. Blood gushed out. My throat was blocked. My last breath almost slipped away. And just when I was about to cough up blood, Lady Silver Lily sealed my lips.

With her lips.

".....,"

My vision faded.

Killing me meant that Lady Duchess was finally starting her machinations against Lady Goldencup. As Lady Goldencup's shield, I must not die. Thus, this was an urgent and critical situation.

However, my last thought wasn't about Lady Goldencup or anything else.

It was just about the red eyes staring at me from close by.

[The silver-clad heart loves you.]

I wanted to wipe away the tears flowing from those eyes.

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

[.....]

Faintly.

[An error has occurred.]

A voice flows.

[The owner and subject of the skill are different.]

[Evaluating whether to return '24 hours before from the owner's perspective' or '24 hours before from the subject's perspective'.]

[Unable to evaluate.]

Darkness encroaches.

[The tower confirms that the skill's activation conditions are not met.]

[The current situation is identified as intended by the owner of the skill.]

[This question surpasses the authority of the tower.]

Fading into oblivion.

[The tower acknowledges the authority of the King of Death.]

[Approved. The King of Death currently holds temporary Apostle status.]

[Temporary Apostle status granted by - Hamusutra.]

[The tower acknowledges the King of Death's question as an official subject for discussion.]

And then.

[The tower requests a vote from the Six Pillars of All Lives.]

A wave of white light engulfed me.

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That place was unfamiliar to me.

It was pitch dark, and without limbs or body, I seemed to float in the void.

[Confirming participants.]

A voice whispered in the endless darkness.

[The 6th Pillar, 'Staff of Time Immemorial,' has joined.]

[The 5th Pillar, 'The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages,' has joined.]

[The 4th Pillar, 'The Moon Contemplating Blindness,' has joined.]

[The 3rd Pillar, 'Legislator of the Beginning,' has joined.]

[The 2nd Pillar, 'The God Who Dances in Emptiness,' has joined.]

[Confirmed the presence of the Six Pillars of All Lives.]

[The tower shares the query raised by the temporary apostle, the King of Death.]

[Sharing complete.]

-Tchuba-ta, Mura waloyo Bushi-to!

An extremely agitated voice was heard.

-Sato, mai-mau.

-Nail!

Voices came from all around. The tone was like countless snakes whispering. I felt like I was in hell, unconsciously hunching my shoulders.

[Your request is accepted.]

[Interpreting Zuraqua's language.]

The next moment.

"---That damn thing is playing with us!"

The voice exploded.

"Bring Hamusutra right now! That Holed-Up Head Librarian, what was he thinking making him an Apostle and sending him here!"

"I checked, and there was no problem procedurally. Besides, that kid won't understand a word we're saying. Immersion,

was it? Reversing that might help in communicating."

"Miya! Reverse it!"

[Your request is accepted.]

[Resetting the King of Death's immersion rate.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 0%.]

"Haah!"

I barely let out a breath.

My dizzy head cleared up.

The words I uttered while immersed in the butler, Lady Silver Lily's gaze at me, all memories swiftly returned.

And I was certain.

“You. You deliberately synchronized with a character and then used the return skill, didn’t you?”

That I had succeeded.

“You wanted to go back 24 hours from the character’s perspective, not yours!”

I smiled inwardly.

“Yes. That's right.”

The day Lady Silver Lily broke the mirror with her sword.

One day before the eternal ten days were to repeat.

“Please send me back.”

I aimed to return to that day.

Chapter 108: 1 DAYS (3)

"That shameless thing...!"

From beyond the darkness.

Someone unknown gritted their teeth in anger.

Unlike before, everything they said was now [interpreted].

"Calm down, my child. Fragments of the Padak Era are showing."

However, their voices were still opaque. Like a song with noise interference, their voices would seem distant, then suddenly close to my ear.

"Anger and jealousy won't help our deliberation."

“I’ll kill him!”

“King of Death, was it? It’s been a long time since a meeting was convened twice because of one person. How long has it been since the Constellation Killer?”

“Moreover, the connection between those two is getting stronger. Is this also a coincidence?”

Then...

“---This is troublesome.”

The chattering voices suddenly stopped. The surroundings became silent. Among the idle and casual conversation, only a dispassionate voice sank.

“If the immersion rate was completely 100%, we could return a day from the butler's perspective. If it was below 90%, it would be enough to return a day from the King of Death's perspective. But, it had to be 99%.”

I recognized that voice.

“It's ambiguous. Whose side should we take?”

The Tower's Master.

I swallowed hard.

“I think... we should return a day from the butler's perspective.”

“Convince us.”

“Firstly, just looking at the numbers. An immersion rate of 99% means the butler is 99% and I am only 1%. The butler's proportion is overwhelming, so it's only fair to consider the butler as the standard.”

“Yes. But [Returner's Winding Clock] is a skill you acquired. King of Death. It's your skill. Only the person who possesses the skill can use it.”

An unseen gaze scanned my face from the darkness.

“Shouldn’t you be the one to return?”

"....."

“Don’t be nervous. I’m just curious.”

The voice spoke kindly, telling me not to be tense. But it was an impossible consideration. With every word and phrase, it felt like a long snake was climbing up my neck.

“...That’s an overly biased view.”

“Hmm?”

“Consider it from the butler’s perspective. The butler and I have been fighting over who would possess the body throughout the stage. I was devoured by the butler, but at the same time, the butler was devoured by me.”

In other words.

“The butler fought fairly and won over me, thereby taking

my skill. [Returner's Winding Clock] is now also the butler's skill."

"Oho."

The serpent's voice quivered strangely.

I realized a bit late that it was laughing.

"That makes sense. Like how you, King of Death, copied the Flame Emperor's skill."

"....."

"A returner against a returner in battle. I wondered who would win. But to think, returning to a point before acquiring the skill. I must say, even my lowly self was impressed. No, all of us were surprised."

Lowly Self.

The absolute ruler of the Tower referred to themselves as

lowly. They speak politely too.

As if being cordially humble to everyone.

That felt even more ominous to me.

“You were impressive. You could have chosen to simply flee from the Flame Emperor’s sight. But you didn’t. Why?”

As the Tower Master asked, the silent figures began to speak.

“It’s because of revenge. This guy never forgot what was done to him. So he went after the one who burnt him to ashes. Dying over 4050 times? That’s stubborn.”

[The Moon Contemplating Blindness curses you.]

“It’s because of a sense of justice. The Flame Emperor killed many and would have killed more. He must have thought it couldn’t be left unchecked. The thoughts and feelings of ‘this cannot be’ drove the King of Death. Yes. He is a righteous human.”

[The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages blesses you.]

The serpent's voice nodded.

“Yes. That must be it. Sometimes revenge drove him to pierce his own throat, other times a sense of justice led him to end his life. But revenge and justice are common. What amazed me was only one aspect.”

Someone else took over the Tower Master's words.

“It's the fact that the only way to 100% defeat the Flame Emperor was through that method.”

[The Legislator of the Beginning declares quietly.]

“Yes.”

The Tower Master laughed.

“King of Death. Your heart is raw and hot, but your mind is cunning. Always seeking a way to win 100%. So I'm looking

forward to it. Have you prepared a logic that will persuade us 100%?"

This was the critical moment.

I couldn't back down here.

"Yes."

"Go ahead."

"I... we haven't done anything wrong."

The serpent's voice turned towards the murmuring direction, opening its mouth.

"This is entirely a mistake and error made by the Tower. The very fact that it's difficult to decide whether to return a day from [the butler's perspective] or [my perspective] is a problem. If the Tower were perfect, such an error would never have occurred."

“Yes. I’ll admit that. So?”

“Since we are victims of the error, please compensate us.”

"....."

I spoke as confidently as I could.

“And as the ones who discovered the error, reward us.”

Silence.

After a while.

“Impudent.”

[The God Who Dances in Emptiness glares at you.]

“Look at how that creature talks. Does it want to be crushed into nothingness?”

[The Moon Contemplating Blindness wants to kill you.]

Voices started to boil over.

“Stop.”

But when the serpent's voice spoke, everything fell silent again.

“Interesting.”

"....."

“What I find interesting is this. You believe without a doubt that I will [compensate] and [reward] you properly. Why? I could just wipe my mouth and turn away.”

“Because...”

I spoke firmly.

“Because you always wished us luck.”

The Tower.

Every time a stage was cleared, hunters heard a voice.

『The who chose to climb the Tower.』

『May fortune be with you.』

Just that.

But it was definitely ‘encouragement’.

“You, being absolute, do not mock us. You don’t despise us. You don’t push us in any particular direction. A hunter who wants to stay on the 1st floor can stay forever. For those climbing higher, you wish them luck and only ask for caution.”

A resting place for those who wish to rest.

Good fortune for those entering the fray.

“It's not just that.”

The children in the hellish mansion.

The Demon King shedding red raindrops.

The lonely peony in the eternal snowy field.

The heart repeating endless ten days.

“Every single person you allowed to enter the Tower, without exception, is lonely and sad. You gathered only those destined for tragedy and built the Tower.”

I believe.

“You are benevolent.”

The Tower Master in front of me is a benevolent absolute being.

“You never interfere in our fights and killings. You respect our freedom. But surely you will compensate for the damage caused by the Tower’s error.”

Because it’s the Tower’s responsibility, not ours.

“Thank you for building the Tower.”

“I’ve always wanted to say that. I didn’t have the chance before. I’ve always wanted to express my gratitude.... If it weren’t for the Tower, I would have been trash in the outside world. Ah. Well, I was trash even after entering the Tower...”

I lived wrongly.

I lived wrongly, but I got the chance to relive my life.

“If you weren’t there... I would never have gone back more than 4000 days by myself. Never. You said it was revenge and justice... but I only barely endured because someone was watching over me. That’s all.”

I bowed my head.

“Thank you.”

I bowed deeply.

“Sincerely, I am grateful.”

There was a long silence.

“Hmm.”

Someone murmured softly.

“I like it.”

[The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages expresses favor towards you.]

“Me too. It’s been so long since a human came here to

express gratitude, I can't even remember. Wait, was there ever one? Maybe this is the first time."

[The Staff of Time Immemorial expresses favor towards you.]

"...These days, children somehow harbor hostility towards beings like us. The world is too harsh. They think they need someone to blame and resent."

[The God Who Dances in Emptiness expresses favor towards you.]

"Ha. They simply don't want to acknowledge a higher existence than themselves."

[The Moon Contemplating Blindness looks at you disapprovingly.]

And there was laughter.

"Indeed."

It was laughter spilled by the Tower Master.

“Certainly. You have a bit of a cute side.”

"....."

“I’m just a mirror, King of Death. If I seem good to you, it’s because you are good.”

The serpent's voice smiled.

“State your desired compensation.”

“I wish to return 24 hours from the butler's perspective.”

“And your desired reward?”

My heart raced with tension.

“I want you to let Lady Silver Lily...”

“My beloved...”

“Keep her memory.”

“Indeed.”

The serpent's voice chuckled lightly.

“You could ask for a tremendous skill as a reward, right? After all, you discovered the Tower's error. We should reward you generously. Shall I enhance [Returner's Winding Clock] for you?”

Temptation.

“You can turn back time as you wish, not just for a day. Or how about enhancing [Ghoul Reincarnation]? So it can inherit not just memories but also the abilities from a previous life.”

“I don't need it.”

I knelt down.

“Please.”

Respectfully, I lowered my forehead in the direction of the voice.

“I simply want to live with the one I love.”

"....."

And then.

A hand gently caressed my bowed head.

Very slowly.

"King of Death."

[Concluding the meeting.]

“May fortune be with you.”

[May fortune be with you.]

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[Re-adjusting your immersion rate.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 99%.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

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Blink.

"....."

When I opened my eyes, the first thing I felt was the scent of spring flowers blowing in from the window.

My head felt foggy.

Like I had been dreaming for a long time.

“Ah.”

A voice, both unfamiliar and familiar, came from nearby.

“You’re finally awake. Butler. You took a rather long nap.”

Lady Goldencup.

My master.

“...My lady?”

“Yes. Your one and only lady.”

Lady Goldencup chuckled. Was she amused by my reaction? She was looking at me with her eyes barely open.

She had adapted to the capital, and there was no trace of the

girl who had been famous in her hometown for her wild ways. I regretted that fact a little. Of course, her outward appearance had become sophisticated, but her heart remained the same.

.....

What is it?

“After having dinner with His Highness, I came back only to find that the butler was dozing off in his chair. I was a bit upset that you fell asleep without me. But I let it slide because your sleeping face was cute.”

“My lady.....”

“Oh? You look like you’re about to cry. Did you have a nightmare?”

A nightmare? Was that it? Had I had a nightmare?

An inexplicable feeling of suffocation filled my chest. It felt like I had just forgotten something very important. The more I tried to remember, the more distant it became, an elusive sensation.

“Dinner with His Highness...”

To shake off that feeling, I deliberately changed the topic.

“Did you enjoy your dinner with His Highness?”

“Yes. Quite a bit. Listen, butler. Today His Highness gave me a ring made of blue coral!”

Lady Goldencup beamed. Blue coral is a gemstone name. Not particularly valuable, but in the southern regions of the empire, it's often used for proposing to a lover.

“And he did it in the student cafeteria, in front of other ladies and gentlemen! Really, the Crown Prince is a fool, but a fool who knows how to make people happy. I wonder what kind of face Duchess Ivansia will make when he hears this news!”

Suddenly, I felt breathless.

“Duchess Ivansia.....”

“Ah. Are you curious too?”

"....."

What is it?

Really, what is it?

My heart's unrest resonated in my throat.

“Raviel.....”

Lady Goldencup looked at me with a puzzled expression.

“Butler? Even so, it’s a bit rude to call the Duchess by name directly like that. Even if it’s just the two of us here, it’s too disrespectful. Mind your manners, manners. Sometimes you seem more ignorant of the capital’s etiquette than me.”

That moment.

-■■■, ■■ ■■■■. ■■ ■■■ ■ ■■ ■■■■!

My head buzzed.

[■■■■ is speaking to you.]

I clutched my forehead in pain.

“My lady... do you hear something?”

“Something?”

Lady Goldencup tilted her head.

“What kind of sound are you talking about?”

“It’s just, it seems like someone is shouting...”

“Uh-oh, butler. I thought you were joking at first, but now I’m starting to get worried too. Does your head hurt? Is it hot?”

Should we go to the infirmary?"

"...No. I'm sorry. I keep saying strange things."

I stood up from the chair.

"I feel a bit of a headache. It doesn't seem like a cold... I'll go outside for some fresh air. Is that alright, my lady?"

"Ah. Yes, do that."

Lady Gold

encup looked at me with concern.

"Shall I accompany you?"

"No, it's really fine..."

-■King■ ■ ■■■■!! ■■ ■■! ■ ■■ ■■!

“...I think a little walk will make it better.”

“Alright. Then go ahead. But don't be too late.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

I left the lady's room and the dormitory.

Magnolias bloomed white like the moon in the night.

But even after stepping out into the garden, the unease in my heart did not subside.

『It's still the time when I wasn't a returner yet.』

I walked.

『His Highness is bound to marry Lady Goldencup.』

I walked aimlessly.

Like a sleepwalker in a dream.

『In my anger and bitterness, I leaned on the family sword and made a wish.』

『May my love last forever.』

『Then, my life became eternal.』

At the end of the path I wandered aimlessly, unbelievably, was the grand residence of Duchess Ivansia. A place I had passed by before but never consciously walked to.

A place unrelated to me.

『My heart has been fixed since that day.』

Yet it shouldn't be.

"....."

Why am I here?

‘Let's go back.’

To where my master waits.

‘Go back.’

I thought so and moved to turn around.

‘I have to go back.’

But for some reason, my steps didn't turn back. Though I thought I should return, my steps moved forward. My hand pushed the iron bars of the gate.

Creak-

The door opened lightly.

There were no guards from the Ivansia family.

"....."

It's truly strange.

Maybe I'm still trapped in a dream.

Then everything makes sense.

Me crossing the gate and walking across the garden for no reason.

My heart aching for no reason at the sight of cherry and magnolia trees in bloom.

Naturally knowing the layout of the residence of Duchess Ivansia, whom I've never been invited by, and walking straight there.

"You've come."

And Duchess Ivansia standing at the end of the corridor.

『I will be waiting for you.』

Her smiling softly as she looks at me.

“I’ve been waiting.”

Everything.

Chapter 109: Her Way of Loving (1)

Duchess Raviel Ivansia stood in the corridor at midnight.

Behind her, a large mirror was placed.

A full-length mirror.

It was smooth and clean.

Only her straight back was reflected in the mirror, which the moonlight slid over, making the Duchess seem like an island standing alone in a dark sea.

"You're silent."

"....."

“Such a troubled expression. You wear your emotions clearly. Even in the night, it's easy to read your face. Just looking at you, I know this is the [first time].”

First time?

My heart had been restless since a while ago. Even now, it is. Why does Duchess Raviel use such a familiar tone with me?

The cold and rational sword. The moon of the Ivansia family.

There should be no reason for her to be kind to me, the butler of Lady Goldencup.

There shouldn't be.

“...I was silent because I didn't know what to say. If I have been rude, please forgive me. Duchess. Is this... a dream? Are you also appearing in my dream?”

To my question, Duchess Raviel showed a strange expression. Her smile seemed almost like a scar.

“An interesting question. Yes. Your dream has swallowed my life. I now understand that love is nothing but offering one's life to someone else's dream.”

What does that mean?

“I become your dream, and you become my life, and we call this exchange of dreams and life love.”

What does that signify?

I didn't know what that meant. There was much I didn't know.

Among those things, Duchess Raviel, with her scar-like smile, explained one.

“But such a romantic question was not what you meant. I'll answer seriously. If you're wondering why there are no servants around, don't worry. I sent them all away.”

“Why.....”

“And a warning. Never again call me [Duchess] with those lips.”

Duchess Raviel smiled.

“I will gouge out your heart and kill you.”

"....."

I couldn't understand.

Just now, Duchess Raviel harbored a killing intent towards me. Her words of killing me were not an empty threat. It wasn't a bluff. If I call her 'Duchess' once more, undoubtedly her rapier will pierce my heart.

Yet.

‘Why?’

Why is the killing intent Duchess Raviel directs at me not cold, but only comforting?

Can a declaration of killing someone be this tranquil?

“Come here.”

Her voice beckoned me like a gesture. I couldn't resist. As I approached Duchess Raviel, she pointed at the full-length mirror. “What do you see?”

“.....I see you and me standing side by side.”

“And?”

“The dark corridor... Only the moonlight barely illuminates. Apart from you and me, almost nothing is visible. Everything is buried in darkness.”

“And?”

The Duchess asked. It was peculiar. She seemed to be expecting a different answer. As if there was still something I had to see in the mirror. But what else could be reflected in it?

“What else do you see?”

"....."

“Don’t hide it, speak.”

I decided to look more closely into the mirror. I narrowed my eyes and frowned. But even so, what I saw remained largely the same.

‘Only darkness is visible. And unusually red eyes...’

At that moment. Zing! A headache struck me.

Unrecognizable characters flashed before my eyes.

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■■■

■■■: ■■

■■ [■■], [■■■], [■■], [■■]

■■ ■■

■■ ■■■: [ster], [Lov■], [■■■ ■■], [■■■], [■■■], [■■■],
[■■], [■■■ ■■■ ■ ■■ ■], [■■■■ ■■■■ ■],

[■■ ■■■■■]

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“Ugh, huh...?!”

Nausea overwhelmed me.

-Kim■-Ja ■ap out■ ■ ■■ ■t!

[■■■■ tells ■■■ ■■■■■ ■■■■ro!]

Instinctively, I grabbed my throat. It hurt the moment I did so, but I didn't understand why.

Since I had no choice but to leave what I didn't understand as unknown, I thought of something else.

'It's good that my stomach is empty.'

I hadn't vomited. Vomiting in front of the only daughter of the Ivansia family, the thought was horrifying. I desperately suppressed the urge to vomit.

Duchess Raviel was calm.

"What did you see?"

So heartless.

A bitter taste spread in my mouth.

"Strange letters... I see strange letters. And voices... strange voices... I don't understand."

“Voices.”

Duchess Raviel slightly smiled at that. Her smile now seemed more like a smile than before.

“You are loved.”

“What do you mean....”

“Tell me about the letters.”

Without explanation, she moved on to the next topic. I just stared blankly at her. She, having lost her smile, simply repeated calmly.

“You said you saw strange letters. Speak of them.”

“...They are not clear. Not complete letters... Only fragments...?”

“Utter even a fragment.”

“Ster... Lov... Beyond that, I can’t... Nothing.”

"Hm."

Duchess Raviel held her chin.

“Indeed. [Ster] is from [Master] and [Lov] is [Lover]. It’s typical of you to leave such things at the very end. But why is the master ahead of the lover? I understand, but I don't like it.”

“Your Grace, I don’t understand much of what's happening. You said this is not a dream, but then what do you want from me?”

“I want you.”

“I’m sorry, I still don’t understand.....”

“What dream did you have?”

Duchess Raviel cut off my words abruptly.

‘Even though she's the daughter of the Ivansia family-’

‘I am the only butler of Lady Goldencup-’

‘Considering His Highness favors Lady Goldencup, this treatment is-’

Numerous thoughts tangled in my head.

But none of them resonated in my heart. Like music that lost its rhythm, just wavering. Soon to collapse.

“I don’t remember well. But in the dream.....”

Eventually, the only thing that vibrated in my mouth was an obedient answer to her question.

“In the dream.”

“.....you looked at me and shed tears.”

Yes.

“I was tied to a chair... Perhaps. Tied with something like ropes. I didn't know why I was tied, but only you were there, looking down on me in a splendid room.”

Right before waking up.

I definitely saw such a scene.

“My heart hurt. My chest... pierced by your blade. But, that wasn't all. In the dream, I.....”

“You?”

“.....I felt very guilty towards you.”

“Is that so.”

Duchess Raviel smiled again.

“At least you know how to feel guilty. That is a relief.”

"....."

“Do you know why you had such a dream?”

“No. I don’t know. Not at all....”

“That’s because it is my [trauma].”

Trauma.

“I haven’t mentioned it yet. My mother committed suicide.”

What?

My mind went blank from the shock.

“She killed herself when I was too young to know why. The wife of the Ivansia family. The moon of Ivansia. A person with

such power and wealth ending her life is inexplicable. I distinctly remember the words she whispered to me on her last night and how everyone hushed up her death and quietly cremated her.”

This...

This is something I should not know. Something I shouldn't hear. A dreadful secret hidden in the Ivansia family, too grave to be used even as a tool in political battles.

“However.”

Duchess Raviel looked at me.

“That memory is no longer my trauma.”

"....."

“His Highness gave Goldencup a ring of blue coral today.”

One step.

Duchess Raviel stepped towards me.

“In the past life, I despaired over it. Or I was angry. You can say I was jealous and envious. All those feelings filled my heart. I held a sword in a heart full of curses for the world and pressed it against my heart reflected in the mirror.”

There was no sound of footsteps.

Only then did I realize she was barefoot.

“But even that is no longer my trauma.”

Light pressure.

Her foot stepped on one of my shoes.

It was a light and insignificant weight, yet it captured my entire being. I could have stepped back or escaped at any moment, but I was completely caught by her half-hearted weight.

“Even the eternal ten days we repeated.”

Her hand came closer.

“The sight of my world drowned in blood and destroyed. The forms of demons mocking me with my tongue and lips. Everything that once scarred my heart, is no longer my trauma.”

Slender fingers.

“It ceased to be.”

My neck.

“From now on, only you have the exclusive right to hurt my heart.”

Her hands lightly gripped my neck.

“No matter how vicious the curses thrown at me for two days by the most wicked tongue, they are nothing compared to

the sighs you carelessly throw at me.”

From pinky to index. From the thinnest to the thickest finger, every pressure she applied was felt.

"The most malicious person in the world could beat and whip me, but that's nothing compared to a single sneer from you. Though countless in this world could kill my body, only you can wound and kill my soul."

I felt suffocated.

“So my trauma is already determined.”

I felt my throat constrict.

“Your Grace.....”

“You fool. I warned you clearly.”

『If you scar my heart, I will kill you.』

“You. You've scarred my heart.”

Warm flesh.

Her red eyes smiled.

“I haven't broken a promise since I was four. Die.”

".....,"

“Die and love me again.”

I.

For some reason, couldn't resist.

[You have died.]

And then.

[Re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

[The level of penalty is medium.]

[Hungry Ghost Realm.]

A dream within a dream unfolded.

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I don't want to kill him.

Looking at the man before her, Raviel Ivansia thought. She didn't want to lose him. She, Raviel Ivansia, felt absurd realizing how possessive she was.

-Lady, think about it. You will come to the exact same conclusion I did. Because you, too, are a Returner like me.

A dangerous man.

Raviel quickly realized what he was planning. He willingly immersed himself in the role of 'Butler', intending to return to 'the butler's perspective' from a day ago.

A strategy that could turn the game board upside down.

'A brilliant idea.'

Truly, a plan striking the weakness of the tower.

'With such a gentle face, how does he come up with such schemes?'

Feeling pleased that the man she loved wasn't stupid. Yes, it was a very pleasant feeling. But still, Raviel Ivansia opposed it.

-But, Gong-ja, it's dangerous.

The reason was clear.

-I won't remember you.

She, Raviel Ivansia, won't remember Kim Gong-Ja.

Even if he returns to a day ago, stopping her from plunging the sword into the mirror, thus preventing the eternal ten days of tragedy, if she doesn't remember him, it's meaningless.

-I don't want to live.

-I want to live with you.

The days spent together.

The fortnight of vacation granted for the first time.

All those memories make who she is now. Without them, she can't be Raviel Ivansia.

Does he understand? That even if he escapes the ten-day maze that way, it wouldn't be a favor to her.

-It's okay.

Maybe he knew.

-I will find a solution.

The way he irritatingly spoke.

-Please trust me.

-.....

Raviel Ivansia fell silent.

Stunned by the severity of his words. Trust me. Trust someone without any reason. She regretted promising to trust him just a few days ago. But Raviel Ivansia was too desperate to linger in paralysis and regret.

‘I trust you.’

She trusts the man she loves. She trusts his competence. He is her chosen man. Her person. Surely, he will convince the tower to return a day earlier.

The real issue is what comes next.

‘How to reverse the immersion that’s risen beyond 90%?’

If he successfully returns a day earlier, he will surely not remember her at first. Even if he does, it would be a faint feeling. It’s impossible to vividly recall the days spent together.

‘.....’

No.

‘Wait.’

There is a way.

Upon realizing this method, Raviel groaned and then groaned again. The saying that all the poisons of the empire come from her heart passed through her mind. It wasn't long. She couldn't afford to linger.

Raviel Ivansia realized she would carry out that method.

‘I,’

Thus, Raviel Ivansia firmly etched into her heart the method she had thought of, the method she would execute.

‘I just have to kill this man.’

Trauma.

He had confessed nearly everything about himself to her. His ability came with a side effect of glimpsing the memories of those who killed him.

‘If I can make [this moment] my trauma.’

He will glimpse [now] at the moment he kills her.

Not his past, but this very moment she is thinking of.

-.....

Then. If only that's possible.

-I can tell him all the things I want to say, the memories I want to give back, everything, once again.

-He will recall it through me.

-Yes.

Raviel was certain of her success.

-Since I became your first bitch, you will become my last bitch..

Gong-Ja

-Really, I've ended up with a bad man as a lover.

Can you hear me?

I am happy because you are here. I don't want to lose you. I don't want to let go of the time we spent together just like this.

You said, "I will start writing a diary from today." You said that to show me every day of your life. Was that a lie?

You said, "I will learn music." You wanted me to listen to your music and enjoy peaceful evenings. Was that wish truly a lie?

I want to see your day. I want to spend the evenings with you. Your day will surely make me smile, and the evenings spent with you will be happy. I want my smile and your happiness to overlap.

I don't want to kill you.

I don't want to lose you.

-Are you okay?

-Yes..... Still, I'm okay..... more.

-More kisses, is that it? My lover is such a spoiled child.

Look at me.

Look at the you who was with me.

You are a foolish person. Naive even. With such naivety, I wonder how you will survive in the world, but then it gets resolved soon enough, considering you died thousands of times.

There are many reasons to discard naivety. Few reasons to keep it. Even with many reasons, you don't discard it, and even with few, you keep it. I call you pure.

I cherish your purity.

-Are you still okay?

-Raviel.

Are you afraid of losing yourself? Scared?

-I love you. I love you, Raviel

-I know.

It's okay.

"Even if I'm reborn, I will love you....."

I am here.

As I trust you, trust me too.

Rely on me.

"So, make sure I never forget you. Even if I die, make sure I never forget you....."

-I understand.

You alone can't protect yourself.

I alone can't protect the world.

But together, you and I, we can do anything.

I am also afraid. I'm scared of killing you.

Approaching you knowing it will hurt me, is terrifyingly scary.

But my fear will not hinder being with you.

Look.

-.....My goodness.

Eventually, you, completely submerged in the role of the butler, speak to me.

"Duchess."

Throbbing.

My chest aches. It's heartbreaking to have you, calling me not as [Lady] but [Duchess].

-Could it be that you've kidnapped me right now?

An incredulous face. Looking at me with doubt, it hurts. It's painful to have you react as if you're seeing me for the first time.

"This is too much. Even for the power of the Ivansia Duchy that covers the sky, this is too much. Do you despise Lady Goldencup so much that you threaten her servant like this?"

Listen.

This is the wound you've left me.

"Gong-Ja."

Don't forget.

".....Whom are you looking for?"

Never. Even in death, don't forget.

"My lover."

The man who gave his heart to me.

"The man to whom I will give my heart."

You are here.

In my heart.

"Go then."

"....."

"I will be waiting for you."

Can you hear me?

Can you hear it?

Gong-Ja.

I am in love with you.

Chapter 110: Her Way of Loving (2)

And Raviel clenched her hand tightly. To kill the man. To infect him with a wound that would last an eternity.

-Ugh, krk, ack...!

The man twisted his body. Raviel's sword pierced deeper, into his heart. The man screamed in agony, his cries ripping through the space that only the two of them occupied.

'I don't want to kill him.'

Raviel bit her lip.

'I don't want to lose him.'

But contrary to her wishes, Raviel plunged the sword in even

deeper. She felt every sensation in her hand vividly. The sensations. His chest being torn open. His flesh being cut. His heart being pierced, continuously spewing blood.

All of this became Raviel's wound.

'More.'

Stronger. From this moment on, to etch it as her trauma. So that someday, no matter when, the man she loves would witness this scene.

So when the man was about to spit blood, Raviel stole his lips.

-.....!

A bitter and sticky breath flowed from his heart to her mouth. It was a bloody breath. This was the warmth of my man. This was the blood of my man. This was the heart of my man.

Raviel sealed his lips so not a single drop would escape.

-.....

The man was dying.

Raviel didn't blink. She didn't miss a single moment of her beloved man dying. His face paling, his tremors weakening, his breath fading - each moment was agony for her.

'I don't want to lose him.'

She wanted to scream her lungs out to the world.

'I don't want to lose this man.'

What if this moment doesn't become a trauma? What if all her plans fall through? Then she would forget him, and he would lose her. Nothing would remain.

Raviel was scared.

'More.'

Being afraid of something was a disgrace for someone like her. An insult. Yet Raviel kept repeating the frightening scene. The terrible imagination. She deliberately deepened the wound.

The scene of him failing to convince the tower.

The scene of her forgetting him, living as before.

The scene of them indifferently passing by each other in the corridor.

Layering wound upon wound.

-.....!

And Raviel saw it. His death.

-.....

Raviel understood. This was a residual moment. A brief respite before the man returned. Perhaps in just a few seconds,

he would return. She too would be swept up in his time, returning just the same.

Just a few seconds. Merely a few seconds.

But those few seconds felt like an eternity to Raviel.

She slowly moved her lips.

-Gong-Ja?

No answer.

-Gong-Ja.

Ah.

At that very moment, Raviel knew. Yes. This final scene, the absence of an answer.

His lost gaze. His lips, as if they had forgotten how to speak, stopped. This moment, because of this, had become an indelible trauma for Raviel.

Everything became clear.

She had never left a scar worse than this.

-.....

Raviel embraced him. She held his body in her embrace. In these last few seconds, in the final moment, she spent it holding him.

I believe in you.

[Trauma re-enactment complete.]

Just as I believe in you, you will believe in me too, Gong-Ja.

[The target's ego has remained intact.]

So, we can wait for each other.

[Penalty Finalized.]

We will.

[Your immersion rate is currently 98%.]

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Strangely, it was hard to open my eyes.

"Butler?"

The Lady Goldencup sitting opposite me was surprised. It was strange. Her face, which always seemed to shine brightly,

appeared blurry today.

"What's the matter? Why are you acting like this all of a sudden?"

"Huh?"

"You're crying. Right now."

Only then did I realize that I was crying. I was shocked. Just moments ago, Lady Goldencup and I were chatting idly.

It was just a blink of an eye.

In that instant, tears had fallen.

"Ah...?"

Even more, the tears didn't stop easily.

"Bu-Butler? I'm a bit scared. I don't get scared often, but this is a bit scary. Why are you suddenly crying while talking with me? Did I do something strange again?"

"No... It's... I don't quite understand myself."

"You're crying without any reason? Have you lost your mind? Oh. You're really crying heavily.... What, what should we do? This is the first time our butler has cried like this since I hit him when I was 5...."

"That incident really seems to stick with you for a lifetime, My Lady. If possible, please try to forget it."

"But Butler, even if I forget about being hit when you were 5, you were also hit when you were 6, and when you were 7, and continuously until you were 14, and even now you occasionally get hit, if I forget all that, I might end up with amnesia? In fact, your life has been a series of being hit by me."

Amnesia.

"....."

"Yikes, your crying was just calming down, why are you crying again?! I'm sorry! I'm sorry for only hitting you! I won't hit you anymore. I'll hit you less insultingly from now on. Is that okay?!"

"I think I had a nightmare, Lady..."

"A nightmare? Was I captured by a monster and torn to death?"

"No. A woman was looking at me, crying endlessly... I wanted to wipe away her tears, but I couldn't, and it was very sad."

"I see."

Lady Goldencup looked like she deeply understood.

"That woman was me."

"It definitely wasn't you, Lady... You could never make such a melancholic and noble expression. You're inherently different in atmosphere...."

"Ah. Should I hit you, just like that?"

Lady Goldencup glared at me with narrowed eyes. Normally, I would have bowed my head and said 'I'm sorry,' and then she would reluctantly say 'I'll be generous and understand.'

But I stood up from my chair.

"Butler?"

"I need to go somewhere for a moment."

"Where are you going this late at night? I was about to tell you that I have arranged a dinner appointment with the Crown Prince tomorrow. I was so excited to brag about it. You have a duty to listen to my boasting."

I bowed.

"I'm sorry, Lady. But I must go somewhere."

"....."

Lady Goldencup squinted her eyes. She rested her hands on the back of the chair and stared intently at my face.

"Of course. You have a mind of your own, and with a mind comes thought. But don't come back empty-handed. Stop by the kitchen and steal a muffin or something."

"Tomorrow, the Crown Prince will present you with a ring of blue coral."

Lady Goldencup blinked her eyes.

"What?"

"I shall return shortly."

I walked away.

Behind me, Lady Goldencup shouted, "Butler! Was what you just said true?!" But I ignored her.

"Wait, even if you're going out, at least answer me! Butler,

you scoundrel!"

Since coming to the Sormewin Academy, the Lady had become more demure, but her essence remained that of a street boss. She was the one who used to beat up the kids in her hometown.

'My master.'

I hastened my steps.

It was a path I had never tread before, yet my steps felt familiar.

'It's as if I had walked this same path in the past.'

The residence of the Duchess Silver Lily was open. There were no guards. It should have felt odd, but all I thought was 'it seemed likely.' My steps didn't hesitate as I crossed the garden.

The corridor.

"Have you arrived?"

A single point of moonlight.

".....Were you waiting for me?"

"Yes. Today is the [second] time."

Questions and answers without context. A conversation that couldn't be understood touched the night air. Standing behind a full-length mirror, the Duchess Silver Lily was smiling.

"Look into the mirror."

"....."

"What do you see?"

+

■■■

■■■: ■■

■■ [Mar■], Ro■nce], [■■], [■■]

■■ ■■

■■ ■■■: [Master], [Lover], [■■■ ■■], [■■■], [■■■], [■■ild],
[■■], [■■■■■■■■■■■■], [■■■■ ■■■■■], [■■ ■■■■■]

+

".....I see the words 'Mentor' and 'Lover.' Also the word 'ild.'
There seem to be fragments of smaller letters too, but their
meaning is hard to discern."

"Call out to me."

"Du..."

I was about to call her 'Duchess,' but I stopped myself.

Even though it was the most respectful title for Raviel.

『Never again call me [Duchess] with those lips 』

『I will gouge out your heart and kill you. 』

A conversation we never had before flashed in my mind. It felt like glimpsing a dream from a past life.

I was confused. It seemed I should never call her 'Duchess,' no matter what.

".....Lady."

“Much better.”

The Duchess Silver Lily approached me. Her red eyes looked at me. Just looking, her lips firmly closed.

『What dream did you have?』

Yet I felt as if the Duchess Silver Lily was speaking to me. As if her sealed lips were moving. It was too vivid to be a hallucination, too clear to be a delusion.

“The Lady... was shedding tears.”

『And?』

“You kept calling out to someone. A man was bound in front of the Lady... I think you were calling him. But I can’t remember the man’s name.”

『And?』

“The Lady was stabbing the man with a knife, in agony.”

It was strange.

Why was I endlessly speaking to someone who was silent?
Why did the Duchess Silver Lily listen to me silently?

It was truly strange.

The strangest part was that my heart didn't find this situation awkward at all.

“You are commendable.”

The Duchess Silver Lily patted my head. 'Commendable.' That word resonated deep in my heart. 'Commendable.' It felt like a phrase I had heard long ago, before I was even born.

I thought I smelled a blue fragrance.

"Look here."

The Duchess Silver Lily took something out of her bosom.

It was a card.

".....What is this?"

"It's proof of your efforts for me. Be proud."

The golden card was densely inscribed with words.

+

[A Certain Returner's Love]

Rank: EX

Effect: For a returner, love is like poison. No matter how much they struggle, they can't share time with the one they love. Thus, a certain returner had a burning desire, 'Let my beloved keep her memories.' This desire reached the tower and was granted.

You share a timeline with your beloved. If your lover goes back a day, you go back a day. If you go back a day, so does your lover. This is the vow of a ring. This is a marriage of time.

May fortune be with both of you.

*However, it only activates when you and your lover mutually love each other.

+

"....."

I was inexplicably speechless.

"To think you would say 'Let my beloved keep her memories'."

The Duchess Silver Lily smiled faintly.

"Receiving a proposal in this manner would be troubling. I like your voice. Understand this. If it's not directly from you, I won't listen. So, come back soon."

A stirring in my heart.

"I will kill you. Again and again. As long as showing you my wounds can bring you back, I will show them to you forever."

“Lady.....”

“So, witness my agony. Look at the scars you left on me. Look again and again. Your traces are there.”

The Duchess Silver Lily stretched her hands and grabbed my neck.

"Know that the only person in this world who can kill you is me."

Gently.

"And the only person who can kill me is you."

And then I saw.

[You have died.]

[Re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

I saw, and saw again.

[Your immersion rate is currently 97%.]

I saw the Duchess Silver Lily shedding tears.

I saw her killing a man, again and again.

Every time I returned a day, I lived in her dreams.

[You have died.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 96%.]

We loved each other in a past life.

[You have died.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 95%.]

And we will love each other in this life.

Perhaps even in the next.

[Your immersion rate is currently 94%.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 93%.]

[Your immersion rate is currently 92%.]

That I hurt you. That in places I didn't see, in times I couldn't be with you, you shed tears. You cried silently.

If I do not forget those.

If I remember and keep them in my heart.

[Your immersion rate is currently 91%.]

We can love each other forever.

[Your immersion rate is currently 90%.]

And.

And.

And.

I am returning to you.

Opening the door. Crossing the garden. Running down the corridor.

You were born as the rightful daughter of the Ivansia Ducal family. Born to a sad mother, you were destined for a sorrowful life. Before you were born, your betrothed was chosen, and since then, you devoted your life solely to him.

You were a white flower.

You were called the Moon of Ivansia, also known as the Duchess, and more briefly, as the Lady.

"Have you arrived?"

"....."

You stand in the corridor. In the dark night corridor, you were like an island alone in the middle of the ocean. The endless sea surrounded you. I listened to its waves.

Not as the Duchess of Ivansia, not as Lady Silver Lily.

"Raviel."

The white flower smiles.

"I was waiting for you, Gong-Ja."

I am...

In love with you.

Chapter 111: Her Way of Loving (3)

I rushed in and embraced her.

“Raviel.”

Numerous words swirled in my mouth.

I could have said [I'm sorry].

Sorry for leaving an indelible wound on you.

I am truly sorry.

Maybe I could have said [Thank you].

Thankful for believing in me, for waiting for me, and above all, for loving me.

For loving someone like me.

But the words I wanted to utter were neither an apology nor gratitude. It wasn't the first time I apologized to her, nor was it the first time I expressed gratitude.

At this moment.

On this night when we met again, I didn't want to offer apologies or thanks.

‘Words I’ve never said before.’

I wanted to tell her something that could only be given once. A language that I could only speak once in my life. My first. My last. I wanted to dedicate my time to Raviel Ivansia.

So. Therefore, for that reason.

I took Raviel's hand.

“Let's get married.”

A marriage proposal.

"....."

Raviel slowly nodded her head.

“I am known by many names. His Majesty the Emperor called me Silver Lily. In the empire, I dedicated myself as the Duchess Ivansia. However, my name, Raviel, will always remain vacant just to be called by you.”

We kissed.

Deeply.

The two of us woke up at dawn.

The window was pale blue color.

As I turned my head to the sound of breathing, Raviel was silently looking at me.

"....."

"....."

I, too, silently looked at Raviel and moved my hand to clasp hers. Cool fingers entwined with mine. Beautiful person. We shared breaths, intertwined our fingers, and pressed our foreheads together.

"Raviel is a genius."

It was dawn. At this hour of dawn, every encounter becomes a clandestine meeting, every whisper a secret word. Thus, those who spend the dawn together are lovers.

I whispered.

“You’re incredible. To use my trauma in reverse to transfer memories to me... Truly, you are amazing. I would never have thought of such a method.”

“You have a way of sanctifying others’ pain.”

Raviel’s touch grazed my earlobe.

“You are equally remarkable. How did you ever persuade the tower? To all the Constellations, the tower is like an untouchable administrator. I knew you had a sweet tongue, but to persuade the tower is something else.”

“Hmm. Actually, I don’t quite remember. It comes back to me vaguely like a dream. Perhaps after meeting the tower’s higher-ups, a veil falls over your memory.”

“That doesn’t change in the fact that you succeeded. My lover is quite capable.”

“And my lover is a genius.”

“An undeniable truth.”

We rubbed our foreheads together.

Astonishing each other.

No hint of vanity or pretense.

This fact made me endlessly happy.

“When shall we marry?”

“Are you in a hurry?”

“That tone sounds a bit unfair.”

Raviel chuckled softly. It was thrilling. Static electricity rose from my spine to my head. No music was as beautiful as the sound of Raviel's soft laugh.

“The first step is to break off the engagement with His Highness the Crown Prince.”

“Ah.”

Indeed.

Raviel nodded.

“His Highness and I are bound by an engagement. Marrying you under these circumstances would be legally troublesome.”

“Hmm, actually, I'm fine with a non-legal marriage. Just a small ceremony for the two of us would be enough.”

“No. It matters to me.”

Raviel stroked my cheek.

“This is the world I live in. The empire is the nation I serve and care for. If it's my world and my country, then they must recognize my marriage. Even if you are a commoner here, as my lover, all citizens of the empire should bless you.”

“Oh. But it might be difficult to expect such a reaction from

people...”

“It’s alright, Gong-Ja.”

Raviel was calm.

“Any citizen who doesn’t bless us will die by my hand.”

What should I do? She’s too cool. I fell for her again. I want to keep falling.

“Alright. Let's have the wedding in Raviel's world. But I have a condition too.”

“Speak.”

“You must be the one to break off the engagement with the Crown Prince. If I hear anyone talk behind my back about you, I won’t be able to forgive them.”

If there’s someone pointing a finger at my lover, I’ll crush that finger. If someone badmouths her, I’ll cut off their tongue.

If someone slanders her, I'll kill them.

This is no joke.

I'll show them hell.

“It must be clear to everyone that the Crown Prince is at fault.”

“Oh? Are you asking me to insult the foundation of the empire? Me, the heir of the Ivansia ducal family, who works in the shadows for the nation?”

“Yes.”

“That's easy.”

The two of us shared a moment of kissing.

Life became a bit richer.

“Do you have a plan?”

“Of course. Who are you asking? Every time His Highness has a secret meeting with Goldencup, a document gets added to my library drawer. Hundreds of such documents have been collected. Alibis and witnesses are all prepared. It’s a guaranteed win in court.”

What should I do? She’s too cool. I fell for her again. I want to keep falling.

“Of course, there’s no need to really go to court. The royal family wouldn’t want such a matter discussed. I just need to bring the evidence and request an audience with His Majesty.”

“When do you plan to go to the palace?”

“As soon as possible.”

Raviel quietly brushed my bangs.

“Gong-Ja. Once we’re married, you’ll be the consort of the Ivansia ducal house. The royal family will bestow a title on you. And I will become your matriarch.”

My heart raced.

“In public, I will address you as my consort. You will call me your matriarch. Is that alright?”

“It's a hierarchical society. Raviel is the head of the Ivansia family. I'm just a foreigner. Don't worry. I will abide by the laws of the empire. I don't mind any of that.....”

“I'm glad to hear that. I thought you'd be fine with it. So, try calling me matriarch as a test.”

I hesitated.

“Why? Are you embarrassed?”

“.....”

“You're embarrassed. I knew it. Let me show you first.”

Raviel smiled with her eyes.

“Consort.”

My heart.

"....."

I swallowed. Saliva stuck thickly in my throat. As I slowly opened my mouth, it didn't work well. My upper lip slipped against my lower lip several times before I could barely make a sound.

“.....Ma... triarch.”

Raviel blinked.

Silence descended.

My lover's red eyes stared straight at me. How should I put it? It was like seeing the soles of a hedgehog's feet for the first time. In short, I couldn't figure out her expression.

“Gong-Ja.”

“Yes.”

“Say it once more.”

".....,Matriarch?"

“Once more.”

Uh.

“Matriarch.....?”

Raviel’s eyelashes trembled slightly. Her shoulders shrank a bit.

‘What kind of reaction is this?’

At first, I didn’t notice due to Raviel's impassive face, but then I realized. Could it be? Maybe? Possibly. I thought it impossible even if the world fell apart.

“Raviel. Are you embarrassed right now?”

“Hmm...”

Raviel let out a soft moan.

“You’re incredibly adorable. My man.....”

Embarrassment spread instantly. Insane.

My face flushed red, and my lips dried. But my mind was still spinning. Now would be the perfect time to retort with [But Raviel, you are the cutest in the world]. I could return the damage I’ve received from Raviel. But I couldn’t do it. I felt too embarrassed.

Instead, I decided to compromise.

“Matriarch.”

An exchange of affection rather than a unilateral attack. A draw with neither winner nor loser. Did Raviel catch on to my

tactic? She also opened her lips.

“.....Consort.”

“Matriarch.”

“Consort.”

“Matriarch!”

“Consort.....”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“My matriarch.....”

“My consort.”

That scene replayed endlessly.

When I came to my senses, dawn had turned to morning.

-Damn it. That damn bastard...

Guardian Spirit grumbled, turning his back to me. In his own way, he was respecting our privacy.

-Damn couple. Crazy lovebirds. Pair of lunatics. Shii-it, when you were immersed in being a butler and lost your senses, how desperately did I call out to you? Huh? Right after regaining consciousness, not a word of thanks to me, just thumping hearts with your lover? Huh? Do I look that easy? Really, should I just achieve Nirvana now? Huh?

[Shiny offers words of consolation to the Sword Emperor.]

-Ah, now you're all I have left, Shiny!

A ghost and a sword forged a mysterious friendship.

‘I’m sorry and thankful to you guys too.’

But for now, I just want to love my love a bit more.

In the midst of love, I revisited the objective of this stage.

[Prevent the destruction of this world.]

The primary cause of this world's destruction was my matriarch's artifact, the fragments of the holy sword and the runaway wishes.

‘In other words, if I retrieve the fragments of the holy sword, the risk of this world being destroyed by demons will disappear.’

But that wasn't the only reason leading to this world's destruction.

-Apostle of 'Ruin-Harvesting Cow'.

-Apostle of 'Warhorse of the Eternal Plains'.

-Apostle of 'The Immortal Missionary of Happiness'.

Beings from other realms descending through the torn sky on the last day.

I clearly remember the invasion of apostles sent by other Constellations.

'They will surely come.'

The fact that the stage clear message hasn't appeared yet was proof enough.

'My matriarch had awakened as a half-Constellation by embedding the fragment of the holy sword in her heart.'

In other words, a Constellation is a representative of a world, a barrier protecting it.

This meant that this world had about half a barrier.

But now, my matriarch hadn't embedded the holy sword in her heart, thus there was no awakening as a Constellation.

In the truest sense, there was no Constellation in this world right now.

“I’ll set the wedding date for a month from now.”

A month from now.

“That’s exactly ten days after the point I possessed this body.”

“That's right. I deliberately chose that date.”

My matriarch had intentionally set the day of the world's destruction as our wedding date. To negate the time of the world's end and make it our starting point.

How splendid.

“It's going to be quite a struggle. Everything needs to go

smoothly for the wedding to happen a month from now.”

“What kind of things need to be resolved?”

“First is breaking off the engagement with the Crown Prince. Second is my succession of my father's title.”

Raviel spoke as if it were obvious.

“It's difficult to marry you as a lady. There would be legal complications, and the social circles would be abuzz if I brought in a commoner as my betrothed. Annoying. It's better for me to become a duke and receive you as my consort. As the head of the family, I can handle many things my way.”

“Uh...”

I was at a loss for words.

“Raviel. I still have some memories of being a butler. Isn't it quite difficult for an heir to ascend as the head of the family? Especially for Ivansia. The noble and great Ivansia family. Just because Raviel wishes it doesn't mean you can easily succeed the dukedom...”

“That's true. If I weren't Raviel Ivansia, it would have been difficult.”

Raviel spoke calmly.

“But I am Raviel Ivansia.”

What should I do? She's too cool. I fell for her again. I want to keep falling.

“My family's vassals have already sworn allegiance to me. I hold the military power. If my father still doesn't want to relinquish power, he has no choice but to plead with His Majesty.”

Thud.

Raviel placed a stack of documents on the table.

“I have more than enough evidence of His Highness's infidelity. His Majesty is as competent as his special forces. He will choose to protect the dignity of the royal family rather than keeping loyalty to my powerless father.”

“That sounds like a loyal statement, but Raviel. That’s basically blackmailing His Majesty with a weakness, isn’t it...?”

“Consort.”

Raviel looked at me seriously. The word consort made me flinch.

We both deliberately used the terms [consort] and [matriarch] when alone to get used to them.

“Yes, matriarch.”

“You have a job in the tower, not in this world. I will understand if you don’t return to our empire often, just as you understand why I can’t give up my nobility.”

It sounds like I’m a husband working abroad...

“But there are times when you must be with me. End-of-year events, New Year’s events, things like that. And events involving a duke’s couple are always political. You will become the moon of Ivansia and, except for the empress, the most

revered consort in the empire. You should become somewhat versed in politics.”

Hmm. So.

“Loyalty to His Majesty and blackmailing the royal family can coexist. Becoming the head of the ducal family won’t be detrimental to the empire. Rather, it’s fortunate to welcome a noble as capable as you, matriarch.”

“My consort knows two things for every one thing taught. Capable, smart, and cool.”

“Of course. I am Raviel’s man.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

The two of us shared a moment of kissing.

Life became a bit richer.

-Shiii-it...

For some reason, the ghost's face became increasingly gaunt.

-Who is it? Who taught this lunatic about love? Who labeled his craziness and afflictions as love?... Why does he love? If he had not loved, I could have still been happy...

[Shiny sadly points out the Sword Emperor.]

-I should have killed him. I should have...

And so, we became busy.

For the best happy ending--- no.

For the best wedding.

Chapter 112: Holy War (1)

Romance Fantasy Rule 999

『Love needs no norms.』

Sometimes in life, you unexpectedly receive a gift.

“Lady Goldencup. I have something urgent to tell you.”

“Heh, it’s been a while since you called me [Lady Goldencup] instead of [Lady]. Every time you do, something ominous happens. Let me guess what it is this time.”

Baroness Goldencup slowly lifted her teacup.

The epitome of elegance.

“Do I have a hidden half-sister?”

“No.”

“I see. So, my mother was actually an illegitimate child of the previous emperor, meaning I too have royal blood? And my love for His Highness the Crown Prince is forbidden?”

“No.”

“Or do I have a hidden half-sister and a hidden lineage, making me the perfect protagonist of an incredible story?”

“No.”

“Then what is it, you son of a bitch?”

“I’m getting married soon.”

“Oh. Marriage, huh. Marriage---.”

Pffft!

Baroness Goldencup spat out her tea. Mostly on my face.

Elegance was nowhere to be found.

“Marriage?!”

“Yes.”

“Marriiiiage?!”

“That’s correct.”

“If this is a joke, it’s a very low one, butler! Do you want to get hit after a long time?!”

“It’s not a joke.”

I wiped my face with a handkerchief.

“Why would I joke about such a thing with you, Lady? I’m really getting married. There’s no use trying to stop me. The wedding date is already set for a month from now.”

“Who, who’s the bride?”

“Lady Silver Lily.”

“Ah, see. It was a lie after all.”

Baroness Goldencup sighed in relief.

A face relieved as if, even if the world ended, there was no chance of Raviel and I getting married. Well, that’s a normal reaction, I guess.

“You think it’s a lie?”

“Yes. Not just a lie, a blatant lie. If you’re going to deceive me, at least come up with a more plausible lie. You fail in the creativity department.”

“What if it’s true? Would you give your blessing to my marriage?”

“Ahaha. Sure, sure. I’ll gladly give my blessing, Butler. If it’s true, that is. To think that my butler is betrothed to the most noble family in the empire, that’s a huge benefit for me personally, right? Our family’s status will leap six steps at once?”

“Please stamp here.”

"Huh?"

I presented a document I had prepared earlier.

“What is this, butler?”

“When I marry Lady Raviel Ivansia, as your butler, I will be released from serving under you. I will become the consort of the Ivansia family.”

"Pfft!"

Baroness Goldencup burst into laughter, clutching her belly.

“The consort of the Ivansia family... Hah! What’s that? A joke? Comedy? Our butler is going to be called [Lady of the Ivansia Duke]? Just imagining it is damn hilarious. It’s more plausible for me to become the empress of the empire.”

As she laughed, Baroness Goldencup showed a different kind of smile.

“Well, that’s how it will be this time.”

Hmm.

I recalled the summary I read before entering this apocalypse.

‘The second-cycle heroine.’

Reflecting on everything up to now – the identity of Goldencup, the Heretic Inquisitor yet to possess her, and more – I buried these thoughts for a moment.

“Will you stamp it, please?”

Baroness Goldencup laughed again.

“Oh, gladly. This will add to the butler's dark history. As a generous master, I can't ignore such hilarious content.”

“Thank you. Then I'll bring the future matriarch tomorrow.”

“Sure. Yeah. Lady of the Ivansia Duke. The second brightest moon of the empire. Do enjoy playing with your imaginary matriarch.”

The next day.

I stood before Baroness Goldencup with Raviel.

“I've brought her, Lady.”

"....."

Baroness Goldencup's mouth dropped open.

“I assume you know, but allow me to introduce myself once more.”

Raviel, flipping her fan, said,

“I am the legitimate daughter and heir of the Ivansia Ducal family, Raviel Ivansia. I have received the title of Silver Lily from His Majesty.”

“Uh? Ah. Yes, of course, I know. Lady...?”

“I am fortunate to be betrothed to your butler. The butler is bound to you. Without your permission, our marriage would be difficult, but you’ve graciously granted it. I’m grateful.”

“Yes.....?”

“This is the wedding invitation.”

Raviel tossed the letter. Its border was adorned with silver

threads. In the center, a red wax seal stamped with the Ivansia family crest. Baroness Goldencup, stunned, received the letter.

“Be happy. You’re the first to receive this invitation. I hope you regard it as a great honor. Well, it’s a modest gift for taking care of the butler until now.”

“Bu-butler.....? This is a joke, right.....?”

“How rude. From today, this man is no longer your butler, but my fiancé. I trust you don’t think the Ivansia family’s status is lower than your baronial house. From now on, treat my fiancé with proper respect.”

“Du, du, duke’s... consort.....?”

Baroness Goldencup stared at me with a lost expression. Her eyes pleaded for me to deny the title she just uttered.

I bowed politely.

“It was an honor to serve you, Lady.”

"....."

"But from now on, please call me consort. Respectfully."

"....."

"Shall we go? Raviel."

"Heh. I told you to call me matriarch in front of others."

"Ah, my apologies, matriarch. I'm still not used to the title..."

"My consort is quite mischievous. I love that too about you."

"I love you."

We left side by side.

Shortly after, a distant scream echoed behind us.

“What is this noooooo-?!”

In the spring when magnolias wither.

The wedding was approaching.

My lover, Raviel Ivansia, is a woman of her word.

If Raviel says she will have a wedding in a month, there will indeed be a wedding in a month.

“I’ve placed my father under house arrest in the villa.”

Raviel casually mentioned it.

“There are still some who follow my father in the family, but they are a minority. Ignorable. I’ve negotiated with His Majesty and formally received recognition for my succession, so I am essentially the Ivansia Duke. No longer Lady Silver Lily, but Duke Silver Lily.”

“Uh...”

Suddenly, my father-in-law was under house arrest.

‘Is this really okay?’

Feeling an uncomfortable sense of impropriety towards my father-in-law whom I never met, Raviel looked at me.

“Now you are officially the fiancé of the Ivansia Duke. You’ve become the mistress of the second highest-ranking family after the royal family.”

"....."

“Except for His Majesty, the Empress, and the Crown Prince, there’s no one you need to bow to first. At least not in this empire. Regardless of their status, all citizens of the empire must bow to you. In places where the royal family is not present, you deserve the highest honor.”

Raviel was serious.

Only after hearing her words did I realize that [something very big] was happening.

Until now, I approached our wedding out of love for Raviel. That love was sweet. Romantic. But for Raviel, marriage was more than just romance.

Sensing the enormity of that something, I spoke.

“But I am merely a commoner...”

“Of course, the rabble of high society will whisper. Gong-Ja. Your origin is like the uncomfortable hem of a dress, following you wherever you go. But the maximum measures have been taken.”

Measures.

“What kind of measures?”

“You will first be registered as the adopted son of the royal chief butler.”

Raviel handed me a document.

“The current chief butler has long served the royal family. He’s been granted a noble title, his personal life is clean, and his honor is high. Most importantly, he has no children. You will become the adopted son of this old chief butler and elevate your status.”

My goodness.

Really, my goodness.

“Can... can we do that?”

“We can. If I wish it.”

Even now, Raviel was busy processing mountains of documents. Her quill moved ceaselessly. What these documents were and what political impact they would have, I couldn’t even guess.

“All cumbersome procedures have been bypassed. Just sign the document. Then you will be officially recognized as the adopted son of the royal chief butler.”

"....."

Indeed.

The marriage was reality.

My father-in-law, whom I had never met, was under house arrest. I also became the adopted son of someone I had never met. Something was happening beyond my knowledge.

As I signed the adoption papers, I belatedly realized.

[Being the husband of the Ivansia Duke] was an immensely significant matter.

This was vividly proven in a scene I encountered a few days later.

"I offer my greetings to the person who will become the empire's second brightest moon."

Just walking around the academy, young ladies and

gentlemen who recognized me kneeled. Their respect was impeccable. The news had already spread throughout the academy.

“I offer my respects to the mistress of Ivansia.”

“Ah. Yes...”

“Congratulations on your betrothal. May everlasting glory be with Ivansia.”

“Th-thank you.”

Whenever I walked by, the young ladies and gentlemen stopped their chatter and what they were doing. They respectfully maintained silence until I passed. The academy's guards and knights saluted me respectfully.

There were no exceptions.

Even the academy's teachers naturally bowed.

"....."

When I ranked third in the tower, when I became a star surrounded by crowds... I had never felt like this.

‘This is, class.’

Not a star. Not a celebrity. They didn’t surround me or raise their smartphones to capture my face.

They just kneeled.

‘...Amazing.’

Perhaps people behaved like this only in my presence.

As soon as I disappeared, all sorts of nasty rumors and vile gossip about my humble origin, about the abrupt end to the Crown Prince and Raviel’s engagement, would circulate.

But no one dared to mutter in front of me.

“Eek!”

Crash!

One day, a servant in the academy accidentally broke a water bottle while I was passing by. Unthinkingly about to say [Are you okay?], I stopped as six servants simultaneously kneeled.

“We a-apologize!”

“We have committed a grave sin!”

“Please forgive us for our foolish mistake!”

I was speechless.

Not because I was overwhelmed for another reason.

The fact that they naturally sought my forgiveness. The fact that I had the right to [forgive them] paralyzed my thoughts.

In other words, it was also within my right to not forgive and punish them.

"....."

This was madness.

An insane situation.

-What's wrong? This is natural.

Guardian Spirit floated in the air, swimming leisurely.

-It's strange that your tower doesn't have nominal classes or ranks. Didn't you know? You'd realize if you went up to the 50th floor, most towers have class societies.

I remembered something about competing with other worlds' towers beyond the 50th floor.

Guardian Spirit flicked his ear and blew on his finger.

-Your matriarch's Ivansia family is one of the most powerful families here, second only to the royal family. So, you're practically the queen.

Queen.

-Congratulations on becoming Cinderella. You rascal.

The servants remained prostrated in the corridor, trembling.

Suddenly, Raviel's words came to mind.

『All citizens of the empire must bless you.』

『If it's my world and my country, they should rightfully recognize my marriage.』

That's exactly what it meant.

In just a few days, I had reached the top of the pyramid.

I had ascended to the pinnacle of power.

‘This is... Raviel’s world.’

Then.

‘How should I behave?’

Not just as [Kim Gong-Ja].

Not as the Hunter with the alias [King of Death].

But as the [spouse] of the most noble aristocrat in this country.

"....."

I bent down.

And picked up the fragments of the broken water bottle.

I placed them gently on the palm of the servant who made the mistake.

“Turn this fragment into a necklace and wear it.”

I spoke.

“The necklace is the ornament closest to the heart. Keep your mistake close to your heart, to reflect and repent on your own.”

"....."

“Don’t wait for my forgiveness. When you think you’ve sufficiently reflected, forgive yourself. Understand?”

“Yes, yes...!”

I turned and walked away.

That evening, Raviel said,

“You showed thoughtful handling today, consort.”

I was slicing meat with a knife and fork, learning table manners. To ensure I could watch and learn sufficiently, Raviel deliberately moved her hands slowly across from me.

“Yes. Uh. Did I do well?”

“Exceptionally well. Had you easily forgiven at that moment, they would have said, [He’s too lenient with inferiors due to his humble origins. How can he lead the duke’s family with such attitude?]. Had you been stern, they would’ve said, [He’s become arrogant overnight due to his sudden rise].”

Either way, it was a loss.

“To be criticized whether you forgive or scold. At such times, the essence of the incident is not important. The packaging is. You created a beautiful story and skillfully wrapped up the incident.”

Raviel smiled.

“Today’s event has already spread in the empire’s high

society. Those purely curious will admire your heart, and the shrewd will acknowledge your wisdom. I thought you were a novice in politics, but what magic did my lover use?"

"...I just thought of Raviel."

My knife sliced through an egg yolk.

The color of a young chick crumbled.

"Somewhere I can't see, somewhere I don't know, I realized you're running around tremendously."

"Hmm."

"As you think of me so earnestly, naturally, I also started thinking of you."

I simply thought from Raviel's perspective.

『How should I behave to be the best for my wife?』

“Had I forgiven the servant, I would’ve been regarded as a generous duchess. Had I scolded, I would’ve been a strict duchess. But being perceived as [a wise consort] would be the most helpful for Raviel.”

“Why?”

“Me being generous doesn’t make Raviel generous. Me being strict doesn’t make Raviel strict.”

The candle on the table flickered.

“But if I’m wise, Raviel becomes wise too. Because choosing [a wise spouse] itself means Raviel is wise.”

"....."

Raviel wiped her lips with a white napkin.

“You thought of me.”

“Yes.”

“Gong-Ja. You have already helped me. Though others may not know, you have saved this world from destruction. And you will continue to do so. Can't you be a bit more whimsical?”

“No.”

I shook my head firmly.

“I’ll spend my lifetime with Raviel. A lifetime. I don’t want to fixate on [what I have done for Raviel]. I don’t even want to think about it. I want to give you more, something more precious than I have ever given before.”

"....."

“I hope that meeting me will be the greatest fortune in Raviel’s life. I hope being with me will be the greatest happiness. I want to be the most significant meaning only to you, Raviel.”

“It’s not just fortune or happiness.”

Raviel stood up from the table.

She slowly approached me and bent down.

“You are a miracle to me.”

Our lips met.

Of course, not everyone succumbed to the name of Ivansia.

“I! Oppose! This marriage!”

Baroness Goldencup came to me every day to complain. With the Crown Prince summoned by the emperor, she dared not confront Raviel directly and only protested to me.

“Didn’t you already stamp the document?”

“It’s invalid, invalid! I stamped it thinking it was a joke!”

“Regardless of your thoughts, the document is legally perfect.”

“Uh... Ugh!”

Baroness Goldencup bit her fingertips.

“This is strange. It wasn’t like this last time... Is it a butterfly effect caused by me? No, that doesn’t seem right... Ah, Ruin-Harvesting Cow, what is this...?”

Ruin-Harvesting Cow.

I tilted my head as if hearing the keyword for the first time.

“What do you mean?”

“...Nothing!”

Baroness Goldencup clenched her teeth.

"Fine. Anyway, this must be another scheme by Lady Silver Lily!"

“It’s Duke Silver Lily. Soon to be a duke. Please maintain respect.”

“Eek. Butler, I really hate you! I will never forgive you!”

Baroness Goldencup glared at me and left the room. The door slammed shut, rattling its hinges. It was an open declaration of not accepting this marriage. Probably, Baroness Goldencup would be the biggest obstacle to the wedding.

But I wasn’t worried at all.

Ten days before the wedding.

“Gong-Ja!”

Someone dressed like Baroness Goldencup burst in.

“It seems I have become the protagonist of this apocalypse!”

I smiled, still seated.

“Heretic Inquisitor.”

“Yes! Gong-Ja!”

“In ten days, the apostles of otherworldly constellations will invade.”

Speaking to my ally who turned from the greatest obstacle to the best supporter.

"Please prepare for the Holy War, SSS-Class Clergy."

Chapter 113: Holy War (2)

The Heretic Inquisitor.

A bearer of an alias. A so-called first-generation Hunter who has been active since the early days of the tower's establishment. A psychopathic blonde who decisively hunted down extremists in various countries, in regions without established nations, and in areas where nations had collapsed, stabilizing the tower amidst the influx of countless people.

“I interpret constellations as deities of other worlds!”

Now, recognized as a specialist in the Pantheon of Religions, managing all religions on Earth under the 'Temple of the Omnipotent God,' the Heretic Inquisitor smiled broadly.

“A deity, simply put, is a law! For instance, in our world, Earth, there's the law of physics! This law of physics is like a basic Windows operating system installed everywhere, so it's nothing special! That's why there's nothing particularly special about our world!”

Huh.

“But we have nuclear weapons and guns, right?”

“As I said, the law of physics is a basic foundation installed everywhere! Thus, those two could potentially emerge in any world if technology develops sufficiently!”

However, the Heretic Inquisitor noted, in worlds where magic and miracles are commonplace, purely physics-based technological development might be challenging. Nonetheless, it doesn't mean that nuclear weapons and guns couldn't be invented in other worlds.

‘Indeed, there were apocalypses that perished in nuclear wars. Our 23rd floor, the Chronicles of the Space Iron Knight, was also SF....’

So, is Earth among the weakest of worlds?

It made sense that magic and skills weren't commonplace before the tower emerged, but it still felt odd to hear that our home planet, Earth, was weak. Is this a sense of patriotism? Or should I call it love for one's star?

“But as you mentioned, guns and nuclear weapons are indeed powerful weapons! Unleashing them could defeat most of the apostles of constellations!”

“Indeed.”

Raviel tapped her lips with the tip of her fan.

“So, as physical laws are fundamentally the base, physical force is also fundamentally applicable.”

“A precise understanding! Physical entities that don’t exist or can’t exert physical force are naturally powerless. And if they possess a physical form, physical attacks are logically effective! The efficiency issue remains, whether they fully absorb the physical force or mitigate it!”

The floating Sword Emperor let out a small exclamation.

-Heh, that guy’s smart.

‘Does it sound right to you, Sword Emperor?’

-Yeah. That's why Constellation Killer shattered auras with a flash of light, and why I managed fine just practicing swordsmanship. And that girl controlling the Black Dragon Guild, she could obliterate Preta with a beam. Physical force is a powerful law.

[Shiny nods with a gloomy expression.]

-Depending on how much one adheres to or deviates from this law of physics, the rank of the respective constellation is determined.

That sounded intriguing, but the Heretic Inquisitor elaborated just in time.

“This ‘mitigating physical force’ part I just mentioned is surprisingly important! It means following physical laws, yet not being completely bound by them! And how that's possible is---”

“---the constellations each have their own laws, and their apostles oppose physical laws with these unique laws of their own.”

“Wow! As expected, the wisdom of the King of Death's spouse is immaculate!”

“Of course.”

My spouse charmingly uttered those loving words. Just that made me confident that Raviel was illuminating this little tactical meeting.

-Gong-Ja, focus? This is the moment that decides whether this world survives or not.

[Shiny leaps up and smacks the back of the warrior's neck.]

Whoa.

Such pitiful fellows who don't understand love.

-Ah, stop the nonsense, zombie.

[Shiny looks at the warrior with eyes like a rotten fish.]

‘But Shiny, you don't have eyes.’

[Shiny indicates the gemstone on its sheath.]

Following its cue, I looked at Shiny's sheath decoration, where the color of the gemstone had faintly changed.

Hmm.

‘Got it, I’ll be careful.’

-Focus.

‘Yes.’

1. Each constellation has its own laws.

2. Apostles also follow those laws.

“What kind of laws do they have?”

“Hmm! For example, there's a constellation called Baravit.”

The Heretic Inquisitor added, known as the ‘God of Love.’

“This constellation interprets [everything in the world as romance]. In a world governed by Baravit, power and wealth are meaningless! One’s strength is determined by how strong their romantic power is.”

“Romantic power? What is that?”

“Hmm! Seeing is believing.”

The Heretic Inquisitor formed hand seals.

“Holy Technique, God of Desire.”

Paat!

Light spread from the Heretic Inquisitor’s hands. Not just white light, but a slightly dense, pinkish... fragrance-like mist wafted around.

“Ah, now I’ve temporarily invoked the domain of Baravit

here! Please, take any action, King of Death!”

"Um..."

I looked around awkwardly. It was late at night. The three of us – the Heretic Inquisitor, Raviel, and I – were in the duke's residence, planning a strategy for the upcoming invasion in ten days.

"...Except for the pink mist, nothing much seems different?"

“Excuse me for a moment!”

That's when the Heretic Inquisitor tripped me. As I stumbled, saying "Uh?" and started to fall, I accidentally grabbed Raviel's arm, saying "Uh."

“Uh-oh?” We both fell to the floor.

“Oho.”

Raviel looked down at me intently. I ended up on top of her.

It all happened in an instant.

“Gong-Ja. Such affectionate behavior in front of others is inappropriate.”

“Uh. Uh...”

I was flustered.

“No, no! Not that, Raviel! I was just about to fall...”

“Ahaha.”

The Heretic Inquisitor chuckled.

“A typical scene from a romance!”

“Heretic Inquisitor, this is...?”

“In God Baravit's domain, every action leads to romance!

Even falling isn't just falling, but pulling someone nearby. Um. For example, if the King of Death was wearing a shirt and drinking water, there's a 95% chance of spilling it and revealing his undershirt! The ensuing heart flutter of those around is inevitable!"

Good heavens. What is that? Cosmic horror?

"Domains reinterpret the world and brainwash people. The Great Library we were just in does the same! The Head Librarian interprets the world as a [collection of stories], and there, we are [characters in a story]."

Paat.

The Heretic Inquisitor formed seals again, and the pink mist blanketing the floor disappeared. I blushed and got off Raviel.

The Heretic Inquisitor beamed and said.

"Defeating those who possess their own laws with laws we can use. I define this as a Holy War and a Star War!"

A Holy War and a Star War.

“Then, how should we act in the Holy War happening in ten days?”

“That depends on which constellations we are facing! As you can infer from what I've said, the method of dealing varies based on the laws of the respective constellations!”

“Certainly. Knowing the enemy before the war is of utmost importance.”

Raviel, with her fan's tip on her lips, nodded in agreement.

“Yes! So, who exactly are the apostles of the constellations invading in ten days?”

Hmm.

“If I tell you their constellations, will you recognize them?”

“If you give their true names, I can! I can check with my skill, [Temple of the Omnipotent God]!”

Remembering this young man... or rather, currently possessing the body of Goldencup, this woman's... anyway, recalling information about this person, I thought:

‘It was around the time we were fighting Preta on the 13th floor.’

When I was busy throwing around prophecies as a prophet, the Heretic Inquisitor, though relying on skill, was well-versed in religions of other worlds, as mentioned by the Black Dragon Witch.

Alright.

“Can you infer their true names from their epithets?”

“If they are famous enough, yes!”

Then, it's clear.

“[Ruin-Harvesting Cow], [Warhorse of the Eternal Plains], [The Immortal Missionary of Happiness].”

"Hmm."

The Heretic Inquisitor pondered.

“[Ruin-Harvesting Cow] is Mutia. Mainly governing the areas of [Destruction] and [Recreation]. Simple but powerful.”

Destruction and recreation.

“How do they fight?”

“Let's see. They can exercise physical force very powerfully, at will! Either flattening a wide area or disassembling the physical structure of a specific entity, or, oh, creating golems through disassembly and reassembly. It's rare, but some exercise their power over time as well! Time itself is physical, after all!”

So, Goldencup's 'second-round protagonist' trait was due to Mutia's power.

An apostle of an outer constellation was already in this world.

‘Did the Holed-Up Head Librarian choose this world as an apocalypse because of that?’

In the style of the Holed-Up Head Librarian, did he ‘intervene’ because it wasn’t their story but one already tampered with by an outer constellation? Or was it simply

Speaking in the style of the Holed-Up Head Librarian, was it because this wasn’t their story but one already tampered with by an outer constellation, allowing them to ‘intervene’? Or was it simply because, as Raviel said, there were no constellations in this world?

‘It seems more likely the former, considering the Head Librarian’s tendencies.’

While pondering this, the Heretic Inquisitor continued.

“[Warhorse of the Eternal Plains] is the epithet for Mahos. Mainly overseeing the realms of [Duel] and [War]. Although straightforward, these powers are formidable!”

Duel and war.

“So, it becomes impossible to refuse a duel challenge?”

“Yes! Or it could widely spread a battle frenzy that fears no death, or gain wisdom in tactics and strategy! Ah, inversely, ‘banning war itself’ to forcibly create a peace zone is also possible! This is quite rare, though!”

“A warlord overseeing peace... sounds a bit odd.”

Hearing my mutter, Raviel smiled slightly.

“What's so odd about it? Peace is merely a state where [war has ceased]. Therefore, those who can enforce war can naturally enforce peace as well.”

“Indeed, a precise understanding!”

The Heretic Inquisitor beamed brightly.

“[The Immortal Missionary of Happiness], I don't know their true name. Seems they are not famous enough yet!”

An unknown entity.

‘Not being famous could mean they are weaker, which might be an advantage for us?’

Lost in thought, Shiny trembled.

[Shiny requests to ask about 'Goddess of Protection' as well.]

‘Shiny... you should focus on the meeting...’

[Shiny insists it's a crucial matter!]

‘Why are you like this...’

[Shiny declares it's solely to verify the accuracy of the Heretic Inquisitor's knowledge of constellations, with no personal interest!]

Hmm.

“This might be a bit off-topic, but do you know anything about the [Goddess of Protection]?”

“Oh ho.”

The Heretic Inquisitor grinned.

“[Goddess of Protection] is the epithet for Hwiya! Mainly overseeing the realms of [Protection] and [Immortality]. Quite a powerful deity, but currently, according to my skill [Temple of the Omnipotent God], they have lost much of their power.”

[Shiny sparkles, indicating that the Heretic Inquisitor can be trusted!]

“Gong-Ja, why is your sword doing that? It's dazzling.”

“Just a moment, I'll soothe it...”

[Shiny cries out, asking to be left alone.]

Anyway, with the former constellation Shiny confirming (to

me) the accuracy of the Heretic Inquisitor's information, Raviel tapped her chin with her fan.

“Troublesome... Different types of enemies, one of each kind. Three in total, huh.”

“Depending on which divine power of the deity the apostle can borrow, it becomes even more complex!”

“Yet, we can grasp the general tendencies. Thank you for sharing the information.”

“Ahaha, saving this world is also a benefit to our tower! Naturally, it's efficient to help!”

“Is that so.”

“Yes! And my other skill [Holy Technique] can almost borrow the power of a deity whose true name I know! Adding your strengths, a way will surely emerge!”

Our strengths.

Raviel and I looked at each other and simultaneously opened our lips.

“It’s love.”

“Love indeed.”

There might be many who are better at fighting or smarter than us, but there is one thing we are certain of – our depth of love is unmatched.

“.....Huh?”

The Heretic Inquisitor tilted his head.

“It’s strange. Seeing you two being sweet together makes my heart feel tender and tingly. It’s a sensation I’ve never felt before. What could it be?”

“Angina pectoris.”

“The immersion rate is increasing! How should I interpret

this?”

“No... First, be cautious about that immersion rate thing.”

It would be a catastrophe if Goldencup consumes the Heretic Inquisitor before the Holy War.

Knowing what I had already explained, Raviel also understood. She said,

“The ‘love’ we just mentioned has another meaning beyond the typical one.”

“What might that be?”

“Sorry, but we can't share that. It's sort of a secret weapon.”

“Hmm, it's difficult to incorporate it into the strategy...”

“No worries. Let's discuss basic tactics and strategy instead. As a ruler of this world, I can deploy substantial security forces to the wedding venue. For instance, I could borrow the Special

Forces from His Majesty the Emperor...”

“Oh ho. How powerful are these Special Forces...”

Thus, Raviel and the Heretic Inquisitor continued their discussion.

‘It’s possible.’

Once rivals in love, now these two, though one of them has changed content, were harmoniously resolving to fight together. It brought an inexplicable sense of optimism to me.

‘This will definitely work!’

Just as I was affirming my conviction, the Guardian Spirit threw cold water on it.

-Gong-Ja, snap out of it. Three apostles invading isn’t a trivial matter.

‘How serious is it?’

-Think of it as about 1.5 Pretas from the 12th floor attacking.

What a bizarre unit of measurement.

‘Preta was a constellation, wasn’t it? The ones invading now are apostles. Wouldn’t apostles be weaker than constellations?’

-Lowest rank constellation. Maybe about a D-rank in your tower’s terms?

‘Preta from the 12th floor?’

-That’s right, Preta from the 12th floor.

As the Guardian Spirit idly picked at its ear, it said,

-Well, I’m not worried because it’s you. Or should I say, ‘you two’.

The Guardian Spirit glanced at Raviel, obviously guessing the ‘secret weapon’ Raviel mentioned.

I felt the same. Thus, I didn't think we couldn't overcome this invasion.

However.

-But you want to clear this with zero casualties, right?

‘Yes, that’s right.’

-Then you really need to think hard. Leave the tactical part to that smarty-pants and your spouse, and you focus on improving your personal combat skills.

Having said that, the Guardian Spirit crossed its arms, looking down at me.

-Hmm. Your rank was D, wasn't it? You don't plan to stay at that rank forever, do you?

Of course not.

And like a bolt, ten days flew by.

“The wedding day is finally here!”

In the empire, weddings are held in the evening.

Weddings symbolize the union of the sun and the moon. The evening sky, where the two celestial bodies blend, is considered perfect for weddings. The more vivid and red the sunset, the better the day for a wedding, and today was one of those days.

“You look so handsome today, the Duke’s Consort!”

I was surrounded by servants, experiencing an unusual feeling.

Five servants, like beetles sticking close, coordinated my outfit. They incessantly praised, “How can someone be so handsome!”

“The duke is so lucky!”

It almost muddled my mind.

“Thank you for all the help, but could you please tone down the fuss a bit...?”

“No, not at all!”

The servants resolutely responded.

“At least for today, you must be the most handsome groom in the country! Even if modesty and humility are virtues, you should not hold back today! Today is literally the day where beauty alone is the virtue!”

Ah, I’ve felt this before....

Just like when the Black Dragon Witch and the giant guild masters were fussing about taking my photo...

Of course, there were differences from that time.

“Congratulations on your wedding, Duke’s Consort.”

A distinguished gentleman with a well-groomed beard entered the dressing room and greeted me. I was puzzled, not recognizing who he was. Seeing my expression, the gentleman gave a bitter smile.

“I am your foster father. I hold a minor position in the royal court, managing the household. I’ve heard a lot about you from the new Duke of the Ivanisia family.”

“Ah...”

Good heavens. The man I wondered about turned out to be my foster father, whom I had never met before!

“I-I’m meeting you for the first time. Um, that is...”

“Please feel free to call me father. Don’t worry. I understand that you don’t regard me as a father in your heart. I assure you, I will never exploit your influence to disrupt the Duke’s house.”

The gentleman bowed very respectfully.

“After this wedding, I plan to retire. Your spouse has shown

me great consideration. Haha. There's no need to worry about my retirement anymore."

"....."

A sigh escaped me. How much effort had Raviel put into this day?

For the first time in my life, I uttered this word.

".....Father."

"Yes, the moon of Ivanisia."

"I'm not well-versed in social circles or politics. I'm curious, what do the citizens of the empire say about this wedding?"

"In a word, it's a series of shocks."

The gentleman spoke gracefully.

“A wedding of the Ivanisia family is almost a national marriage. Preparing such an event in just a month's time is extraordinarily difficult. Let alone breaking off the engagement with the Crown Prince, inheriting the family title, either way...”

At that moment, the gentleman paused. The noise outside the dressing room had grown louder. The guests were buzzing.

“...if it wasn't for Duke Ivanisia persuading His Majesty the Emperor, it would have been impossible.”

The gentleman stroked his beard, smiling faintly.

"Duke's Consort. Your spouse is truly capable. The mere fact that she pledges loyalty to His Majesty is an unparalleled blessing for the empire. Although the bond of father and son formed today is just for a day... If I may say something.”

At that moment, the old gentleman narrowed his eyes.

Simultaneously, an intense aura, almost comparable to that of a Sword Saint, emanated from the old man's body.

"Considering that your spouse has also requested my 'other position' and the security arrangements at the wedding venue, it seems today's marriage won't go smoothly."

The Royal Head Butler.

The Head of the Royal Special Forces said this just as the commotion outside the dressing room turned into screams.

-Gong-Ja, get ready.

I looked out the window.

-They have arrived.

As the Guardian Spirit had said.

[The Apostle of 'Ruin-Harvesting Cow' manifests.]

[The Apostle of 'Warhorse of the Eternal Plains' manifests.]

[The Apostle of 'The Immortal Missionary of Happiness' manifests.]

The sky, where two celestial bodies mingled, turned red.

As the sunset crumbled away, the awaited enemies revealed themselves.

Chapter 114: Holy War (3)

The wedding venue had become a cauldron of chaos.

“Kyaaaaaak!”

“Oh God, what on earth is that...”

As the twilight sky faded, a rift opened.

The red sky cracked like a pane of glass, shattering with a sharp sound. Through the cracks, blood seemed to drip down. Enhancing my vision with Aura, I looked up at the sky.

[The Apostle of 'Ruin-Harvesting Cow' manifests.]

There was a girl wielding a giant hammer, and

[The Apostle of 'Warhorse of the Eternal Plains' manifests.]

a general riding a fluttering Pegasus, and

[The Apostle of 'The Immortal Missionary of Happiness' manifests.]

children holding hands and dancing a strange dance.

“My goodness...”

The wedding guests, shocked and astonished, gazed at these beings. The mere fact that the red sky had cracked was unbelievable, let alone that mysterious beings had emerged from it.

Only three of us were ready to fight.

“They have appeared.”

Raviel, myself, and the Heretic Inquisitor were prepared to confront them. Among us, Raviel was the one in command.

“Special Forces, gather and protect the guests! Those belonging to the Dragon Squad, assemble at one place! My retainers, guide the guests to safety!”

My bride, Raviel Ivansia, a duchess of the empire, yelled to the disarrayed guests, particularly targeting the retainers of the Ducal House. People flinched.

A call by name.

The act of being named has a curious power to awaken one from confusion. When the person uttering this magic is the second-most noble in the empire, its effect is undeniable.

“The Blue Lion Knights, form up!”

“Duchess, what are those things...”

“Cast aside such questions. Focus and pay attention to the enemies’ movements. You are the leaders of the empire. If you plan to disgrace yourself in front of me, surrender your titles! Do you understand?”

“Yes, we do!”

Raviel swiftly organized the venue. Even the military and nobility, who normally wouldn't fall under her command, obeyed her orders.

Instinctively, they understood. Although they didn't know why the evening sky had shattered or why mysterious Apostles had appeared, they realized that following Raviel Ivansia's voice was the only way to navigate through this crisis.

“Can we figure out their abilities?”

After issuing a series of commands, Raviel spoke to the Heretic Inquisitor.

“Yes! Just give me a moment!”

The Heretic Inquisitor formed a hand seal, emitting a bright light. The light shot up into the sky, instantly scanning the otherworldly Apostles.

"Hmm. Analysis complete! First, the lady with the giant hammer is---."

However, the Heretic Inquisitor couldn't finish his sentence.

Perhaps provoked by the beam he had shot, the hammer-wielding Apostle leaped down from the sky.

The Apostle, with her blonde hair fluttering, swung down her massive hammer.

Kooooom!

The ground literally turned upside down. People screamed.

The wind pressure from the hammer swing alone created a whirlwind. Red and white flowers, brought from the southern empire for the wedding decoration, were thrown into disarray. Amidst the fluttering flowers, the Apostle's eyes blazed red.

-Raviel Ivansia!

Those eyes and voice were familiar.

-I will leave you nothing!

Surprisingly, the Apostle looked exactly like Baroness

Goldencup.

“That’s... Baroness Goldencup...?”

“What is that appearance?”

The guests voiced their confusion. Even if not as famous as my bride, Goldencup was well-known. Many recognized her face. Some gasped in shock, looking back and forth between the Apostle and the Heretic Inquisitor.

"Hm."

The Heretic Inquisitor muttered under his breath, “This isn’t good.”

“That’s probably the true body of Baroness Goldencup.”

“True body?”

“In simple terms, her soul has been pawned to a devil. She has given up her powers, appearance, memories, everything in

exchange for borrowing the power of the Constellation! Ahaha. It seems that lady had a wish she was willing to sacrifice everything for. Quite interesting....”

The subject of the Heretic Inquisitor’s interest was wildly swinging her hammer.

Whooooosh!

The wind pressure from the hammer blows caused people to fly off. At least the warriors, gritting their teeth, managed to stand their ground. They were still in shock, but they realized one thing – the Goldencup look-alike was not on their side.

"Block her!"

"Protect the guests!"

"Respond as instructed!"

The clear emergence of an ‘enemy’ unified the ‘allies’. The empire’s finest warriors, invited as guests and hired for security by Raviel for this day, drew their swords and charged. Coordinated movements. A joint attack by the elite.

Goldencup scoffed.

-Yes. It's better than giving everything to Raviel Ivansia.

Dozens of warriors lunged at her simultaneously.

-I'll destroy everything.

Dozens of blades, infused with Aura, shot towards her simultaneously, only to be repelled with a clang! The blades were blocked by Goldencup's skin.

"What...?!"

Shocked groans were heard from all around. Goldencup remained unscathed. Even those who didn't hesitate to strike again were futile. All blades were stopped by her skin. At most, the Auras scorched her clothes.

-Ruin-Harvesting Cow, bless me!

Goldencup hammered down.

-Allow me your favor!

Crack! The hammer crushed a warrior like a watermelon. Blood splattered. Before the blood droplets could hit the ground, Goldencup swung her hammer again.

"Wait just a---"

Another warrior's head was smashed to pieces. Blood burst forth. The slaughter continued unabated. As their comrades died, the warriors desperately tried to find a chink in Goldencup's armor, but no blade left a mark on her.

"Everyone be careful!"

The Heretic Inquisitor shouted.

"She is enveloped in one of Mutia's blessings, [The Invulnerable Body]! As the name implies, she doesn't get injured. Ahaha. To be precise, [it reduces physical harm to her by 99.9%]!"

An invulnerable body.

"At least a blow capable of demolishing a peak is required to inflict any meaningful damage on her! Do your best!"

-Raviel Ivansiaaaa!

The warriors panicked. Among them was the old gentleman, who had become my foster father for the day, the Head Butler and Captain of the Royal Special Forces.

The old man, holding the position of the empire's strongest, said incredulously.

"Demolish a peak? Who could possibly do such an absurd thing?"

"That's true. It's a difficult task. But if you don't, you'll die!"

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled beautifully. If his smile could be captured and framed, it might make everyone forget that people were being crushed to death by a hammer right now. A crazy psychopath.

"This one alone is a monster."

Raviel sighed.

“And another one is coming.”

My bride was right. The Apostle, Goldencup's soul or true body, was just one of the enemies we had to face. And perhaps she was the easiest one.

-Pitiable beings.

The crimson twilight.

The general on the Pegasus descended slowly, back to the sky.

-Blame that pitiable girl. Blame the original soul that resides in her, blame that young man. Because of them, you are trampled under our hooves. You all should grieve.

The general looked at Goldencup, the Heretic Inquisitor, and finally at me. His expression was indiscernible under the thick helmet.

-Warriors following the warhorse.

The general raised the flag high. A point of the red twilight soaked into it.

-Awaken.

That was the moment. Ghostly figures began to appear around the general. Tens, hundreds, thousands, perhaps even tens of thousands of transparent ghosts.

-Grroooooar....

-Moan, groan....

Everyone was speechless.

Even when Goldencup swung her hammer, even when people were torn apart, the guests still kept their wits. They resisted. They fought back. But the army of tens of thousands that emerged from the blood-red sky.

Was on a different scale.

"Run..."

Someone whispered hoarsely.

"Run away!"

The same words were shouted by another.

-Charge.

The general cut off their murmurs and shouts with a single command.

-Roarrrrr!

-Screech, shriek!

Countless ghosts poured out. They wore ancient armor, like

warriors from an old era. However, their spears were not outdated. Thud! A guest trying to escape was impaled in the back.

“Please, save us!”

“Kyaaak!”

A massacre.

Guests bled and fell. Their blood spilled, staining the white flowers red. What was supposed to be the most splendid wedding venue in the empire turned into the most brutal hell.

“...Heretic Inquisitor.”

I spoke, my voice chillingly cold.

“What are the Apostle's abilities?”

“I’ve just finished analyzing. Hm. One of Mahos's blessings, [Sanctuary of Battle], is activated.”

The Heretic Inquisitor spoke while forming hand seals. Like the character window visible only to me, he seemed to have texts visible only to him.

“[Sanctuary of Battle] is an area effect. It impacts the entire vicinity. The effect is remarkable: [It fixes the abilities of the summoned ones to their prime during their lifetime]. Each of those ghosts is an elite among elites, the souls of warriors who followed Mahos!”

“...It's not enough.”

Raviel put down her fan.

“There's too much difference in numbers. Mutia's Apostle has an ability that makes her unbeatable in one-on-one combat, while Mahos's Apostle is too advantageous in group combat. We're in a tight spot.”

-Lo.

And then.

-Lu, lo, la. La.

The last Apostle began to move.

-La

-Lulu, la. Lala. Lu.

-Lululu. Lala. La. La.

The child-shaped Apostles sang a song. Their voices, originating from the sky, resonated down to the earth. The children, dancing in a circle as if playing a game, intensified their song as the dance sped up.

-La.

-Lu, la. Lala.

Thud.

Guests fleeing from the ghosts suddenly collapsed. Not just one or two. Thud, thud. Like puppets with their strings cut, people lost consciousness and fell where they stood.

"Oh."

The Heretic Inquisitor quickly formed a hand seal. Light leaked from his hands, enveloping Raviel and me.

“Ahaha, this is really bad! Hm. It’s a kind of mental attack. Exposure to that song forces you into [your happiest memory]. Unless you have exceptionally strong mental fortitude, you can’t resist it!”

.....

An Apostle immune to physical attacks with a hammer.

An Apostle specialized in group combat on a warhorse.

An Apostle tormenting minds with happiness.

“...Seriously. They're formidable in their own ways.”

“Yes! If it were only an Apostle specialized in one-on-one combat, there might be a way to counter. Even if forced into

group combat, there's a method to respond. If it's a mental attack, forming a small elite group with strong mental power would work. But facing three types of battles at once, ahaha. That's extremely difficult!"

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled broadly.

"Gong-Ja."

"Yes."

"Can I believe that you will win?"

The wedding venue was already fading into the twilight.

The sky echoed endlessly with song. On the ground, the dead slaughtered the living.

And then.

Crash!

The last resisting Captain of the Special Forces had his head crushed.

With the old man's head under her foot, the Apostle Goldencup fiercely glared at us.

-Raviel Ivansia!

.....

Raviel was dressed in a black gown. At a glance, it looked more like mourning attire than a wedding dress. But this was the empire's tradition.

The one to become the head of the family after marriage wears black. The one who does not wears white. Hence, Raviel wore a black dress, and I wore a white tuxedo.

“Gong-Ja.”

Raviel turned to me.

“I should have said this earlier.”

“Yes.”

“That tuxedo suits you very well.”

.....

I smiled. The Apostles of the Constellations had invaded. All the guests had been slaughtered. Yet at this moment, Raviel complimented my wedding attire. It meant she did not accept 'this ending' as 'the end.'

Yes.

We will never give up on our wedding.

“Raviel is the most beautiful in the universe too.”

I took my bride's hand. The soft touch of her lace glove was palpable.

Boom!

Heavy footsteps approached. Probably Goldencup running towards us. Soon, the giant hammer would crush us. Feeling the earth shake, I said,

“We made a promise to each other. Without Raviel's permission, I will never commit suicide. Even in a moment of death, I will accept it only after trying my best.”

“That's right.”

“Please permit me to die now.”

Raviel smiled.

“I permit you.”

A single word. That was all it took to make me invincible, a word from the one I love.

-Raviel Ivansiaaaa!

As Goldencup swung her hammer, I shielded Raviel.

To die even 0.1 seconds before her.

Raviel, realizing my intention, willingly allowed me to cover her. We interlocked our fingers. Soon, the giant hammer crashed down on me.

[You have died.]

The same death as always.

[Re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

The same scene as always.

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

But.

This was not the usual return.

“Gong-Ja.”

When I opened my eyes, there was Raviel, holding my hand. We instantly understood upon seeing each other. There was no need to explain what we had experienced. We shared 'the same time.'

Just as we did before death, upon returning to life, we were still holding hands.

She and I were no longer lonely returnees.

“Let's establish a strategy.”

Together, we were invincible.

Chapter 115: The Black Wedding (1)

-O God.

-Help me.

A girl prayed, and it was granted.

Thus.

-O God.

-Help us.

A boy, as her butler and childhood friend, who had always stood by the girl, prayed, and it too was granted.

"We need to change the arrangement of the wedding venue."

Raviel whispered.

"Now that we know where the Apostles will appear, we can strategically place the Special Forces and warriors there."

Preparing for the wedding, I realized that enormous power is granted to the bride and groom. We can arrange the guests at the wedding venue as we wish.

If we wanted, we could even place feuding nobles at the same table. Sure, it would damage our reputation, but what does that matter? Defeating the Apostles of the other world is our priority.

'If only I could have taken their blessings as well...'

Regrettably, my skill, [I Want to Become Just Like You], couldn't copy Goldencup's blessings.

-Zombie, I told you. The Tower is brutally logical in strange ways.

Delighted that I couldn't cheat, the Sword Emperor was grinning.

-You're already receiving several [Blessings], right? Like when fighting with Preta, and even now, with the Blessing of the God of Beauty, and so on.

'Yes, yes. Those are treated separately from my own skills.'

-Exactly. They're technically 'buff effects given by the Constellation using their own skills.' Since that's how they work, what can you do? If you're upset, go invade the Constellation who put the buff on you and get killed by them.

'Got it, got it. Anyway.'

I grumbled. All these mechanisms sounded like a computer game, but what was before us was not a game, but reality.

The Heretic Inquisitor thrust that reality at us.

"If there's an Apostle skilled in mental attacks, we must drastically reduce the number of guests! Especially if the Apostle's blessing involves recreating [one's happiest

memory]!”

Candles flickered, casting light on the Heretic Inquisitor's face.

At night.

The three of us gathered in the toilette room, brainstorming. The wedding venue layout and guest list were spread out on the table. Raviel's toilette room had transformed into our secret strategy room.

“The most deadly poison in the world never causes pain. It brings happiness! Not many can escape the poison of happiness spread by [The Immortal Missionary of Happiness]!”

“...The problem is this.”

Raviel lightly tapped the guest list with her slender finger.

“The smaller the number of guests, the harder it becomes to confront the Apostle of [Warhorse of the Eternal Plains]. This Apostle summons an army of nearly 10,000. If we increase the

number, we fall to mental attacks; if we decrease, we get crushed by sheer numbers.”

“Hm. A valid point. It's indeed difficult...”

The two were lost in thought as the candle burnt down.

"Leave that to me.”

I spoke up.

Both turned to look at me.

“Do you have a good idea, Gong-Ja?”

“Yes.”

I nodded and explained my plan. As I spoke, Raviel's and the Heretic Inquisitor's expressions changed.

“...Indeed.”

Raviel was impressed.

“My consort truly has extensive connections. If we follow your plan, there will be no problem.”

Just as I respected her without pretense, Raviel praised me without hesitation. I felt a bit shy.

“However, there’s one condition.”

“What is it?”

“Allow me to wear black, Raviel.”

.....

Raviel pursed her lips.

In the empire, only the person who will become the head of the family can wear black on their wedding day. It's not a color meant for the Duke Consort. Yet, I had to wear black.

“Not because I suddenly want to play the role of the head of the family. It's just...”

“No need to explain. I've known since my previous life that you're not the kind of person who craves power.”

Raviel shook her head.

“It was just the empire's customs and traditions that concerned me. And I can't ignore my consort's wishes because of tradition. Hm. I'll prepare the clothes for you.”

“Thank you.”

Our three gazes met, and we nodded in unison. By coincidence, at the exact moment we nodded, the candle on the table flickered.

Everything was ready.

Evening approached.

Renowned nobles of the empire began arriving at the venue.

The wedding was announced and prepared in just over a month. Despite its hasty arrangement, no noble dared refuse an invitation to the Ivansia marriage. Regardless of their private criticisms, they had to smile outwardly.

Power was everything.

“...The arrangement of the venue is unusual.”

The nobles, upon entering the venue, tilted their heads in confusion. It was understandable to hold the ceremony outdoors, not in a temple. A marriage between nobility and commoners was unlikely to be blessed.

However.

“Why are the warriors gathered in one place?”

The butler, my foster father, asked in the groom's dressing room.

“Moreover, this arrangement seems to be as if we’re preparing for battle. Capable people are placed at the front, and ordinary nobles at the back.”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

Surrounded by attendants, I casually replied. The old man chuckled.

“It looks like you’ve pushed the useless trash to the back and gathered only the useful ones at the front. I hope it's not rude to say that?”

“Whatever the Duke plans, I’m sure.”

“You, too, are wearing a sword on your waist.”

“Yes. I enjoy practicing martial arts and training. Wouldn’t it be shameful if the person to become the Moon of Ivansia appeared weak? Besides, some troublemakers might disrupt the wedding. We must be prepared for anything.”

“Indeed. Preparing for unforeseeable situations...”

The old man smirked.

“I understand. I’ll also tell my colleagues to be prepared for any [unforeseeable] situations. Oh, what a thing. To think that his Highness the Duke chose me to be your foster father for this reason...”

He greeted me and left the dressing room, probably to instruct his Special Forces to prepare for battle.

It was all a provoked reaction.

‘The more people who remain calm in unexpected situations, the better.’

Raviel had already been moving people behind the scenes.

[There are dissidents displeased with the marriage planning a terrorist attack.]

Such rumors were subtly spread. Not everyone believed them, but nobles are psychologically astute. Even planting a seed of caution would be effective.

“Aaaah!”

The effect came sooner than expected.

‘They’ve come.’

I shook off the attendants and rushed out of the dressing room.

At the same time, a voice, probably only audible to the Heretic Inquisitor and me, echoed.

[The Apostle of ‘Ruin-Harvesting Cow’ manifests.]

[The Apostle of ‘Warhorse of the Eternal Plains’ manifests.]

[The Apostle of ‘The Immortal Missionary of Happiness’ manifests.]

The same sunset unfolded. The sky cracked, and through the shattered pieces, the trio of Apostles appeared.

“My God, what on earth...”

The guests rose in astonishment. Their shock was the same, but their posture had changed. The warriors instinctively grouped together, gripping their swords, while the non-combatant nobles glanced around, ready to flee.

And.

“Heretic Inquisitor!”

Above all, my actions had changed.

“Yes, Gong-Ja!”

The Heretic Inquisitor, who had been waiting in front of the dressing room, responded.

“I will ride on Gong-Ja’s back now!”

“Okay!”

“Holy Technique, God of Teleportation!”

It was the first time I realized the Heretic Inquisitor was a psychopath. The moment when the Demon King of Autumn Rain and the Goddess of Protection put us to the test, causing our separation. It was the Holy Technique he used then.

The effect was instant teleportation.

-What?

The destination was the blood-red sky.

-What's this?!

Right behind Goldencup, the Apostle. I caught her off guard.

Goldencup turned around in confusion. Clash! My holy sword clashed with her hammer. The gravity of the high altitude pressed down on me. I felt my body fall vertically and

shouted.

“One more time!”

“Ahaha! Yes! Holy Technique, God of Teleportation!”

The Heretic Inquisitor joyfully exclaimed. The next moment, we were again right behind Goldencup. I swung my sword powerfully at her now-exposed back.

-Ugh!

Goldencup barely managed to block my attack again. But the two unexpected ambushes had a fatal effect. Her posture was disrupted.

Whoosh!

Originally planning to be formidable in the air, she began to fall helplessly.

-Whatever tricks you’ve used, they’re useless!

Goldencup shouted, her golden hair in disarray from the fall.

-My body is invincible! Now nothing can wound me! I am unbeatable! The Ruin-Harvesting Cow has gifted me a body that cannot be hurt!

“Did you sell your soul to the Apostle because you didn’t want to get hurt!”

-What’s it to you!

Goldencup lashed out in rage.

-Everyone only sees Raviel Ivansia! That infuriating woman! She just got lucky with her lineage, yet she acts as if she understands all the world's sorrows! I’ll kill her! I’ll take away everything she has!

Raw and filthy desires.

But I, for one, did not scorn Goldencup. No matter how much one pretends or disguises, in the end, it’s the blatant desires that drive humans. I knew because I had been there.

However.

“You should have realized there are far worse people than you in the world! Baroness Goldencup!”

Thus, I could shout these words.

I gripped the hilt of my holy sword tighter.

“People know the pain they’ve endured! That’s why when they see others in agony and screaming, they can imagine how lonely that pain is and feel compassion! It’s not about your background! Everyone who screams in agony is my fellow being!”

-Ha, what nonsense! Who would live such a life!

Goldencup sneered. The wind pressure surged. She was falling through the air, looking up at me.

-You can’t hurt me anyway! I am indomitable, indestructible, and have an immortal body!

Yes.

If words could change people, they would have changed long ago. Words are powerless. To help those in agony, force is needed. That's precisely why the doctrine of shadows arms itself.

“Shiny!”

[Shiny responds to the call of the hero.]

“Transform the Sword of Idol into the Sword of Pity!”

It was the moment I commanded.

[Yes, hero.]

Black corruption flowed from the holy sword. Gurggle! The sacred blade was quickly tainted with murky black.

Her ability was simple yet powerful.

『She is enveloped in one of Mutia's blessings, [The Invulnerable Body].』

『As the name implies, she doesn't get injured.』

But I had a way to counter it.

『My ability is pain.』

The sword I acquired in my master's world.

『Those cut by it will feel pain.』

『But never bear a wound, nor will it lead to death.』

『Pain without injury is the essence of my power.』

The second ability possessed by the Goddess of Protection.

That was pity.

“Silvia Evanair!”

I called Goldencup by her real name and slashed down with my sword.

“I will kill you now!”

-Ha.

Goldencup scoffed. She seemed to have no intention of dodging my strike. Her expression dared me to try and stab her. Absolute confidence in the blessing she received supported her.

-Go ahead and try to kill me....

Goldencup couldn't finish her sentence.

Instead, a scream tore through.

-Aaaaahhh!!

My sword's tip pierced precisely her heart. No wound was created. The blade seemed to pass through her chest invisibly. No blood gushed.

-But... Ah...?

However, pain was present.

-Aaaahh! Aaaaahhh!!

Her scream ripped through the blood-red sky. Falling like a shooting star, Goldencup agonizingly wailed. Her voice spread through the wind and filled the evening sky.

“Heretic Inquisitor!”

We were plummeting to the ground. The ground rapidly approached. I stabbed Goldencup's heart again.

Just before we hit the ground.

“Now!”

“Holy Technique, God of Teleportation!”

The Heretic Inquisitor shouted eagerly. He repeated the Holy Technique several times. Flash! Pop! With each teleportation, our falling speed decreased. In the final moment, we landed gently on the ground. We had escaped the fall.

But Goldencup did not.

Boom!

It was as if a small meteor had hit the ground. The earth shook, and dust billowed. Unlike the previous round, Goldencup’s fall had turned into a crash. No one was hurt by the hammer swing.

-Heek, hick... Wh-what...?

Only an Apostle convulsing in pain from being stabbed in the heart remained.

I gripped my sword again.

“Does it hurt?”

I slowly walked towards Goldencup.

"It must hurt."

Hearing my footsteps, Goldencup flinched. Whimpering, she clumsily got up.

-Help, help me!

Goldencup didn't listen to me. She frantically called for help. Towards the evening sky. Towards another Constellation's servant.

-You have a contract! A deal! If you just stand by and watch me like this, even Mutia won't tolerate it! Your Constellation won't be pleased either!

-Hmm.

The general riding the Pegasus spoke.

-Strange. Not a Constellation, but a fragment of one. How on earth did you obtain such an artifact? It's utterly baffling.

The general slowly raised his flag.

-The necessity to subjugate a hindrance remains unchanged. Warriors following the Warhorse, awaken.

And then, the summoning unfolded.

-The onslaught begins!

Hundreds, thousands of ghosts appeared. Reflected in the red sunset, the ghosts looked like blood-soaked murderers. Cries of terror erupted throughout the wedding venue.

The opponent's power was absolute.

『[Sanctuary of Battle] is an area effect. It impacts the entire vicinity.』

『The effect is remarkable: [It fixes the abilities of the

summoned ones to their prime during their lifetime]. Each of those ghosts is an elite among elites, the souls of warriors who followed Mahos!』

But I had a countermeasure.

"Gong-Ja."

Raviel, who had approached behind me, spoke. Turning around, I saw her holding something in both hands.

"Put this on."

It was a black cloak.

Raviel wrapped the cloak around me, covering my white tuxedo with black. The black fabric was embroidered with the Ivansia family crest in silver thread.

Even as the army of ghosts approached, Raviel confidently finished draping the cloak on me.

"Hmm."

She examined my attire and nodded in approval.

"The cloak suits you well."

"Thank you for fulfilling my request. But, I had to insist on this."

"I understand. End it as you wish."

"I will."

I smiled and turned around.

A vast number of ghosts were rushing towards us.

"[Sanctuary of Battle] is an area effect. It impacts the entire vicinity."

"It fixes the abilities of the summoned ones to their prime during their lifetime."

"It impacts the entire area."

I slowly raised the blackened sword.

Then I declared.

"Ghoul Reincarnation."

Shadows spread beneath my feet like dusk.

[Activating skill.]

It was evening.

The sky was dyed red with the sunset, and the horizon was shrouded in darkness.

-What...!

The general, leading the charge atop the Pegasus, hesitated. The following ghosts halted too. Their confident assault, thinking they could easily slaughter us, was blocked by the shadow engulfing the ground.

"My lord."

One of the shadows spoke.

"Have you summoned me?"

Preta kneeled on one knee.

Her appearance was different from usual. No longer in the slender form of Ester, she was covered in dark red mud, continuously flowing from her. She was the very image of the Autumn Rain Demon King I had faced before.

"It fixes the abilities of the summoned ones to their prime during their lifetime."

But Preta wasn't alone.

Behind her, martial artists clad in dark robes stood. They had different faces, origins, and lives, but they were united in black.

"We serve the Vice-lord of the Demonic Heaven!"

Those who became proof of my life.

I spoke, cloaked in black.

"Fight for me."

The followers of the shadow doctrine bowed in unison.

"We heed the Vice-lord's command!"

The moment to start the war had arrived.

Chapter 116: The Black Wedding (2)

Shadows covered the earth.

Each person, donning a black robe, faced the halted army of ghosts without a hint of surprise. They had lived and died in a world overrun by zombies.

For them, ghosts could not be a source of fear.

"Today, the Vice-lord looks exceptionally grand."

Hell Ghost Demon spoke leisurely. The top of the Four Demon Lords of the Demonic Cult, a follower who once faced the Head Monk of Shaolin in the final Great Orthodox-Demonic War.

"Even applying makeup, as if you're heading to your own wedding."

I nodded.

"It is indeed a wedding."

"...What?"

A thousand followers turned their heads in unison. These were martial artists in their prime, each enhanced with Ki to hear my words.

I announced to them.

"Today, I am getting married."

Silence fell.

The followers exchanged glances, then looked back at me, trying to discern if I was serious or joking. I simply nodded in response to their unspoken inquiries.

"Our Vice-lord,"

Hell Ghost Demon opened her mouth.

"Our Vice-lord is getting married!"

The followers erupted in excitement.

"Our Vice-lord is marrying!"

"The supreme authority of the Demonic Heaven is tying the knot!"

"Not an engagement, a real wedding!"

They forgot the ghostly army in front of them, causing an uproar. The news of my marriage seemed an urgent matter they must announce to the world.

"Who is the bride?"

"Over there."

I gestured gracefully with both hands.

"That lady over there with silver hair will be my wife."

Raviel was soothing the panicked citizens of the Empire at that moment.

Her cool and dignified profile as always.

Following my gesture, the followers' jaws dropped.

"She's beautiful..."

"Yes, quite pretty."

"Our Vice-lord has high standards."

"Vice-lord! How strong is the lady's Ki?"

Someone, true to a martial artist's nature, inquired about

her combat strength.

"Um. My fiancée does not practice martial arts."

The followers' eyes widened. Soon, murmurs of discontent spread. Their eyes held a rebellious spirit, seemingly unable to accept this marriage.

"But, being the counterpart of the leader of the Demonic Heaven..."

"She doesn't know martial arts at all? That's a bit..."

"Well, authority comes from strength..."

"The Blood Ghost Troop cannot acknowledge this marriage!"

I added more.

"I forgot to mention. My spouse is second in power in this country, next to the Emperor."

The followers murmured amongst themselves.

"Then it's a different story..."

"People aren't obliged to learn martial arts from birth, right?"

"Right, authority stems from power..."

"Congratulations on your marriage, Vice-lord!"

Such simple-minded folks.

However, not everyone among them was a follower. Preta, once feared as the Demon King of Autumn Rain, had been gaping ever since hearing about my marriage.

"You're getting married, lord?"

"Yes. That's the plan."

"Impossible. Someone like you, a total... Ah, my apologies, lord. I mean, someone as unique as you found someone willing to marry you?"

Preta, you...

Externally obedient, but you thought of me as a lunatic inside....

Feeling slightly hurt, I sighed.

"Yes, it really happened. I'll share the details at the reception. But for now, let's focus on the battle."

"Ah, yes. Of course, lord. Who are our enemies?"

"Otherworldly apostles trying to conquer this world."

And then, I said.

"They're also trying to ruin my wedding."

At my words, the atmosphere among the followers shifted.

"Oh?"

Blood Demon, leader of the Blood Ghost Troop, grabbed his sword's hilt.

"Hmm..."

Hell Ghost Demon, leader of the Soul Repentance Troop, smirked.

"Interfering with the wedding of the Vice-lord of the Demonic Cult."

Moon Shadow Demon, leader of the Shadow Corpse Troop, flicked his hair.

"Idiots."

Sword Demon, leader of the Extermination Troop, stretched his neck in all directions.

"..."

Lastly, Preta unsheathed her sword without a word. The same sword that forced hundreds of deaths upon me. It was a magical sword emitting a dark red light.

"Indeed. I see. It was due to the blessings of a Constellation that I regained my power in my previous life... They must be servants of a Constellation."

"Correct."

"If I may ask, which Constellation's lackeys are they?"

"Mahos. Known as the Warhorse of the Eternal Plains."

Preta twisted her lips in scorn.

"Fools who know nothing but battle."

Her disdain held the arrogance she had before falling, due to my actions.

The enemy was 10,000 strong. We were only 1,000. However, the followers, chatting and gripping their swords, and Preta, slowly raising her blade, were confident. No one thought we were at a disadvantage.

"My lord, command me. What would you have me do?"

I ordered.

"Annihilate them."

Preta lifted her magical sword high.

"As you wish, lord."

A single slash.

A red beam split the bloody sunset.

-The onslaught begins!

It was a red beam, leaving no room for any other description. Its power and majesty laid within Preta's strike. Ghosts caught in the red beam screamed and vanished.

Even the general leading the ghost army barely escaped.

-What, this is... impossible! A Constellation...? But without being one, controlling a Constellation's underling...

As the general gaped at me in shock.

"Crush them!"

The followers roared.

"No need to recite doctrines for these small fries!"

"Who dares to interrupt the marriage of the Vice-lord of the Demonic Cult!"

"The heads we collect today are our wedding gifts to the Vice-lord! Understood! Anyone who brings less than five heads

will die by my hand today!"

"Haha! Extermination Troop, aim for at least ten heads!"

"This is why the uneducated are..."

Some raged, some shouted, and others scoffed as they charged. The distance to the ghost army was irrelevant. A thousand shadows soared using stepping techniques.

-Uh?! Block them!

Startled, the general ordered a defense.

The ghost army was indeed elite. They raised their shields tightly, forming an impenetrable formation like a porcupine. Spears filled the gaps. But...

"So foolish."

Preta, the Autumn Rain Specter, sneered.

"They've conveniently become targets for us."

Another red beam tore through the sky. Kwaang! The tightly packed formation of the ghost army was easily swept away, leaving a gaping hole. The ghosts frantically tried to fill the gap.

"Haha!"

But the battle-hardened followers didn't miss this opportunity.

"Tear them apart!"

They charged like beasts. The shadows and the ghost army clashed. Chaak! Chaak! The followers spread their Ki, slaughtering the ghosts.

Unlike the Great Orthodox-Demonic War, they didn't bother chanting the mantra of Baraya. No one mentioned why, but I could guess. This wasn't a duel. It wasn't a war.

Merely a hunt.

The followers disdainfully butchered the ghost army, treating them like mere beasts.

-Kiiiiek!

The ghost army lacked the strength to overcome such arrogance. They crumbled under the followers' blades. Shields shattered, spears snapped. Followers thrust their swords through the gaps and reversed the broken spear shafts to strike down.

It was a massacre.

"Regroup by units!"

The general raised his flag and shouted urgently.

"Don't panic, warriors! No rush! Follow the lead of the captains..."

"Hey."

Thud.

Someone casually landed on top of the flag that the general was holding.

"Hello there."

It was the Sword Demon, the most talkative among the Four Demon Lords of the Demonic Cult and the first-ranked among them. The evening sunset cast his face in shadow.

"Are you trying to interfere with our Vice-lord's wedding?"

-You...

"Damn bastard. Just die."

A flash of swordplay. First, second, third strikes. Three sword trails intertwined like a spider web. The first strike severed the general's right arm, the second slashed his chest, and the third tore the flag.

-Cough, hah...

The Apostle of the War God spewed blood. That was brief. Sword Demon launched his final strike at the general's throat, cutting off his scream and sending his head soaring.

"Oh. Euh cha."

Sword Demon leaped from the flagpole, catching the general's head in mid-air.

"Ah, can't let this precious thing slip away. Haha. See that, you brats! I'm the Sword Demon, leader of the Extermination Troop! Our troop will be the first to offer a wedding gift to the Vice-lord!"

"Damn."

"Why did it have to be that blockhead..."

Soft curses flowed from various places. Even among the same Demon Lords, there seemed to be a peculiar competitive spirit. The followers frowned, having their moment stolen by Sword Demon.

[The Apostle of the 'Warhorse of the Eternal Plains' has been annihilated.]

Swoosh-.

The head of the general, caught by Sword Demon, vanished into light. Not just that, the body of the headless general and the ghosts following him crumbled into dust like instantaneously. The legion was extinguished.

"What? What?"

Sword Demon was baffled, looking at his now empty hand. After a moment, he dumbly turned to look at me.

"Uh... can you accept a gift from the heart, Vice-lord?"

I smiled faintly.

"It's okay. I'll give you a discount."

Then.

-Lu. La.

The Apostle of ['The Immortal Missionary of Happiness'] began to sing. Lu. La. Children holding hands, danced in circles in the air. With each step upon the sunset, more melody was added to the sky.

"Hmm."

"Uh."

The followers furrowed their brows. Some hurriedly raised their Ki to counter the song, but it was futile. The wide-area effect had ended with the death of the Apostle of the Warhorse of the Eternal Plains.

"Ah..."

Preta also let out a disappointed sigh. The black sludge covering her body rapidly flowed away. She clicked her tongue and glared at the Sword Demon.

"That idiot... Not even useful to his own side. I apologize, lord. If I'm not in my prime, I'm weak against such psychic

attacks... fighting... is..."

Her voice slowed as she fell into sleep. Preta staggered.

Not only Preta. The followers who had been rampaging on the battlefield, as well as the guests following Raviel's command, were similarly affected. They helplessly succumbed to the lullaby sung by the Apostles of Dreams.

"Please wait, King of Death."

Heretic Inquisitor formed a hand seal.

"I'll create an immunity field now!"

"No."

I grabbed Heretic Inquisitor's hand, stopping him. He tilted his head in confusion.

"King of Death? If we leave it like this, we'll also fall victim to the Apostle's song."

"It's possible. But if I'm right, everyone else might not know, but Raviel, you, and I should be fine."

"Hmm."

Heretic Inquisitor smiled and released the hand seal.

"I understand. If the King of Death says so, there must be a reason."

The sunset was at its peak.

-Lu. La, La.

-La, Lulu. Lu.

The setting sun burnt red, illuminating the children. Their shadows stretched long across the horizon, growing and shrinking, coming closer and then moving away.

『It's a kind of mental attack.』

『Exposure to that song forces you into [your happiest memory].』

The wedding venue fell silent.

The followers sat on the ground, leaning on each other, dozing off. Some guests had completely fallen asleep. Were they all immersed in their own happiness?

"Oho."

However, three people still spoke.

"Really?"

Heretic Inquisitor looked intrigued, alternating glances between Raviel and me.

"The King of Death was right. The three of us are unaffected. I feel a bit sleepy, but my body maintains its normal condition. Ahaha. What magic did you use this time, King of Death?"

The Heretic Inquisitor, curious about the current situation, wasn't the only one. The Apostles of Dreams slowly stopped their dance. The children tilted their heads, looking down at me in puzzlement.

-Strange human.

-Doesn't sleep. Doesn't dream?

-No happy memories?

I shook my head.

"No."

I slowly surveyed the wedding venue.

"It's not that."

There was Preta, softly breathing in sleep. Followers leaning on each other, having dozed off. Lives that I had gathered and those that evidenced my teacher's existence.

There were many reasons for me to be unhappy.

Countless.

I had burned to death, committed suicide thousands of times, witnessed comrades killing each other under the influence of doubt, lost dozens of lives just to take a step forward, been bitten by already dead corpses, and had to part with someone who said I was beautiful.

No one might blame me if I called my life unhappy.

"But I am happiest now."

Because the person I love is here.

One reason for happiness was more precious to me than hundreds of reasons for unhappiness.

"I don't know if you know, but today is my wedding day. I might not know about other days, but today, it's hard to find someone happier than me. You've chosen the wrong day to invade this world."

I shrugged.

"As for the Heretic Inquisitor... maybe he's never happy, or maybe every day is happy for him."

"Ah! Indeed! That's right. I'm always happy! No one can match the King of Death's insight."

Heretic Inquisitor laughed and whispered.

"Holy Technique. God of Teleportation."

In the next moment, we were teleported behind the Apostle.

Unlike other Apostles, ['The Immortal Missionary of Happiness'] had no combat ability. The Apostle, in the form of a child, didn't resist even after seeing us, just gazing up at my face.

-Strange human.

I steeled myself and swung my sword.

[The Apostle of the 'The Immortal Missionary of Happiness' has been annihilated.]

We returned to the ground using Holy Technique.

All invaders from another world were vanquished.

"....."

No. Not all of them yet.

I gripped my holy sword and turned around. An Apostle with a giant hammer stood in the distance. As our eyes met, she shrank back in fear.

-Yikes, uh... ah...

I slowly opened my lips.

"This is your last chance to fight me. The last chance to oppose me, the last chance to resist me. I will kill you and gather you."

-Gather...?

"No need to understand now. You'll find out soon enough."

I pointed my sword at the Apostle.

Calling her by her real name.

"Come at me. Silvia Evanair."

Goldencup trembled in fear.

Chapter 117: The Black Wedding (3)

"O Ruin-Harvesting Cow..."

Goldencup desperately prayed.

"Please bestow upon me... a new... a new blessing!"

Humans shrink when cornered. Their mind, their scope of thought, rapidly narrows. That's why humans can flee or cling desperately to someone. Goldencup was no exception.

"As a price... Yes. I'll offer my existence as the price! No, whatever you desire, I'll wreak havoc in this world! Ruins! Destruction! Shattering! Isn't that what you, Mutia, cherish? I-I'm good at that! At destroying!"

Thud. I stepped forward.

-Hic.

Goldencup heard my footsteps and became even more desperate. She stumbled backwards, looking up at the crimson sunset as if salvation would descend any moment.

"I'm good at it, Mutia! I'm really good at destroying things...!"

But there was no response.

-This is,

Her prayer quickly turned into resentment.

-This is a breach of contract!!

I took another step closer.

-You promised me a new destiny, power to remake my fate! Then, why! Why is there a crazy woman inside me! Give it back! My body, return it!

"Ah. That's a wrong expression."

Heretic Inquisitor cheerfully corrected.

"If you're referring to me, I'm sorry, but my physical gender is male! So your words are incorrect! I'm not a [crazy woman] but a [crazy man]. Ah, for a healthier language, perhaps it's better to say [insane person]. A healthy mind resides in a healthy language, Miss Evanair!"

-Damn bastard!

Goldencup, no, Silvia Evanair, cursed.

-It's wrong! Yes, it's wrong! It's a breach of contract... I deserve to be the Empress. I was meant to rise to a greater position than Raviel Ivansia. It's my destiny! The destiny I created! So... so it's a breach of contract... I am,

Another step.

-Huh!

Only then did Silvia Evanair turn her eyes away from the sky. Now, unable to ignore me as I had drawn much closer.

-Monster!

Silvia Evanair swung her hammer. Clang! The iron hammer clashed with the holy sword. She swung the hammer erratically, and I easily parried her attacks while advancing. Her increasing desperation made it easier to break her down.

-Ah,

I seized the moment when Silvia Evanair swung the hammer widely. I sliced her wrist.

-Aaaaaah!!

Naturally, there was no wound. No bloodstain. No blood. Not a trace of red to prove her pain, yet Silvia Evanair screamed as if being torn apart.

She dropped the hammer. Thud! The iron hammer fell to the ground with a heavy sound.

-Ah, uh... uhh....

I locked eyes with Silvia Evanair. Dust raised by the fallen hammer settled on both our knees.

"Make a choice."

-Ch-choice...?

"You've already lost your place in this world. Even if you flee now, you're no longer 'Baroness Goldencup.' Just an Apostle of the Constellation."

-.....

"I'll give you a chance."

Silvia Evanair, clutching her wrist, glared at me.

"If you choose to remain a servant of the Constellation, do as you wish. Escape. I'll let you go. But if you still have attachments to this world, if you want to do more here, then

give up the protection of the Constellation."

-Why would...

"And die by my sword."

I pointed the sword at her.

"You've seen the battle. I can summon those who died by my hand, retaining their memories from life. Silvia Evanair, If you surrender yourself, I'll summon you back to this world, once again as 'Baroness Goldencup.'"

-.....

"Of course, it won't be exactly the same life as before. Any hostile actions towards my lover, Raviel Ivansia, are strictly forbidden. But that's it. The rest is up to you. Marry the Crown Prince or live as you wish."

-Why...

"Because life should be something that can be re-lived."

The sunset now mixed red with purple hues. The wedding in the empire lasts from the time the sunset begins to fade. I estimated that less than 30 minutes remained.

-How can I... trust you? What if you turn me into a summon and exploit me like a slave? I wouldn't be able to resist or fight back.

"Think about it."

I looked at Silvia Evanair.

"Why, of all people, were 'you' and 'your butler' chosen as the hosts?"

-Huh?

"Everything you wished for, you offered to the Constellation. Your memories, your body, all of it. That's why your place in this world became a void."

A void that anyone could fill, anyone could replace.

The reason [Holed-Up Head Librarian] could have me and Heretic Inquisitor possess them.

"I can understand why your place became vacant."

But.

"Have you ever thought why your butler's place became vacant too?"

-.....

Silvia Evanair's eyes widened.

"I don't know the details. But I've been a butler once, fully immersed in the life of a butler. I realized then, this man was utterly devoted to you, Silvia Evanair."

I surmised from that point.

"I bet even if you had become the empress, you would never have been happy."

-What...?

"You said it yourself. You didn't want to become empress out of love for the Crown Prince, but to outdo Raviel. Even if you became the empress that way, would your life have gone well?"

I shook my head.

"You're quite capable. But not as much as Raviel. You don't have the power and dignity of Raviel's noble birth. You lack the ability to manipulate and dominate crowds like Raviel. Even as empress, people would constantly compare and belittle you."

-.....

"For life."

Suppose.

Suppose there was one butler.

That butler watched his mistress suffer all her life.

"The butler I know would give up everything to save you."

The butler might have thought.

[If only Miss Goldencup hadn't become the empress, she might have been happy.]

"That's what I think."

-Butler... My butler, did he regress?

"No."

The butler is not a Returner.

"You wished for yourself. But not the butler. He wished for

you. Not to rewind his own life, but simply wishing for you to go back."

-What are you saying...?

"Do you remember your butler's name?"

-Ha?

Silvia Evanair furrowed her brows.

-Of course. My butler's name is.....

But.

-.....Huh?

She couldn't say the name. She furrowed her brows further. After a moment, her frown relaxed. She looked perplexed at the air.

-Wait, this can't be. Ah?Ah? Uh...?

I calmly observed Silvia Evanair.

Yes.

In this world, the butler was never called by name.

Silvia Evanair never called the butler by his name. The only servant and childhood friend, she only referred to him as 'butler.' Even when alone in the room, with no need for formality.

『Butler.』

Raviel Ivansia never called the butler by his name. Despite holding all the empire's information, she couldn't possibly be unaware of Goldencup, Baroness's close aide.

『Butler.』

The character I became possessed of.

The Baroness's servant was nameless in this world.

Because he had given everything to the Constellation.

I, too.

Even I, who had been completely immersed in the life of a butler, didn't know his name.

I couldn't remember or recall it.

-.....

Silvia Evanair's expression crumbled.

-Then, what does it mean...?

Like a tower meticulously built, collapsing from the top.

-The butler, he's gone for good?

"Yes."

Perhaps.

There were three regressions in this world.

First, Silvia Evanair wished for a regression from the Constellation.

The Constellation that granted the wish was [Ruin-Harvesting Cow], overseeing destruction and recreation. It granted Silvia Evanair another chance at life.

Silvia Evanair became the empress, surpassing Raviel.

Next, 'the butler' wished for a regression from another Constellation.

The granting Constellation is unknown.

The butler sacrificed everything for Goldencup, leading to a regression. Back to a past where Baroness Goldencup hadn't

married the Crown Prince. A past where nothing was decided yet.

Lastly, Raviel caused a regression.

The granting Constellation was a fragment of [Goddess of Protection].

As a result of this regression, the world got trapped in an eternal loop of ten days.

And here we are.

"We can never know the butler's name. Forever."

-.....

"Whatever thoughts and sacrifices the butler made beside your life, we will never know. He's gone."

But.

"The butler must have wanted you to live a different life."

Thus.

"I want to honor the butler's wish."

-.....

"Silvia Evanair. Someone, whom you don't know and whose name you can't remember, sacrificed everything just for you. Someone who loved you more than anyone and wanted to be with you more than anyone, gave up everything."

That was how a nameless butler loved.

"Live again."

It's not too late.

"Live as he wished, once more."

Silvia Evanair said nothing.

She trembled. Her lips quivered. Her throat convulsed. A life was writhing there. A cursed life. Yet, the fact that someone wished for her life, existed for her, was unbearably harsh.

-.....

Slowly, Silvia Evanair bowed her head, no longer having the strength to face forward.

Gradually, light began to leak from her body.

That light was the Constellation's blessing, being released.

"Alright."

I raised my sword high.

I deactivated the Sword of Pity and called forth the Sword of the Idol again.

The sunset blazed red.

The shadow of my sword stretched long on the ground.

The shadow swung the sword.

[The Apostle of the 'Ruin-Harvesting Cow' has been annihilated.]

The sunset faded.

All the Apostles from another world had been subjugated.

The beings threatening this world were gone.

[Stage Clear.]

The voice announcing it echoed.

Probably only the Heretic Inquisitor and I could hear it.

[Today.]

[The 25th floor stage has been cleared.]

The voice of the Tower.

[Announcing to everyone once more.]

[Today, the 25th floor has been cleared.]

[Assessing raid participants.]

[Assessment complete.]

[Announcing the 3 raid participants.]

People began to awaken. Preta. The followers of the Demonic Cult. The guests. Those who had been caught in the Apostle's lullaby and dreamed were slowly rising.

"Uh..."

“What on earth happened...?”

Above these people, text appeared.

+

[Raid Contribution Ranking]

1st place. King of Death

2nd place. Heretic Inquisitor

3rd place. None

+

"....."

I silently looked at the text.

There were only two participants in this stage.

The only hunters sent by [Holed-Up Head Librarian] were the Heretic Inquisitor and me.

But the Tower listed three participants.

‘None.’

The third, nonexistent participant's name did not appear.

I looked into the void for a while.

"Hmm."

Raviel, my bride, came beside me and took my hand. We leaned on each other. Then Raviel slowly looked around at the guests.

"I am his wife and the Duchess of Ivansia."

The guests, just awakened from a dream, looked at us blankly.

"Does anyone object to this marriage?"

No one spoke.

There might have been those who were displeased. Those who wanted to object. But it all became a thing of the past.

The mere appearance of beings from another world was enough to shake heaven and earth. Moreover, the guests had witnessed me defeating the extraterrestrial beings.

The guests, by remaining silent, agreed to Raviel's words.

"Good."

The very person who chose today as the wedding day.

Raviel, my bride, nodded deeply.

"I declare that my marriage to this man has been successfully concluded."

Chapter 118: The Black Wedding (4)

Floor Clear.

This signifies that the world of [Tales of Sormewin Academy] has been officially integrated into our Tower.

Hunters can now travel to and from this world.

Of course, that doesn't mean they can enter freely. They must undergo the scrutiny of the major guilds. For example, a general hunter needs a permit to enter the Aegim Empire.

What this means is-

Flash!

Shortly after the stage clear was declared, a bright light

flashed. Flash! Flicker! Lights burst here and there around the wedding venue. It was a scene familiar when hunters are teleported.

"King of Death! No, Kim Gong-Ja! You!"

As the light faded, familiar faces appeared.

"How could you marry without discussing it with us?!"

Those who could move freely between floors without a permit. Leaders of the major guilds. One of them, the 2nd ranked hunter, Black Dragon Witch, was red-faced with anger.

"I oppose this marriage!!"

"....."

"It's not just me!"

Voices were raised not only by the Black Dragon Witch.

"Ahem. King of Death."

The top-ranked hunter, Sword Saint, also spoke up.

"First, congratulations on clearing the stage. Truly... it was a swift romance. Not that it's my place to say here, but if I may, as an elder-"

"Don't."

"Um."

Sword Saint closed his mouth, fitting of someone who's been reforming his old-fashioned mindset.

"While you were conquering the Tower, there was a commotion. Everyone wondered why you two fell for each other. But I staunchly defended you. Love at first sight is only understood by those who have experienced it. Don't worry. I understand. I'll handle the Black Dragon Witch."

And for some reason, the Paladin looked sternly proud, her gaze seemingly saying, 'I understand your love.' I couldn't grasp the meaning.

I turned to Raviel.

"Hmm."

Raviel was expressionless, at least at first glance. But I loved her, so I could read her blank expression.

Raviel was... observing the Black Dragon Witch's group with great interest. Her red eyes were brimming with honey.

"My dear Gong-Ja. My love."

"Speak, my love."

"It seems there are many people you need to introduce me to."

"Yes..."

It's late, but.

The meet-the-family session begins now.

Naturally, I thought meeting the family happened before marriage. But cultural differences existed here. In the Empire, it was customary to have the meet-the-family session after the wedding.

"Isn't that obvious?"

Raviel tilted her head.

"Many in the family live far away in the provinces. The wedding is the occasion to gather and invite them. It's on the night of the wedding that the bride and groom, along with members of both families, meet."

"Ah... that makes sense."

I immediately understood.

Right. A marriage is also a union of families. For hunters like us, who fled from the outside world, there's no family to consider... but the Empire was different. They valued family

much more than individuals.

Moreover, this marriage wasn't just a union of families.

It was a national marriage, no, a world marriage.

Raviel representing the Empire. Me representing the Tower.
The marriage of us two.

"Hehe..."

My foster father, the head of the servants, kept a bitter smile.

"I never imagined such an occasion... I don't even know how many messages I've sent to His Majesty the Emperor today. I'm at a loss for words."

"Yes. This was unintended for us as well."

Black Dragon Witch began to speak. She was remarkably calm, as if her earlier agitation towards me never happened.

The Empire's and the Tower's power players sat side by side at the table, wary of each other, yet equally perplexed.

"However, this unintended event is not misfortune, but fortune. Head Butler, we consider it fortunate that our first meeting with your country is on such an auspicious occasion as a wedding."

And they began to converse, overcoming their apprehension and wariness.

"Your Highnesses came from another world, didn't you? It's a miraculous event difficult to explain to His Majesty, not to mention it can't easily be declared to our citizens."

"Yes, you're absolutely right. We fully understand the situation of your country."

Black Dragon Witch nodded. She seemed adept at such diplomatic occasions, knowing how to navigate between grace and competence.

"However, you must have witnessed the invasion of beings from another world. Denying something that exists can lead, eventually, to existence denying us. I'm worried about such a future."

"Hm. That's a valid point."

"Thank you, Head Butler. What we must practice now is mutual understanding. 5 years, 10 years, 20 years, maybe even more..."

Both sides calmly exchanged words.

Raviel had a firm grasp on the Empire's representatives, and I was fully trusted by those from the Tower. Our marriage was a great fortune for both sides.

The fact that power players from both sides were gathered in one place was a difficult feat, but Raviel's and my wedding made it possible from the start. There couldn't have been a better beginning.

"....."

I sat at the head table with Raviel. I reached under the table to hold her hand. Squeeze. Raviel naturally intertwined her fingers with mine.

"....."

Just that gesture was reassuring. The night deepened. Stars shone brightly. Candles flickered on the table, and people exchanged words across the flickering lights.

Suddenly, everything seemed beautiful.

"Raviel."

"Speak."

A soft whisper.

"There are a few people I'd like to introduce you to."

"Apart from those here?"

"Yes."

"Then I must see them."

Raviel stood up from the head table.

Everyone from the Empire's side immediately fell silent.

"The night is long. Let's talk calmly. I will go meet my husband's people and return."

"....."

No one could stop Raviel's departure. Indeed, the Duchess of Ivansia. If the ability to leave when one wants is a sign of power, then my wife held absolute power here.

I took Raviel to where the disciples were gathered.

"Oh. Vice-Lord! Now the honeymoon begins!"

Sword Demon laughed heartily, holding up a glass. The disciples were all drunk on the wine provided at the wedding. They tried to stand and greet me, but I gestured for them to sit. So, they remained seated and saluted.

"Congratulations!"

"Congratulations, Vice-Lord!"

"The wine here tastes unique and is truly good!"

"Demonic Heavens forever!"

"Wow! You two really match well!"

The wedding hall instantly became noisy. After all, when nearly a thousand disciples cause a commotion, it's inevitable. I let out a wry smile.

"Sword Demon. Come here."

"Yes?"

Sword Demon blinked in surprise, not expecting to be called. His face went blank as if caught off guard, while his drunk companions giggled around him.

"Look at that! I knew he'd get scolded by the Vice-Lord someday!"

"He always forgets to add 'Lord' when he calls for the Vice-Lord. Such a blockhead."

"Give him a good smack on the butt, Vice-Lord!"

"Uh... uh..."

Sword Demon put down his glass and hesitantly approached. His brazen attitude when he beheaded the ghostly general had vanished. He seemed to shrink, like a child who had done something wrong.

"So-sorry, Vice-Lord. I'm not good with formal speech. But in my heart, I really admire our Vice-Lord..."

Rambling his excuse, Sword Demon.

I put my hand on his shoulder.

"Raviel."

And spoke to my bride.

"This is the Sword Demon."

"....."

"He was a subordinate of the Master I revered. My Master was the leader of a place called Demonic Cult. She selected four exceptional people from her disciples and called them the Four Demonic Lords. Sword Demon is one of them."

"Oho."

Raviel observed the Sword Demon carefully. The Sword Demon flinched.

"A simple man. Harsh in speech and barren in attitude. It proves that your Master didn't judge people by harsh words or barren attitudes. She found people in harsh and barren places, so she must have been a noble and exalted person."

"....."

"I am Raviel Ivansia, Duchess of the Empire, and the wife of the Vice-Lord you serve. I ask for your cooperation."

"Yes, yes. I humbly ask for your... favor."

I turned my head.

"Moon Shadow Demon."

"....."

"Come here."

One of the disciples stood up. He bowed respectfully.

"Yes, Vice-Lord."

An eerie silence descended under the night sky. The chatter

and laughter of those drinking and chatting died down. I called each of the Four Demonic Lords, and with each call, they showed utmost courtesy.

Then I called the next person I had to introduce.

"Preta."

"...Yes, my Lord."

"Come here."

"Yes."

Preta, who had been mingling with the disciples, stood up. It seemed she had been waiting for my call, already having tidied up her appearance.

"This child's name is... Preta."

I said.

"Preta was originally a nameless monster, a doppelganger. Capable of imitating anything it devoured, it initially consumed small creatures like frogs and snakes, and then, by chance, ate a human. And then..."

Preta quietly bowed her head. Occasionally, her shoulders trembled slightly. An uncanny silence prevailed in the hall.

I introduced their lives, and by doing so, I introduced my own life.

One person spoke about their life to another, gently, under the night sky. It was sacred, just by being that.

"Also... Ah. Right."

I undid my holy sword from my waist.

"This is Shiny."

"Shiny?"

"Yes. It originally had a more dignified name. But it was sealed in the sword by a bad man. I didn't want to use its original name, 'Goddess of Protection,' so I just called it Shiny. It's very... shiny."

"Indeed."

Raviel let out a small laugh.

"Your naming is a bit harsh. Cold-hearted. If it were me, I would have at least named it 'Eleanor*.'"

*Eleanor means 'shining light' in greek.

[Shiny pledges loyalty to the spouse of the brave hero!]

Shiny quickly changed its allegiance.

"Um."

And then.

"There's one friend I can't show you here now..."

Guardian Spirit.

"He's probably someone Raviel will never see. You both can't meet... He's a bit special. He can't stand in front of others."

My partner.

"Though he speaks very crudely... um, about 30 times dirtier than Sword Demon. But he's incredibly strong. Amazingly so... I learned swordsmanship and Aura from him first."

"Oh, a person of great significance."

-.....

The Guardian Spirit remained silent.

In humble martial attire. Arms crossed.

Instead of her usual talkative manner, Guardian Spirit just silently observed Raviel and me.

"...Without him, I probably couldn't have endured my time alone."

"Is that so?"

"Yes."

"Then I must express my gratitude to him."

Raviel bowed her head.

Towards the empty air where nothing could be seen.

"I have become happy by meeting you. If your friend hadn't helped you, my happiness wouldn't have been possible. I express my gratitude to everything that allowed you to be here at this moment."

Guardian Spirit slowly opened his mouth.

-Kid, that nutcase, take good care of him.

I spoke on her behalf.

"If he heard Raviel's gratitude, he probably would have said,
'Take good care of that nutcase.'"

"A wonderful friend indeed."

I took a deep breath.

"Raviel."

This is.

"This is all of me."

Everything I cherish.

Everything that entered my heart and stayed.

My family.

"....."

Raviel gripped my hand tightly.

"My dear."

"Yes."

"Let's dance."

In Raviel's eyes was an intense desire. I hesitated. Whenever Raviel looked at me like this, when she strongly wished to do something with me, I couldn't refuse.

"I've never really danced properly."

"I still have some memories of being a butler. I'll use that as a reference."

‘What if I accidentally step on Raviel's foot? I'll kill myself.’

Instead of answering, Raviel showed me with her actions. She bent down and took off her black shoes. Soon, she stepped onto the grass and soil of the lawn with her bare feet.

White feet.

Just by taking off her shoes, she seemed as light as the wind.

"Come."

"....."

I hesitantly removed my white shoes and socks. Then, Raviel immediately took my hand and led me.

One step. Two steps.

Raviel stepped on petals fallen on the grass with her toes. Magnolias, cherry blossoms, white petals turned whiter as they were trampled.

"....."

No one spoke. There was no music. No grand chandeliers decorated the ballroom, only the moonlight softly settled on the garden.

Our own ball.

"...See."

I stepped through the dance, smiling.

"What a mess. I've already stepped on Raviel's feet three times. Dancing is definitely not my forte. Are you trying to embarrass me to death?"

"It's fine. I will just step on your feet as much."

With a firm step, Raviel immediately stepped on my foot, her weight fully transferred to me. She smiled playfully.

"See. Fair enough."

A smile that she showed only to me was there. My red jewel.
My heart. My music.

The moonlit chandelier cast our shadows.

Our dance wasn't about not stepping on each other's feet.
Even if we did step on each other's feet, it was about not letting
go till the end. About facing each other and smiling, no matter
the misfortune.

I belong only to Raviel.

And Raviel is mine alone.

Yes, we danced. Every place touched by the moonlight was
our ballroom. With just the two of us, any world could be
transformed into our stage.

On this day, we were married.

Our next story will start on a higher stage than ever before.

Chapter 119: Hero

(1)

Two weeks had passed since the formal introduction. Much had happened during this time. We had an audience with the Emperor of the Empire. Numerous secret agreements were made between the Empire and the Tower. But, leaving such historic upheavals behind, I attended to what I needed to do first.

There was still my own epilogue to complete.

"Shiny."

[Shiny responds, Yes Hero.]

In Raviel's and my bedroom.

On the huge bed lay a sword.

"Eat up."

The thing that once tore apart the heart of my lover.

The sword that trapped this world in an eternal cycle of ten days.

The Sword of Prayer.

Towards this cursed blade, my Holy Sword emitted a white light.

[The Goddess of Protection absorbs a fragment of herself.]

White light touched the Prayer Sword. Immediately, a red aura burst from the Prayer Sword, as if resisting the light that sought to engulf it, a deep crimson fog erupting from its blade.

[The Prayer is terrified.]

[The Idol persuades its sister.]

White light and red mist battled fiercely, but the mist seemed denser. Just as the red was about to overpower the white, another color flowed from my Holy Sword.

[The Pity also persuades its sister.]

Dark black sewage joined the fray, the fragment of the second Holy Sword I had collected.

The tide turned. The pure white light devoured the mist, and the black water consumed it. The red fog quickly dissipated.

[The Prayer Sword is astonished by the betrayal of its sisters.]

[It declares it cannot serve anyone but Leafanta Aegim.]

I spoke up.

"I have an idea why Leafanta Aegim killed the Constellations."

The red mist paused.

Even though it had no eyes, I felt as if it was staring at me. A calm tension settled between us.

"At first, I couldn't understand it at all. But after experiencing this world, I realized. Constellations invade and conquer other worlds on a whim, imposing their will regardless of the natives' opinions."

The Holed-Up Head Librarian was no different.

His interest wasn't in controlling worlds but in observing characters. Designating living humans as [characters] and voyeuristically enjoying their [stories]. In that sense, he was just like other Constellations.

In short,

"It's a nuisance."

It's violence.

"Leafanta Aegim was an Emperor. He must have thought deeply. 'Rather than using Constellations to seek power, it's better to kill them all.' That's probably what he planned. This world likely had Constellations too, but Leafanta Aegim must have killed them."

[.....]

"But your original master made a mistake."

I sheathed the sword.

"Where Constellations die, new ones are born. Look! In the continent where the 'Goddess of Protection' was sealed, the 'Demon King of Autumn Rain' emerged. In this world, the 'Silver-Clad Heart' appeared. Frankly, your master didn't solve the problem but created bigger ones!"

[Leafanta Aegim.....]

"Deny it if I'm wrong."

The sword wrapped in red mist, the crimson blade, remained silent.

"Maybe my experience in life is less than your master's. Yes, your master might have endured tremendous trials, known much more, and after deep contemplation, took on the role of the Constellation Killer. But there's something I can say for sure."

I spoke sincerely.

"If you've caused trouble, you must take responsibility to the end."

[.....]

"Because of your master's reckless killing of Constellations, an eternal winter has descended in some worlds. The martial artists living there became walking corpses, humiliated. Even if Leafanta Aegim had noble ideals, it's unforgivable. He must take responsibility."

Then,

The red mist gathered in one place, and soon took the shape of a child.

A child drenched in blood.

[My name is Prayer.]

The sword, now in the form of a red child, spoke.

[My role is to fulfill people's prayers.]

[Leafanta Aegim prayed, 'To kill all Constellations, so people will never be dominated by them again.' His prayer was noble. Heavy. Magnificent. So I entrusted my existence to Leafanta Aegim.]

[What is your prayer, human?]

I looked down at the child.

"To not run away from anything."

And said,

"I won't turn a blind eye to what's happening before me. No excuses. I'll take responsibility for my words and actions. I won't overlook wrongs by saying, 'That's just how the world is.' As long as my sword reaches and my life continues."

[Oh.....]

The red child looked up at the void.

[The road to hell is always paved with good intentions.]

[All I can do is bless your good intentions and simply join you on your journey to hell.]

It was a mournful lament.

[My power is a trial.]

[Those pierced by my heart, are tested if their prayer was truly sincere. Whether they wanted it so badly that they'd sacrifice everything.]

[My cursed power is to make them ultimately give up their prayer.]

The child dissolved into red mist.

[To our new master.]

[May you prosper long in hell.]

The mist was absorbed into my Holy Sword.

[The Goddess of Protection's existence becomes better defined.]

Finally, I could breathe a sigh of relief.

"Phew."

With this, I had wrapped up what I needed to do before moving to the next stage. There's still much for the Empire and the Tower to discuss... but that's a matter of politics. A field more suited for my wife than me.

"Is it over?"

Raviel, who had been waiting outside the bedroom, asked. A maid accompanied her.

"Yes. Raviel. It's all done. Now there are no Constellations or their fragments to disrupt this world. At least for a while."

"Even with three Apostles forming a coalition to attack, they were miserably defeated. Be at ease. After seeing your prowess, no fool would dare invade."

"....."

The maid standing beside Raviel wore an awkward expression. Understandably, since she was the mastermind behind the invasion of this world---Baroness Goldencup.

"...It sounds like you're talking to me. Duke, am I just imagining this?"

Baroness Goldencup muttered. Outwardly, she was portrayed as a [young lady who was possessed by a wicked demon and wielded a hammer]. She was made a victim, not a

perpetrator.

But being possessed by a demon itself was a rumor that tarnished her honor, so she agreed to serve Raviel and wash away the disgrace. As someone who once aspired to marry the Crown Prince, it must be painful for her.

Well, it seems she's seriously reconsidering marriage now.

"Sharp ears. Yes, it was meant for you. Continuously repent for your foolishness, Lady. Once I think you've repented enough, I'll use my connections to the temple to restore your honor. Until then, shut up and work for us."

"Ugh...."

The Baroness in maid's clothing bit her lip. She can't defy us. Just by withdrawing [Ghoul Reincarnation], she'd crumble immediately.

"....."

This was the ending I had reached.

Looking at the scene, I slowly began to speak.

"I'm heading to the next stage now. Raviel."

"Hm. That's necessary."

Raviel met my gaze.

"I would like to accompany you to explore other worlds, but the Empire needs me. Just as I have my role, you have yours. Go wild and come back when you're tired and need comfort. I'll be here."

"Yes. But..."

I hesitated slightly.

"The 20th floor in the Tower belongs to me. I want to build a house there just for the two of us. If you're okay with it, Raviel."

"Oh? Indeed. From now on, that will be our main home.

There, I won't be the Duchess of Ivansia but only your partner."

Raviel smiled.

She had effortlessly read my mind.

"I'm looking forward to it."

Raviel took a handkerchief from her pocket. White with silver embroidery. She opened my hand and gently placed the handkerchief on it.

This was,

"This is my handkerchief that I always carry. I used magic to permanently infuse it with perfume."

"Perfume?"

"You."

Raviel tiptoed to whisper in my ear.

"The scent of white lilies you first smelled when you fell for me."

"....."

"When you're restless, you often fiddle with your dagger's handle. It's a bad habit. Get rid of it. Instead, when your heart flutters, smell the scent on my handkerchief."

Ah.

"Gong-Ja. You staying true to yourself is not your misfortune or your pain. I hope it isn't. The memories and love for me, happiness, I hope they keep you true to yourself. Will you accept my wish?"

"...Yes."

I swallowed the overwhelming emotions welling up in my heart.

"Yes. I will, Raviel."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

I overlapped my lips with Raviel's, wishing for this moment to last forever. Yet, our shadows soon parted, and I said,

"---Transfer."

Light enveloped my vision.

The next time I blinked, I was already in the Great Library.

The hunters who had been waiting for me there came into view.

"Welcome back, King of Death."

Black Dragon Witch, speaking on behalf of the others, broke the silence. Seeing her, I instantly realized she was not in the best of moods. Despite her words, her eyebrows were deeply furrowed.

"What's wrong?"

"I wish I could say nothing is wrong."

Black Dragon Witch sighed deeply.

"Uh, there's a problem. A pretty serious one."

Looking around, I noticed that only the top rankers like Black Dragon Witch were present. Normally, hunters like the Apothecary would be around too.

"Where did the other hunters go?"

"We asked them to leave. We have confidential matters to discuss. Well, our conversation is still being broadcasted throughout the Tower..."

Black Dragon Witch's voice trailed off ominously.

"What could be so serious?"

"Aha."

It was the Heretic Inquisitor who responded, not Black Dragon Witch. He was back in his usual priestly attire after shedding the dress from the last stage.

"To put it simply, King of Death! You've become too successful!"

"Me?"

"Think about it. In [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon], you showed a profoundly loyal side to your master! Your reverence for martial arts and caring for your followers touched the hearts of countless hunters. After clearing [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon], martial artists from the outside world entered the Tower by the thousands every day!"

The Paladin picked up from there.

"Someone is recording the broadcasts from the Tower and spreading them in the outside world. In fact, we've allowed this dissemination. King of Death, your success is a tremendous advertising effect in itself. There's no reason to refuse it."

"But, well."

The Countess waved her fan.

"It seems we underestimated something a bit. Right?"

"Underestimated what?"

"The impact you, as a person. No, as an [icon]."

What did they mean? I looked at them, unable to grasp their point. Everyone wore serious expressions. The Heretic Inquisitor, always smiling regardless, responded.

"113,654."

"Pardon?"

"That's the number of people who entered our Tower yesterday!"

"....."

I couldn't comprehend what the Heretic Inquisitor was saying.

After a moment, I realized he meant 'yesterday.'

"Yesterday, in one day?"

"Yes! Such an influx is normal when wars break out or nations fall. But recently, besides small conflicts, there have been no battles! Ahahaha. No nations have fallen either! It's a [peaceful] time, and yet we've had this many new arrivals!"

"Leaflets from the outside world."

The Countess handed me a leaflet.

It was like a presidential election poster with my face on it.

Below it, read this sentence:

+

Make the King of Death our King!

Journey to Utopia!

+

My mouth slowly opened.

"Don't tell me the King of Death refers to...?"

"Of course, it's your nickname, King of Death. It's referring to you. This kind of leaflet is being distributed in numerous places. To clarify, this isn't something we orchestrated. People from the outside world are doing it themselves."

"....."

I didn't know how to react.

"Regarding the leaflets, you might have guessed."

The Paladin grinned wryly.

"These days, leaflets aren't common promotional tools. Get it? King of Death. 'Leaflets are used when wanting to inform even those who don't use the internet.'"

"...What do you mean?"

"People from regions with poor internet access. The poor from impoverished countries. Conflict zones. Areas controlled by warlords. Countless poor and refugees are entering the Tower. They're abandoning their [nations] and [nationalities], leaving behind their [lives] in the outside world, and coming to the Tower of Babel."

Just like we did, the Paladin added.

"Hmm."

Viper crossed his arms.

"Those people. Upon entering the Tower, they wear black hats or black tops. They want to join the Demonic Cult... more bluntly, they're coming in because of you."

"It's not just the poor and refugees."

Black Dragon Witch spoke.

"Wealthy individuals are coming in large numbers too. Scientists, sociologists, professors along with their colleagues. They declare, 'We want to contribute to building a new society in the Tower.'"

"Kim Gong-Ja."

The great guild leaders looked at me.

"You didn't just conquer stages. In the outside world, no,

everywhere, people crave heroes. The courage to face adversity. Respect for humanity. Dedication to love. There's nothing more thrilling than a hero who dedicates their life to a righteous cause."

Black Dragon Witch showed me her smartphone screen.

"You've become our flag."

The hologram that always floated in the center of Babylon Square was displayed on the screen.

+

1st. Sword Saint

2nd. King of Death

3rd. Black Dragon Witch

4th. Heretic Inquisitor

5th. Countess

6th. Viper

7th. Babel's Linguist

8th. Wide-Area Communicator

9th. Paladin

+

2nd in the Hunter Ranking.

That was the new position the Tower had granted me.

My heart pounded wildly.

"King of Death."

Black Dragon Witch put away her smartphone and looked me straight in the eyes. She was serious, more than I had ever seen before.

"Are you ready to be our king?"

Chapter 120: Hero (2)

King.

"Uh..."

I smiled instinctively, as people often do when faced with an unexpected situation.

Looking around, my gaze met with Black Dragon Witch, Heretic Inquisitor, Viper, Paladin, and Countess in turn.

"...You're joking, right?"

"Of course."

"Of course," said Black Dragon Witch. I hoped for a follow-up like 'Of course, it's a joke.' However, what she said next was

entirely different from what I expected.

"Of course, we're not suddenly going to adopt a monarchy now. King of Death. You may not be aware, but the Tower's current system is the result of our blood, sweat, and tears... through endless failures and frustrations."

"We have been striving to realize an ideal of anarchism. Ahaha. The 'guilds' operating in the Tower are actually a type of association..."

"Enough. That kind of talk won't help the King of Death."

Paladin cut off the conversation.

"A king is merely a symbol. But symbols hold real power. Kim Gong-Ja, you already possess that power. By your name, by your character, over a hundred thousand people enter the Tower every day."

"....."

"This is unprecedented. Even Black Dragon Witch couldn't achieve this. You're the first Tower hunter to have this kind of

power!"

Only then did I notice Paladin's excitement.

Paladin was always calm and collected. The last time she raised her voice was during the [12th Floor Incident], when everyone fell into suspicion and tried to eliminate each other.

Such an excited Paladin.

And not just her.

Excluding the Heretic Inquisitor, all the major guild leaders were engulfed in a peculiar fervor. They were struggling not to let their enthusiasm burst into fanaticism, but their eyes betrayed their excitement when they looked at me.

"Previously, we couldn't handle such an influx of population. We lacked food. But now, [we] have secured enough land and trade routes... it'll be tough, but we can feed them."

"Most importantly, we have [experience]."

The Countess spoke.

"It's no boast, but everyone here has experienced chaos. Paladin is a refugee from a fallen nation. Black Dragon Witch is an orphan from a country torn apart by civil war, and Heretic Inquisitor and Viper grew up under the thumb of the mafia and thugs. I was born in the poorest village in the world. Everyone here is an 'expert in troubled times.'"

"Right."

Black Dragon Witch affirmed.

"Only we can handle such a crisis in this world. No country, no state in the outside world can. But [we] can! We've overcome worse chaos than this!"

"....."

I swallowed, feeling the guild leaders' fervor directly.

Those who fled the old world for a new one and reached the pinnacle of the new world as guild leaders, they hadn't given up their desire to build a new world.

"King of Death, we can do this."

A dream.

"Let's do what no country in the outside world could. Let's make a better place. Let's create a world where those driven out and who fled here can breathe a little easier!"

An ideal.

"We know what societal collapse means. So, we can prevent it."

Paladin, who escaped from a South American country.

"We know what it means for people to be divided and go to war. So, we can avoid civil wars."

Black Dragon Witch, who survived the chaos of the Black Sea.

"We know what violence is. So, we can utilize it."

Heretic Inquisitor, raised in Eastern European mafia organizations.

Viper, who grew in the Triads of Central China.

"We know what poverty is, and so, we can conquer it."

Countess, born in a trashy village in India.

"Let's show them, King of Death."

Black Dragon Witch said.

"Let's show the people we can make a slightly better world!"

And then I realized.

The one who changed the guild leaders was none other than me.

In the previous world, this never happened. In a world dominated by Flame Emperor as the top ranker... the Tower was still just a Tower.

A refuge for those who lost hope.

A paradise for criminals and death row inmates.

I never saw Black Dragon Witch, who now spoke of a [new world] with sparkling eyes, in the previous world. Not in any magazine photo. Not in any interview video.

Black Dragon Witch was always a person with eyes frozen cold.

It was because of me that she changed.

"....."

My heart fluttered.

"What I should do,"

The world my master dreamed of.

"Tell me what I need to do."

I can change the world.

"...Right. Yeah. I thought you'd say that."

Black Dragon Witch smiled softly. Her eyes held trust in me.

"Just be yourself as you always are. That's the most important thing. We can slowly teach you the ropes of politics."

"Ahaha. If you look at it a bit cynically, we'll monopolize the real power, so King of Death, just keep playing the role of the figurehead!"

"...Well, I won't deny that. But if I could, I'd gladly hand over this position to someone else. Do you want to know how many violent crimes occur every day now?"

"Ah, religious crimes are also very frequent! In the last ten days, 21 cases of extremism and terrorism were preemptively discovered!"

"Let's not talk about this anymore. It just makes our situation seem more pitiful..."

Hmm.

Being myself is the most important thing.

'Then.'

I looked around.

"Librarian! Head Librarian! Where are you!"

My voice echoed through the massive library. Then, a small shadow peeked out from behind a giant bookshelf. The Head Librarian of [Holed-Up Head Librarian], whom I hadn't seen in a long time.

"Hey, what are you doing there? Come here."

"Oh, but... but sir..."

The Head Librarian's lips trembled.

"How can a mere wretch like me dare to face the King of Death? My presence will only dirty your eyes. Please treat me as non-existent, just a speck of dust in the library..."

"Ah, stop your nonsense and just come here."

"Uh. Ugh. Uh..."

The Head Librarian weakly floated towards me. His long sleeves fluttered like the ears of a deflated Maltese dog.

"Speak, sir..."

"Bring out the next stage's book."

"What kind of Apocalypse do you wish?"

"Fairy tale."

"....."

The Head Librarian's lips sealed shut. I continued without hesitation.

"There's only one fairy tale book among the Apocalypses given to us. Give me that one."

".....Hmm. Indeed. A peculiar fate."

The Head Librarian's expression changed. As if he had never trembled before me, his eyes half-closed in a smirk.

"Fine. The Apocalypse you speak of is this one."

One of the floating books among the Head Librarian's collection flew towards us. As the Head Librarian opened the cover, information about the Apocalypse appeared.

+

[Me and Our Scapegoat]

Genre: Fairy Tale

Difficulty: A

Required Participants: 2 or more

*The serialization has been discontinued.

Description: Humanity in this world succeeded in creating a utopia. However, to maintain it, a special power source was needed. The screams of innocent children who had committed no sin. Sadly, to ensure the perfect happiness of 17 million people, one innocent child must endure. Thanks to advanced torture techniques and life-sustaining treatments, about five years of screams can be extracted from one child. Efficient!

Reason for Discontinuation: 118,000 years after the creation of utopia, all innocent children were exhausted. The utopia, having lost its power, came to a halt.

+

'That's right.'

This is the Apocalypse.

From the first time I saw it, I've been keeping it in mind.

"Everyone. I want to select this Apocalypse for our next stage."

"Huh?"

The guild leaders turned to look at me.

Among them, Black Dragon Witch tilted her head.

"A fairy tale book? Sorry, King of Death, but that fairy tale world probably doesn't have any significant resources or territory. It's also rated [A-rank] in difficulty... Do we really need to conquer it?"

"Yes, we do."

I looked into Black Dragon Witch's eyes.

"Up to now, we have chosen Apocalypses based on how useful they would be to the Tower. The martial arts secrets stored in [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon] will enhance the Tower's power. Interactions with the SF world will greatly advance our scientific capabilities."

The Apocalypses we've conquered so far are as follows:

+

21st Floor: Great Library of All Knowledge

22nd Floor: The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon
(Genre: Martial Arts, Fusion)

23rd Floor: Chronicles of the Space Iron Knight (Genre: SF)

24th Floor: Daybreak Mountain Hut Diary (Genre: Mystery,

History)

25th Floor: Tales of Sormewin Academy (Genre: Romance)

26th Floor: Festival City Apocalypse (Genre: Sports)

27th Floor: Bakery Street Epic (Genre: Cooking, Management)

+

After completing the mission in [Tales of Sormewin Academy], I stayed there for two weeks. During that time, other hunters conquered the 26th and 27th Floors. All the hunters with aliases have been diligently focusing on the conquests.

Now, only the 28th, 29th, and 30th Floors remain.

'But.'

I have my own plan. If things go as I hope... this 28th Floor

will effectively be the last Apocalypse.

With that plan in mind, I continued.

"It's not just resources or technology that are useful to us. Heretic Inquisitor. You said it, right? Nearly a hundred thousand people are increasing the Tower's population every day."

"Hm."

"What we need now is a focal point. Unity."

Heretic Inquisitor blinked.

"I agree, but that's why we're proposing to establish you as King. You are the focal point of the Tower. We will soon arrange an appropriate position for you! Something grand like [Guild Alliance Leader] or [Council Chairman]."

I shook my head.

Guild Alliance Leader.

Such a title might tempt some, seeming like the highest seat of power in the Tower.

"Such deception won't work."

"Deception, you say?"

"It's not just me. Everyone here needs to gain people's support. It's not just me who truly governs the Tower. It's all of you. You need to gain support too so that the Tower can truly unite."

"....."

Silence fell around us.

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled.

"You have a point. But do you realize? King of Death, we bear grave sins. We have committed, and are committing,

tremendous acts under the guise of ending chaos in the Tower. Regrettably, we lack moral justification!"

"...Heretic Inquisitor is right."

Black Dragon Witch muttered.

"We've done too much to be symbols."

"From now on, just do well. Please, do well."

"....."

"We're a team. I can't resolve religious issues as fiercely as the Heretic Inquisitor. I can't deal with gangsters like Viper. Politics, economy, security, I can't do as well as you in all of it. It's not false modesty; it's the truth."

But.

"I will never betray you. You can trust me."

Uniting these talented individuals is something I'm confident in.

"If there's a problem among you, I'll mediate. If a discussion is needed, I'll create a place for it. Trust me. Let's become one team."

"....."

The guild leaders were silent.

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled.

"Logical. But, King of Death, are you aware we lack political trust? We lack moral authority!"

"Yes."

I looked at each guild leader.

"Heretic Inquisitor, Black Dragon Witch, Countess, Viper, Paladin..."

The most flamboyant all-star members of the Tower.

And my comrades.

"Fight with me in this Apocalypse."

In this Apocalypse, all of us will participate.

Chapter 121: Hero

(3)

After hearing my request, my comrades remained silent for a long time. Perhaps they were reflecting on the half-life they had lived. Days smeared with purges.

"Really, you're asking for a difficult path."

It was only after a while that the Black Dragon Witch slowly opened her lips.

Her voice was close to a lament.

"People can become competent through effort. With effort, one can also become moral. Even a person of power. But a competent, moral person of power? That's nearly impossible. Simply, it's too difficult. ...A difficult path indeed."

"Someone once told me that the road to hell is paved with good intentions."

I reached out my hand towards the guild leaders.

"Then the road to heaven must be covered with countless evils."

There will be many who envy us. Those who stir up trouble for fun. Those who incite fights among people for power, or even agitators among the residents.

Such people exist.

Plenty of them.

Evil is toxic because it is ordinary.

"But that doesn't mean we have to give up. Let's show a slightly better world to those who have given up on the outside world and fled here."

I extended my hand. Not a gesture to shake hands with someone but rather a pose to gather several hands at once.

Like team members of a sport shouting "fighting" before a game, I quietly reached out my right hand towards the guild leaders.

"....."

"Ahaha."

While the Black Dragon Witch hesitated, the Heretic Inquisitor was the first to lay a hand. Slightly, my hand and the Heretic Inquisitor's palm overlapped.

"I don't mind! The moral legitimacy of a regime has a powerful appeal. And the King of Death is the only person who can gild us with morality. It would be a pity to miss such an opportunity!"

"Cough."

Viper laid his hand.

"I guess I'm now the successor of the Orthodox Faction. The old man always nagged me about remembering the mindset of the orthodox path. Well, think of it as paying respects to my

teacher in the back room."

"Umm."

The Paladin laid his hand.

"I have been activating my skill since before the conversation started."

Lie Detection.

"Among those gathered here, no one has spoken any falsehood. More than anything, Kim Gong-Ja. I know that in [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon] and [Tales of the Sormewin Academy], you've always run with an upright heart."

"....."

"I believe in your genuine attitude, your true love, and above all, your character. All revolutions fail. Then at least, let our revolution be remembered as the most beautiful failure, as I dedicate my life and soul to it."

"Umm."

The Countess laid her hand.

"I can't follow the talk of romantics. Fine. I'm just following the trend. I only hope that the stocks I've invested heavily in don't crash. Do your best, gentlemen."

"....."

Finally.

The Black Dragon Witch hesitantly laid her hand.

".....I can't promise much. I can't guarantee your success. I won't be able to abandon the methods I've used so far. But, yes."

Her black eyes scanned us.

"If we fail. If a time comes when one of us must die... I will be the first to die. That's the only promise I can make."

“Then I too make a promise.”

I smiled.

“I won't let anyone here die. Anywhere. Anytime.”

“You're recklessly issuing checks you can't cash. You....”

The Black Dragon Witch smirked bitterly. But she didn't retract her hand.

All six of us.

Our hands came together.

“Hmm. Good!”

The Holed-Up Head Librarian floated in the air, laughing.

“King of Death. Black Dragon Witch. Heretic Inquisitor.

Countess. Viper. Paladin. I designate these 6 as characters in [Me and Our Scapegoat]! When you open your eyes, you will be in a world where the Apocalypse is experiencing a sensational serialization cancellation. Be careful. This Apocalypse is quite different from the ones you've faced so far!"

The Holed-Up Head Librarian opened a book. Whoosh! Light flowed from the pages of the Revelations, falling onto our clasped hands.

"The difficulty of this Apocalypse is A grade!"

The light enveloped us.

"Unlike last time, I can't bestow much blessing on you. In this Apocalypse, constellations are alive. Alive and reigning. You will invade this Apocalypse as a sort of invasion force. Naturally, the constellations will see you as enemies."

The Holed-Up Head Librarian smiled faintly.

"King of Death. The constellations will especially regard you as an enemy!"

‘Enemy!’

Before I could even understand what that meant, our vision was completely covered in light. In fact, there was no need to try hard to understand the Holed-Up Head Librarian's words.

The world turned white, and before we could fully open our eyes to greet the new world...

[The Immortal Missionary of Happiness detects the intrusion.]

A sharp voice brushed through our minds.

Like an urgent siren, the voice surged continuously.

[The Immortal Missionary of Happiness warns you.]

[The Immortal Missionary of Happiness seeks to annihilate the intruders.]

[The Immortal Missionary of Happiness declares war on

you!]

Me and Our Scapegoat.

[The Immortal Missionary of Happiness despises 'you'.]

This fairy tale was a world ruled by a constellation who invaded Raviel's world.

In the story of the hero and the Demon King, the Demon King always lets down his guard.

The Demon King never reveals his full strength from the beginning. He dispatches his weakest minions first to the hero. The hero, initially weak at the start of the story, grows stronger by defeating progressively more powerful enemies.

Until he's ready to face the Demon King.

-I've been waiting for you.

The constellation of this fairy tale was different.

-How dare you antagonize my master!

The constellation revealed its fangs to us right from the start.

The first to sense the crisis among us was none other than my holy sword.

[Shiny detects the presence of a sister sword!]

The hilt at my waist vibrated, as if alerting us to the crisis. Before our vision was fully cleared, Shiny urgently cried out.

[The nature of 'The Immortal Missionary of Happiness' and the 'Sacrifice Sword' match!]

[The Immortal Missionary of Happiness is the fourth sister sword left by Leafanta Aegim, 'Sacrifice'!]

As soon as Shiny's warning ended, our vision expanded.

Blue sky.

Our party was plummeting from the sky. Right after being summoned to this world, we were briefly floating, so I didn't realize it. But our bodies were swiftly pulled by gravity.

Whooooosh!

The wind brushing against my forehead. Blood caressing my hair. We were free-falling.

"Umm!"

That's when the Heretic Inquisitor grabbed my forearm. As we were being scattered by the wind, he managed to hold onto me first. Skilfully wrapping his legs around my waist, he then formed hand seals.

"King of Death, grab my right foot! Don't ever let go! Holy Technique. God of Teleportation!"

I clung to the Heretic Inquisitor's right foot as instructed. The next moment, the Heretic Inquisitor moved next to the Black Witch.

"Black Witch!"

"Right! Give me your leg!"

As if it were the most natural thing, the Black Witch grabbed the Heretic Inquisitor's left foot. "Ahaha," the Heretic Inquisitor's laughter mingled with the wind. Hearing his laughter, I felt the crushing gravity on all of us lighten momentarily.

"Holy Technique. God of Teleportation!"

The Heretic Inquisitor successively gathered the Countess, Paladin, and Viper. We hung onto the Heretic Inquisitor like piglets clinging to their mother. Viper, apparently quite embarrassed by the situation, let out a loud yelp.

"Hey! Why am I the last?!"

"Because you are the most useless among us! Head of Celestial Martial Guild! Losing you would not significantly affect our strength!"

"You damn religious zealot?"

As five of us clung together, even the Heretic Inquisitor could not form his hand seals. There was simply no room. Nor was there time. The ground was getting closer every second.

"Well done, little one!"

However, as if waiting for us all to gather, the Black Witch shouted loudly.

"Everyone, say you agree with my skill! Quick! Quick!"

"Yes!" "I agree!" "Alright then!" "I agree." "Damn it, I'm in!"

"Teleport!"

All six of us teleported at once. Instant teleportation. Unlike the Heretic Inquisitor, who needed to form hand seals, the Black Witch's skill activated just by physical contact.

The same technique we relied on when facing [Demon King of Autumn Rain].

Thus, we safely landed on the ground.

-You won't escape!

However, the ground itself was far from safe.

-Sing, my apostles!

Hundreds of thousands. Maybe even millions.

Across the horizon, creatures in the form of 'children' were standing. Each one of them identical to the apostles who had invaded Raviel's world. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of children, were surrounding us layer by layer.

-La.

And they sang.

-La, la.

-Lu. Lala.

-La.

A million voices of acapella harmonized. A hundred thousand basses, a hundred thousand sopranos, a hundred thousand whistlings overlapped. The children, seemingly delighted, danced in circles. With each step they took, the ground vibrated lightly.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

-La.

This was the difficulty of an A grade Apocalypse.

A world that sees us as [enemies], doesn't let its guard down, and tries to annihilate us from the start.

"Ugh!"

The group hastily raised their auras. But it wasn't enough.

Within less than a minute of transitioning into the Apocalypse, we were under a total attack. An onslaught of happy dreams, too overwhelming for any individual aura to handle.

"Countess!"

The Heretic Inquisitor shouted.

"Lend me money!"

"Damn, feels like I'm gonna break the bank...!"

"Yes! Better than your head getting broken!"

"Interest 15%! Compounded!"

"If it's not for free, I'm not interested!"

"What, that's nonsense...."

"Nisha!"

The Paladin yelled. Initially, I didn't understand what 'Nisha' meant. But seeing the Paladin's gaze directed at the Countess, I realized. Nisha was the Countess's real name.

"Shut up and take out your wallet! I'll kill you!"

"Ugh. Damn it! Withdrawal, unlimited!"

The Countess pulled out a pouch from her attire. A pouch with a snail pattern. She untied the gold thread at its opening. Chrrrr! Countless gold coins poured onto the ground.

"User change! Heretic Inquisitor!"

"Ahaha, thank you!"

The Heretic Inquisitor quickly formed hand seals.

"Holy Technique, God of Donation!"

Light burst from within his hands. White light enveloped the pile of gold, turning the gold coins into dust. In exchange, the aura enveloping us was strengthened unbelievably.

"Holy Miracle, Aura Enhancement and Immunity to Mental Attacks! Enhancing targets, Countess, Heretic Inquisitor, King of Death, Black Witch, Paladin, Viper. Duration of enhancement, undetermined. The gold will captivate our hands. Technique complete!"

"Ah! My money!"

The Countess screamed. Gold coins kept pouring out of the pouch, immediately evaporating into light. Overwhelmed, cat ears sprung atop the Countess's head.

"My money! Nyah! My blood-like money! More precious than my blood!"

"Ahaha. Should I donate blood?"

"No need! If I go bankrupt, the tower goes bankrupt too! Get it! If you don't want to eat dog food tomorrow morning, better start the raid!"

From falling from the sky, to a million songs, we managed to escape the relentless crisis without a moment's rest.

Only then could we take a closer look at the main culprit who attacked our party.

-Tch. Are you capable enough to engulf The Idol, The Pity, and The Prayer? I stealthily hid my presence and ambushed you, but...!

The constellation floated in the air.

It was similar to the Prayer Sword, entirely red in color. However, slightly darker than the Prayer Sword. A child wrapped in dark red blood trembled in the air.

-But it's useless! Leader of the traitors! My loyalty to Leafanta Aegim will never falter. I will kill and eliminate you, ensuring no obstruction to the path my master walks.

Indeed.

I grasped the hilt and drew out the holy sword.

'Raviel became a constellation by stabbing her heart with a fragment of the [Goddess of Protection].'

Even just a fragment had the potential to become a constellation.

Then it's possible for a fragment itself to evolve into a [New Constellation].

The Sacrifice Sword had evolved from a fragment of the [Goddess of Protection] into [The Immortal Missionary of Happiness].

-Apostles! Eliminate them!

And the Sacrifice Sword still remained loyal to Leafanta Aegim.

Unlike the other sister swords that were helplessly absorbed by me, the Sacrifice Sword had gathered its strength. As if anticipating my arrival, it ambushed us. That was the whole story of the current situation.

"....."

I gripped the holy sword and stared ahead.

Literally hundreds of thousands of troops were rushing towards us from all sides.

The apostles sang instead of shouting, and danced instead of thrusting spears. But they were more threatening than any battle cry and more lethal than any spear or sword.

Our side, six grand people.

The enemy, innumerable.

"Countess."

"What is it!"

"You still have plenty in your wallet, right?"

It's the perfect moment for me to shine.

"What?"

"Let's go big for this stage."

At the moment the Countess blinked, I quietly recited.

"Ghoul Reincarnation."

Chapter 122: Utopia

(1)

A skill I frequently use. The exact ability of Ghoul Reincarnation is as follows:

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[Ghoul Reincarnation]

Rank: SSS

Effect: You summon those you've personally killed. The deceased do not inherit their abilities from life. However, if you wish, they can inherit their memories and appearances from when they were alive. If you do not wish it, they will only be summoned as monsters.

*However, you can only summon once a week.

+

An important point here is the clause, "If I wish, the deceased can inherit their memories and appearances from when they were alive."

In other words, if I don't wish so, they are summoned as monsters without memories or appearances.

Just like now.

-Grooooooar!

My shadow spread out. From the shadow that lay like a carpet, white bones arose. Five thousand skeletons. Although it had been a while since I last saw them, I didn't feel any joy. They are, after all, evidence of my death.

'But now, I need these creatures.'

The apostles of [The Immortal Missionary of Happiness] were swarming in. Singing in chorus.

-La. Lura, Lu.

-La, la.

The melody they sang buried the listeners in forcefully happy memories. Even a martial artist with mental fortitude would find it hard to resist such an attack. Even the followers of the Demonic Cult collapsed at wedding halls.

But.

-Grooooooar!

The skeletons roared unaffectedly, unfazed.

The mere five thousand skeletons charged. They aggressively rushed towards the tens and hundreds of millions of troops. Not because the skeletons were exceptionally brave or resistant to mental attacks, but because...

-Ahah. Indeed.

The Guardian Spirit spoke beside me.

-They have no 'memories', so mental attacks don't work on them.

That was true.

The song of the apostles of [The Immortal Missionary of Happiness] was undoubtedly powerful. But this power only affected beings with memories. To the summoned creatures without any memories, it was no different than a normal song.

-La...

-Keeek! Kiik!

And a normal song has no offensive power.

The skeletons slaughtered the apostles. They stabbed with daggers, bit with teeth, and clawed with their bony hands. Each time, apostles were swept away. In terms of physical attacks, the apostles were utterly incompetent.

-Ugh.

The constellation watching the battle from the air bit its lip. Despite the overflowing melody from all around, every word uttered by the constellation pierced my ears. Probably direct telepathy.

-Pointlessly resisting...! It's merely a matter of overwhelming with numbers!

I had to agree.

"Yes. Certainly so."

No matter how lacking in physical attack power, a hundred thousand is a hundred thousand, and a million is a million. Numbers themselves exert formidable violence. That's why [The Immortal Missionary of Happiness] confidently launched a surprise attack.

"But you've already shown us how to defeat you."

-What?

Did the constellation read the movement of my lips? It reacted.

"The numbers are a secondary problem. Every army has its weakness. The moment it was revealed that you know no pain and only spread happiness, it became clear.

The skeletons were being overwhelmed by the numbers. However, they hadn't been subdued yet. They would hold out for at least a minute or two more. And that was all the time we needed.

"The method to counter you is as good as exposed."

I gripped the holy sword tightly.

"Black Dragon Witch."

"Speak up! I can't hear well because of the song!"

"Yes. Please float the mirrors."

I enhanced my voice with aura. The Black Dragon Witch quickly came to my side. Having heard my request, she had already spread six mirrors around us.

"Done. But what are you going to do with the mirrors?"

"Do you remember when we fought [Demon King of Autumn Rain]? When the Demon King shot beams, you used the mirrors to reflect and weaken them. Conversely, you amplified our attacks. We're going to launch the same kind of attack."

The Black Dragon Witch understood my intention.

"You want to shoot your aura like a beam? That's fine, but are you confident you can produce an output as massive as [Demon King of the Autumn Rain]? Unless it's powerful enough, even reflecting it with my mirrors won't be enough."

"Don't worry about the output. Just focus on spreading it 'widely'."

"I don't fully get your plan, but... Okay, go ahead."

The mirrors flew into the air. East, West, North, South.

When light hit one mirror, it was immediately reflected to the others, enough to envelop the vast field.

'This is enough.'

I nodded and let aura flow into the sword hilt. Woosh! Blood-like red aura ignited along the blade.

'Even though I can't push forward with brute force like Preta, or cut through the world with enlightenment like my master.'

If these apostles are the enemy.

If these comrades are my allies.

I can exert an invincible divine might.

『What happens if you can only wield a sword with hunger?』

Because the martial arts I inherited are of such nature.

『You can slice through anyone who has never experienced hunger in one strike.』

『Thus, half of the orthodox martial artists fall into a state of absolute inferiority.』

Apostles who know only 'happiness' can never be my adversaries.

I swung my sword towards the mirrors raised by the Black Dragon Witch.

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The First Form.

Sword of Starving Death.

The army was cleaved apart.

The red aura carried the ultimate technique of Demonic Heavenly God Art. The mirrors reflected the technique. Once,

twice, three times, four times, five times, six times. With each reflection, the red aura split the wilderness in two.

Whoosh!

The strike was far weaker compared to the Demon King's blow. Incredibly trivial compared to my master's strike. But still, the apostles of happiness simply 'brushed against' the red aura and were annihilated.

—What...?!

Startled, the constellation gazed down at the plain.

No wonder it was flustered. My strike vaporized thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of apostles. The plain that was swarming with apostles was now empty, swept clean by the red aura.

"Black Dragon Witch! Keep going!"

Of course, I had no intention of being satisfied with just one attack.

"Please keep shifting the mirrors too!"

"Goodness... I see now. Your martial arts and those minions of the constellation are completely antagonistic to each other!"

The Black Dragon Witch, surprised, adeptly adjusted the mirrors' positions. Realizing that my attack merely needed to touch the enemies to annihilate them, regardless of the aura's output, was crucial.

Then, it was important to reflect the attack through as many different paths as possible.

"Don't worry about me, keep attacking! King of Death! I'll handle the mirrors!"

The mirrors noisily flew around in the air. The Black Dragon Witch, upon making a judgment, immediately acted on it.

Whoosh!

Trusting the Black Dragon Witch's words, I unleashed another strike. Just executing a familiar martial technique, yet tens of thousands of enemies were swept away. The combined

attack of the second and third rankers, me and the Black Dragon Witch, unilaterally ravaged the constellation's troops.

"Ahaha! Amazing! What a splendid sight!"

The Heretic Inquisitor employed Holy Techniques to protect us from the enemies' mental attacks.

"Hurry, finish it quickly! I've already broken two of my emergency savings banks!"

The Countess poured astronomical funds to back up the Heretic Inquisitor.

"Viper! Enemies escaped that way! Take care of them!"

The Paladin commanded the battlefield, giving real-time instructions.

"Okay! Damn, all the cool scenes are being stolen by the Demonic Cult!"

The remnants of the enemy forces that the skeletons couldn't stop were dealt with by Viper.

'We can do this.'

Just six of us.

'United, we are invincible!'

Yet, us six managed to overwhelm an army comparable to a whole world.

'Look.'

The residents living in the tower must be gathered in the square right now, witnessing our prowess. They will broadcast or record this scene and spread it to the outside world.

The spectacle of just six people repelling a million apostles.

'Look!'

Be thrilled.

Witness the fact that nothing is impossible in this tower.

See clearly how we are not oppressed by the world, but how we engulf it.

And harbor hope.

-This...

The constellation contorted its face.

-How dare you, this group of heinous heretics, invade my utopia! There is no misery in this world! Not even memories of misery!

The constellation waved its hand. A hologram-like scene unfolded in the sky, showing the lives of the apostles in this world.

-La, la.

-Lu.

The apostles didn't live in houses. They had no need to form cities. There was no such thing as hunger for them. They didn't need to mine resources to sustain life. In the form of children, the apostles were always happily singing anywhere and everywhere.

-Kyaaaak!

However.

At the heart of this world, an innocent child was impaled on a sword.

-Aaack! Ugh, ack! Aaack!!

I couldn't understand how the innocent child's screams became the [power] of this world. Probably, the sword embedded in the child's chest was creating some kind of law.

-The world I've built is much more moderate than your worthless junkyard!

Ignoring the child's screams, the constellation shouted.

-Don't even think of being hypocritical in front of me, invaders! I have followed Leafanta Aegim and seen numerous worlds. In every world, screams never ceased. Hundreds of thousands! Millions! Tens of millions! Hundreds of millions!

The sword named 'Sacrifice' howled.

-On the other hand, my world sacrifices just one. Only one! By making a single sacrificial lamb, my apostles live without knowing pain. If I commit one evil, you are ignoring billions of others. How dare such scum belittle my world!

I understand.

Undoubtedly, the constellation must have pondered and struggled before inventing such a mechanism. And did so with good intentions.

If the road to hell is paved with good intentions, then this is the hell [The Immortal Missionary of Happiness] chose.

'This world is just an extreme example.'

The challenges we, as managers of the tower, will face are no different. When food is scarce. When resources are depleted. As those responsible for the tower, we will have to sacrifice someone.

-Ha!

Seeing my silence, the constellation scoffed.

-At least you have the conscience not to spout nonsense. If you cannot answer, then be gone! I will never recognize you as a new master!

"No. I have an answer."

I stepped forward.

-An answer? Ha. What answer could you possibly have?

It's easy to recite the right theory, "Sacrifice is still wrong."

But the right theory is not for uttering with the mouth. It's

for living with the body. It's only valid when you can take responsibility for your own words. When you have the ability to realize them.

I haven't forgotten this.

"I will kill all of you."

-What?

"I will kill all of you and make you my Ghouls."

-.....

The constellation seemed not to understand my words.

-What are you talking about...

"Those killed by my sword are all collected as Ghouls. If I wish, they can be summoned with all their memories intact. I will kill all of you. Then summon you again to live in this world."

I raised the holy sword.

"You want to live happily forever, right? I'll let you. Live without suffering, without remembering, just singing as you do now. I'll make it happen."

-.....

"Ghouls don't need to eat anything to live. I'll give you the world you desire."

Simple.

Kill all the million apostles.

Then summon them back to this world.

Give them back the memories of their living selves.

Nothing changes.

"This isn't just for you."

To the residents watching us now.

To the countless humans who will watch, I declared.

"There are irredeemable villains. Unforgivable sinners. Spirits who want to live but cannot. From now on, I will execute them with my own hands."

-Execution...?

"Kill and revive them as my Ghouls. They will be exiled to my shadow, forever bearing their sins."

Thud.

The songs echoing to the horizon stopped.

The songs that filled the sky and earth thus brought silence to the world when they ceased.

The constellation looked at me incredulously.

-Lies... All villains and spirits. How can a mere mortal...

"The utopia you brag about creating here, I can create the same. And in my world, I don't even need the screams of an innocent child."

-.....

Before entering this Apocalypse, the Black Witch asked me.

If I was prepared to become a king.

"It's a simple story."

Yes.

If every world is hell, then I'll just become a bigger hell.

"My hell is more righteous than yours."

This is the path of kingship I've chosen.

Chapter 123: Utopia (2)

-.....

The Constellation fell silent. [The Immortal Missionary of Happiness], drenched in a blood-red armor, bit its lip quietly. Its eyes wavered. Not like ripples on the surface of water, but more like the deep currents of the ocean. The Constellation remained silent for a long time.

“.....King of Death.”

As the Constellation became silent, so did the army of apostles. A brief respite emerged on the battlefield that had been relentlessly raging from the beginning. Meanwhile, the Paladin approached me.

"Executing all villains and sinners, what do you mean by that?"

Behind the Paladin, the other companions also looked at me.

Puzzlement. Astonishment. Shock. Eyes, each holding different emotions, were directed at me.

"It's exactly as I said."

I met their gazes squarely.

"I know you've purged many people in managing the tower. It must still be happening covertly right now."

"....."

"I can't say that the way you've been doing things so far is wrong and needs to be corrected. I don't have the confidence or the ability to manage the tower better than you. But, if in the future you must eliminate someone, just bring them to me instead."

"Ahah?"

The Heretic Inquisitor tilted his head. He tilted it once to the left, then once to the right. After two nods, the Heretic Inquisitor smiled as if he understood what I meant.

"That's a great idea, King of Death! Why didn't I think of it until now? Truly a wonderful idea!"

The Black Dragon Witch frowned.

"What are you talking about?"

"Think about it. The King of Death's ability isn't just about summoning the target. It's about gifting them with their memories from their lifetime! Then, we can use the King of Death as a [moving prison]!"

Ahahat, laughter echoed across the silent plain.

"It requires no food! It doesn't consume resources! Imagine if the King of Death takes in a serial killer. Just by ordering, 'Never commit murder again,' the murderer will be eternally forbidden from committing crimes!"

"....."

The Black Dragon Witch's eyes gradually widened. The Countess and the Paladin did the same. They were confused, but they quickly calculated the advantages proposed by the

Heretic Inquisitor.

"Using the King of Death's skill as a prison...."

"Yes! Ahahat. The criminals would be quite terrified. And isn't it beautiful? The King of Death. A king who imprisons and manages those who deserve death, there couldn't be a more fitting alias!"

"As the leader of Sang-Ryun, I would like to offer my opinion."

The Countess took out her fan and tapped her lower lip with it.

"Not bad at all. You all must know, the tower has a significantly higher crime rate than the outside world. Prisons are chronically suffering from overcapacity, and maintaining those numerous prisons is no small expense."

"That's a sound argument. As the leader of the Temple of the Omnipotent God, I naturally agree!"

The Heretic Inquisitor grinned, effectively turning this into

an impromptu meeting of the highest guild leaders.

"The purpose of a prison is [isolating criminals] and [preventing re-offenses]. But no matter how excellent the rehabilitation programs are, it's hard to achieve 100% [prevention of re-offenses]. The human heart is as difficult as it is beautiful. But the King of Death can completely prevent re-offenses!"

"....."

The Paladin hesitated.

"I... I'm not sure. I acknowledge it's efficient. But something feels wrong. Isn't it too much to load on one person, the King of Death?"

"The King of Death is already housing two thousand martial artists from the Demonic Cult and the Orthodox Faction! There must be more we don't know about! If he's already holding two thousand, any more numbers are meaningless."

".....I abstain."

Meanwhile, the Black Dragon Witch was intently looking at my face. Her black eyes were mixed with various emotions.

"Are you really okay with this?"

I felt her regret. The Black Dragon Witch was feeling responsible. Responsible for having dragged me into their world.

"It's okay."

I spoke sincerely. I was grateful. Even though it was a situation I had jumped into willingly, she felt responsible. The Black Dragon Witch is a kind and noble person. Perhaps one day I'll get to hear her real name.

I turned my head and looked up at the Constellation.

"What will you do?"

-.....

"If you want to keep fighting us, I won't stop you. But the outcome is already determined. The utopia you boast of, I will take it under my wing."

The Constellation broke its long silence.

-.....I am not just a fragment of the [Goddess of Protection], but also [The Immortal Missionary of Happiness], commanding a million apostles. If you take me in, all the apostles will also be subjected to you. Tell me, how can you guarantee that you won't use the apostles as private soldiers for evil deeds?

"I won't use them."

I asserted firmly.

"When you invaded Raviel's world, I only summoned the followers of the Demonic Cult. I could have summoned the martial artists of the Orthodox Faction since I had killed them too, but I didn't. It's against the principle. Those people shouldn't follow the orders of the Vice-Lord of the Demonic Cult."

-.....

"I will let the million or ten million of your apostles live happily in this world as they have done until now."

The Constellation slowly lowered its head.

When overwhelmed by force and subdued by logic, a person finally utters the last words hidden in their heart.

The Constellation, wearing the guise of a child, murmured softly.

-Ah, Leafanta Aegim...

The Constellation's body began to melt away.

-Once again, to meet you...

Blood rained from the sky. The blood hit the ground, congealed, and slowly solidified into the shape of a sword. The sword, lacking a mouth, couldn't fully express the Constellation's last words.

[The Sacrifice Sword speaks, waiting for your disposition.]

Only the sword expressed its intent, relayed by the tower.

[My name is Sacrifice.]

[I can transform someone's pain into the happiness of others.]

[The purer and nobler the suffering, the more happiness is amplified.]

I walked towards the sword stuck in the ground.

Raising my Holy Sword, I struck down the blood-stained sword.

[The Goddess of Protection absorbs a fragment of herself.]

The sword shattered.

[The Goddess of Protection's existence becomes better defined.]

Simultaneously, the apostles surrounding us also melted away. Hundreds of thousands, millions of children who had covered the horizon, crumbled. Even as they collapsed, the children were still smiling.

Ssshhhh-

As the apostles crumbled, releasing red liquid, the horizon quickly turned into a crimson horizon.

[Stage Clear.]

[Today, the 28th floor has been cleared.]

In the shallow sea of blood.

The Black Dragon Witch stared blankly at the blood rising to her calves.

".....Really, information is crucial in clearing a stage. As long as you know the weakness, you can easily conquer it. When we first dropped into the midst of the enemy, I was preparing to flee far away. But to think we'd clear it so quickly..."

"Eh? What? What's happening?"

The Viper, who was busy dealing with the apostles and skeletons, was utterly confused. He was the only one among us who hadn't been listening to what I was saying and was just doing his job.

"Why are these guys suddenly turning into red paint? What's going on?"

The Paladin sighed.

"It's good to see you haven't changed, Viper..."

"...What's that supposed to mean? Hey, are you into me or something?"

"Ahahat. That would be interesting, but probably not. The deputy leader of the Vigilante Corps has been seeing someone

for a long time!"

The Viper's eyes widened in surprise.

"What? Really? Who is it?"

"I can't disclose that much. Find out for yourself!"

Nobody told Viper. It seemed like common knowledge to everyone else. I was also curious and considered opening the [Character Window] to read her psychological state, but decided against it as it would be too intrusive.

"Wow, that was a truly magnificent performance!"

The Countess approached and patted my back.

"I was prepared to empty the bottomless pot of money for at least a day! But as expected, King of Death. Who was the first person to take notice of you when you were a rookie?"

The Countess was happy we successfully navigated the

surprise attack. I didn't want to dampen her spirits, but I wasn't planning on resting just yet. This stage was only a stepping stone from the start.

"Sorry, Countess. The conquest isn't over yet."

"Hm? What do you mean? Didn't the notification say that the 28th floor was cleared?"

"Yes. The 28th floor is done."

I nodded.

"But today, I plan to clear all the way up to the 30th floor."

At that remark, even the Black Dragon Witch, who was blankly staring at the sea of blood, Viper, who was pestering the Paladin about who she was dating, and the Heretic Inquisitor, who seemed to be pondering the next move, all turned to look at me simultaneously.

"Today? In one day?"

The Black Dragon Witch was surprised. It wasn't a tone of doubt about its feasibility. She no longer doubted my abilities. She was just concerned about my condition.

"King of Death, or rather, Kim Gong-Ja, you've been pushing yourself too hard. Ever since entering [Tales of Sormewin Academy], you haven't had a day's rest."

'Ah.'

She must be right from her perspective.

I had been causing all sorts of chaos, masquerading it as a honeymoon with Raviel. But to others, it must have seemed like I hadn't stopped for a moment.

"Just take some time to rest. Humans wear down under stress. If you don't balance work and rest wisely, you'll eventually collapse. Really. You might not realize it yet since you're young..."

I smiled.

She was genuinely concerned about others, and it was

beautiful to see.

"You're right. I have been overdoing it."

"Right? So, take a break from conquests for a while..."

"That's why I'll finish it all today and then rest."

The Black Dragon Witch held her forehead in exasperation.

"You're not listening at all! Please, just rest!"

"Black Dragon Witch. The tower's population increases by tens of thousands daily. Even if 99 out of 100 newcomers are good, there will be 1 criminal. That means 1,000 criminals increase every day."

"....."

"With 10 criminals, it's organized crime. With 100, it's a mafia. With 1,000, it's a warlord. Right now, a new warlord is emerging every day. We can't just keep focusing on

Apocalypses."

I spoke calmly.

"We need to finish as quickly as possible and return to managing the tower. It's for our sake, for the residents, and for the newcomers."

"Put that way..."

The Black Dragon Witch bit her lip.

"If you put it that way, what can I say..."

"Don't worry."

I grinned and extended a fist to the Black Dragon Witch.

"I'll make sure to rest properly when I do. I doubt anyone rests as well as I do. If you see how I rest with Raviel, you'll be surprised."

"I don't want to see lovey-dovey newlyweds..."

"If you're so concerned, help me prepare a ring later. I need to gift Raviel a ring, but I'm clueless about these things."

"Haah."

The Black Dragon Witch sighed deeply, covering her forehead.

"Right... the most beautiful ring for the most beautiful girl. How did I end up styling a kid from head to toe..."

"I'm always grateful."

"Enough. If we talk about gratitude... no, let's not. It's embarrassing in front of everyone. I realized it when I saw you at Sormewin, King of Death, you really have no shame, do you?"

Despite her grumbling, the Black Dragon Witch went along with my suggestion.

She, along with the other leaders of the tower, knew it was time to gradually return to management. They were not only hunters conquering the tower but also administrators managing it.

It was time to end our days in the library.

"Transfer."

Whooosh!

We returned to the library in phases.

Hunters were gathered in the library. They had seen live broadcasts of us six overpowering a million apostles. Perhaps because of that, they respectfully kept their distance.

A staggering gap.

The authority of the top rankers was firmly established by this display.

'Okay. Good.'

This was the atmosphere I wanted. Proving our rankings through sheer ability, and as a [united team]. For the time being, no one would dare cause discord.

“Hmm.”

There was one more observer of us.

The Head Librarian of the Great Library, with chin resting on hand, stared at us intently.

"Welcome back. Congratulations. I thought you'd struggle a bit more with the conquest, but the synergy you create together far exceeded my expectations. I never imagined the world under the Constellation's rule would be wrapped up so quickly."

Despite the congratulatory words, the Head Librarian's expression was flat.

'It can't be helped.'

[The Holed-Up Head Librarian] is a lover of stories.

He adores characters overcoming adversity, unexpected challenges, and unpredictable resolutions. Overwhelming victories or defeats don't suit his taste.

But I knew how to tempt the story aficionado.

‘Character Window.’

Text floated before my eyes.

+

Name: Holed-Up Head Librarian

Favorability: 95

Preferred Genres: [Fusion], [Romance], [Mystery], [Adventure], [Horror], [History], [War], [Sports], [SF], [Mythology], [Fairy Tale]...

Disliked Genres: None

Preferred Characters: [Fictional Characters], [Constellation Killer], [King of Death]

Disliked Characters: None

Preferred Plots: [Story]

Disliked Plots: [Serialization Cancellation]

Psychological State: 'Well, The Immortal Missionary of Happiness was simply too incompatible with the Demonic Heavenly God Art. Bad luck. Tsk, tsk. Foolish thing. Had it anticipated its disadvantage and sought reinforcements from other Constellations, there might have been a fight.'

+

I nodded.

‘Got it.’

My name was added to the Librarian's preferred characters.

[Constellation Killer] was his most cherished character, and now [King of Death] was listed alongside. This meant I had risen to a position comparable to [Constellation Killer].

"Head Librarian."

"Hm. What Apocalypse will you choose next?"

The Head Librarian smiled, his robe fluttering.

"If you wish, I can personally recommend one. Since the fairy tale ended too quickly, how about a myth next? It's grand and dangerous, but the rewards are unimaginable. Or..."

"The character you love the most is Leafanta Aegim, isn't it?"

I interrupted the Head Librarian.

"How do I compare to him?"

"Uhhh? Well, of course... It's hard to rank you two. You and the Constellation Killer have completely opposite natures!"

The Head Librarian stroked his chin.

"Let's see. If the Constellation Killer is a man burdened with all the misfortune and suffering of the world, then the King of Death... you're like a chocolate ice cream! You look black and bitter on the outside, but surprisingly sweet when tasted!"

Regardless of the appropriateness of the analogy.

"Our next Apocalypse is decided."

"What will it be?"

"The Leafanta Aegim Epic."

"....."

The Head Librarian hesitated.

"When we went to the snowy mountain after clearing [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon], you showed it to me."

Then, in front of the giant dragon corpse, the Head Librarian had said that being killed by Leafanta Aegim was his dream. He showed us a precious, worn-out leather book, read countless times.

[Leafanta Aegim's Epic].

That book would still be hidden in the Head Librarian's possession.

"King of Death...?"

The Head Librarian's lips curved slightly.

"Yes."

"I know you consider the Constellation Killer as your rival, but [Leafanta Aegim's Epic] is not an Apocalypse...? I can only introduce you to Apocalypses, worlds that tragically faced serialization cancellation."

The Head Librarian's lips trembled slightly.

"[Leafanta Aegim's Epic] is still an ongoing story. I absolutely must not intervene. I cannot grant your request..."

"But."

I looked straight into the Head Librarian's eyes.

"You want to see it, don't you?"

"....."

"You said it yourself, the Constellation Killer is your favorite character. And I'm comparable to him."

The owner of the Great Library of All Knowledge.

The constellation who loved books more than anyone.

Therefore, I threw an 'irresistible temptation' at the story aficionado.

“A scene with your favorite characters together. Don't you want to see it?”

The genre of the next stage I chose.

It was a crossover.

Chapter 124:

Utopia (3)

Those captivated by stories face a cruel fate.

Not merely those who enjoy stories, but those obsessed, those gone mad, deeply engrossed to the point of dedicating half their lives to tales.

For them, reality is merely a world that cannot become a story. There are no dramatic twists, no shocking endings. People are just people, never transforming into characters.

Disappointment with reality.

Contempt for humanity.

And above all, worship of stories.

Disappointment, contempt, and worship define those captivated by stories. That's why they rave when a story unfolds in reality and cheer when people become characters.

They haven't lost the warmth in their hearts.

They simply wait for moments to rave and cheer.

"....."

The ultimate reader stands before me.

"Leafanta Aegim and... your crossover."

This person built a library out of love for stories.

"Certainly, it's an attractive proposition, but..."

The library he built is so vast and grand it covers a whole world, known as the Great Library of All Thoughts.

"However, I can only provide Apocalypses. That's the rule I've set. Every story has the right to conclude on its own, and I cannot rashly intervene..."

He's trembling now.

'He's wavering.'

I'm convinced. The Head Librarian will ultimately be persuaded. No real-world logic can convince him, but the phrase "Don't you want to see the story?"

That alone can lure him to hell.

"Ah. If you don't want to, just forget it."

It's an irresistible offer.

"I'm just giving you a generous proposal. To create a scene with your favorite characters together. If you don't like it, just say no."

"....."

"But you really want to see it, don't you?"

The Head Librarian's face betrays his emotions in real-time. Agony, dilemma, and desire for an impossible crossover, a sumptuous dessert.

"I am bound by a contract with the tower."

He speaks with a warm breath.

"Not all Constellations are bound by contracts with the tower. Only those who have made a pact can enter. I'm like a tenant, in exchange for renting a floor, I've taken on various 'constraints'."

"What kind of constraints?"

"Only to provide humans with 'Apocalypses'..."

The Head Librarian gestures.

With each motion, books swirling around him fall to the ground.

"And an Apocalypse, while having various meanings, does not include [Leafanta Aegim's Epic]."

These books were his bodyguards. When hunters attacked with intent, he overpowered them using the power of these books.

"A contract is a contract... I can't just violate it at will. The tower, the tower's master, would be very angry with me. I don't want to anger the landlord. Ah, as they say, a tenant is weak to their landlord..."

In other words.

The Head Librarian is disarming himself.

"Just for your reference..."

With tens of books fallen, the Head Librarian, devoid of his power, looks at me.

"I, in fact, am not mighty in terms of personal strength..."

"....."

"Like many Constellations, I have special powers, but I'm surprisingly clumsy in battle. Without my books, I'm just a weak reader. So... you understand, Gong-Ja...?"

Indeed. Understood.

"Yes. You shouldn't break the contract."

I stride towards the Head Librarian. As I get closer, he nervously interlocks his long, thick sleeves and looks up at me anxiously.

"Unless it's for an 'unavoidable reason'."

I grab and lift the Head Librarian by the collar.

He's surprisingly light. Despite the long, thick sleeves, there's no resistance when I lift him.

"Ugh...!"

The Head Librarian gasps.

"Hand over [Leafanta Aegim's Epic]."

"Ah..."

The tremble on his lips intensifies. Threat and coercion. Despite being a Constellation threatened by a mere hunter, the Head Librarian doesn't resist.

"It's outrageous... After all the kindness I've shown you, after I trusted you... To betray me like this! Ah, the injustice. This is why countless stories warn not to trust humans..."

Such poor acting skills.

I smirk and grip his collar tighter. The Head Librarian gasps, "Hik!"

"Hand it over."

"....."

"Or I'll kill you. You pervert."

The Head Librarian's face gradually clouds over. We're staging a drama, but he senses sincerity in my voice.

Of course.

A threat to deceive the tower must contain some truth.

"Pervert, you say. Gong-Ja, that's a bit harsh...?"

"Collecting people's hair and nails and dreaming of being killed by your favorite character, isn't that perverted? Wishing to die at the hands of the character you love most, is that normal?"

The Head Librarian shuts up.

"Ah, right. I'm one of your favorite characters too."

I grin.

"How about it? Want me to fulfill your wish right now?"

"Right now...?"

"Want to die by my hand, here?"

The Head Librarian flinches and shrinks. He trembles as if struck by lightning, desire and longing in his eyes. Slowly, with trembling hands, he pulls out something from his bosom.

[Leafanta Aegim's Epic].

A worn book, stained by repeated readings, the most cherished among countless volumes, always carried by the Head Librarian.

"I will give it to you..."

He offers me this precious item, more valuable than his life.

"Well done."

I don't release his collar, instead snatching [Leafanta Aegim's Epic] with one hand. "Ah," the Head Librarian opens his mouth. His face is a mess, a blend of ecstasy and self-loathing.

+

[Leafanta Aegim's Epic]

Genre: Unavailable for current grade.

Difficulty: Unavailable for current grade.

Participant Limit: Unavailable for current grade.

*The serialization is ongoing.

Description: Unavailable for current grade.

+

"Hmm."

So, books not permitted by the Head Librarian are unreadable. An intriguing discovery.

I look down at the Head Librarian, still holding him.

"It's not visible? I can't read it."

"Well, you can see the Apocalypses because I permitted it... All the books here are forbidden. They're not meant to be read recklessly by humans..."

"Then explain it yourself. Directly."

"....."

The Head Librarian couldn't refuse. He began to divulge the life story of Leafanta Aegim, his most beloved character.

"Leafanta Aegim... or the Emperor, is from the same hometown as you."

"What?"

"The same world, same region, even the same race. Not just hometown, but also same surname."

He continued with revelations I didn't expect. Speaking with eyes cast down, he murmured,

"The surname 'Aegim' was created by the Constellation Killer himself. A simple combination of words. He used English, not the language from your region."

England? English?

'Ae' and 'Gim'?

"...You mean 'I am Kim'?"

"Exactly."

Incredible.

"Didn't I tell you? Once is coincidence. Twice is connection. Three times, it's fate. You and the Constellation Killer have already crossed paths numerous times, inevitably intertwined."

Shocked by the Constellation Killer's true identity, I realized,

'From the same hometown?'

The only person from my hometown I knew well was a ruffian with a ponytail. And now, the Constellation Killer was also from my hometown.

'Am I the only sane one from my hometown?'

As I was pondering, the Head Librarian continued.

"The Constellation Killer was summoned to another world in his youth."

"He was just a high school student. Naturally, he was in utter chaos after being summoned. But with awakened powers, he managed to survive in that harsh world."

"Wait. Hold on."

I was struck by a strong sense of déjà vu. A plot I had heard often.

"Summoned to another world as a high school student. That's exactly..."

"Yes."

The Head Librarian nodded slightly.

"[Leafanta Aegim's Epic]'s genre is [A high school student summoned to another world wreaking havoc]. Abbreviated as [Isekai Havoc]. Though the Constellation Killer is no longer of high school age..."

My jaw dropped. Isekai Havoc.

'I thought that term went extinct with the dinosaurs.'

So, the Constellation Killer, Leafanta Aegim, was a being from an era long gone.

"Of course, it's unfair to call him just a havoc-wrecker. He endured countless trials and tribulations to become the first Emperor of the Aegim Empire..."

As the Head Librarian narrated the Constellation Killer's journey, his voice turned into light, merging into [Leafanta Aegim's Epic], forming readable text within the epic.

-A long time ago.

-Atop the corpse of the ancient Dragon Emperor, people lived.

"The Constellation Killer... He set foot on your 20th floor."

-They yearned for a hero.

-Because they had none among them.

"That's where his journey piercing through worlds began."

-They prayed to the gods.

-The gods answered their prayers.

"This was a journey to establish a kingdom..."

And so, the book, like other Apocalypses, began to emit a pure white light, which the Head Librarian watched as if he feared it.

"Now, the Constellation Killer resides on the 50th floor."

50th floor.

The same location mentioned by the Guardian Spirit.

"Here's the problem. You haven't conquered up to the 50th floor yet. You're still in the 'novice area.' And the 50th floor is a very special place... Strictly, strictly forbidden to transfer novices."

Even others, who had been listening in silence, were shocked.

"The novice area is below the 50th floor?"

"After all the hardship to get here..."

I wasn't surprised.

I knew the tutorial was considered up to the 10th floor. I had also heard from the Guardian Spirit about competing with hunters from other worlds starting from the 50th floor.

'In other words, until the 50th floor, we don't compete with hunters from other worlds, because it's a measure to protect novices.'

With that thought, I asked,

"So, being forbidden means you can't send anyone to the 50th floor under any circumstances?"

The Head Librarian's face crumbled again.

"That's... not the case. The transfer... the administrator can do it, but at a cost."

"Then it's fine. You don't have to pay the price, right?"

"Ah, at least... limit the number of people to just you, Kim Gong-Ja..."

".....Fine."

Even if the Head Librarian hadn't pleaded so desperately, I intended to face Leafanta Aegim alone.

"Send me to the 50th floor."

The Head Librarian closed his eyes tightly.

"...Don't regret it."

"I'm going to make sure I don't."

Hearing my firm response, he gave up. With trembling hands, he caressed the cover of [Leafanta Aegim's Epic] and whispered faintly.

"King of Death. I designate you as a character in [Leafanta Aegim's Epic]..."

That moment.

[Warning!]

[Abnormal access detected.]

[A penalty will be imposed on 'Holed-Up Head Librarian'.]

A fierce voice pounded in my head. The Head Librarian flinched, obviously hearing the voice too. But he continued, trembling but determined.

"I exert my authority."

[Warning again.]

[A penalty will be imposed on 'Holed-Up Head Librarian'.]

The Head Librarian breathed heavily.

"It doesn't matter. Go, King of Death... And show me your encounter with the Constellation Killer."

Bright light enveloped my vision.

[Abnormal access detected.]

Warnings kept ringing, even as my view whitened.

[Warning!]

[The blessing from the God of Beauty has been suspended.]

[You can no longer observe others' favorability towards you!]

[The blessing from the God of Snakes has been suspended.]

[You can no longer observe others' psychological states!]

The next moment.

[An unnamed resident of 'The Tower' enters the 50th floor.]

I stepped into a realm no one from our world had ever touched before.

The '50th floor' of the Tower.

Chapter 125:

Demonic Realm (1)

Kim ■ vividly remembers the day he first fell into another world.

-Congratulations.

-You have been chosen as the hero to save this world.

A stunningly beautiful woman smiled at him. Bewildered, Kim ■ saw an angel before him.

Having seen numerous celebrities through videos and news, he was just an [ordinary high school student]. It was his first time meeting a beauty whose mere smile seemed to brighten everything around her. He stuttered.

-Um... Excuse me? Angel? Where am I?

-Don't be in such a hurry, Hero. I am the [Goddess of Protection], the constellation that will guard and guide you from now on. You may not know much now, but you will learn a lot.

A goddess, not an angel.

Kim ■ felt his head go numb.

-I was just at the school rooftop...

-You were suffering from school violence.

The Goddess gently clasped her hands.

-Young humans can sometimes be like beasts. Acting out pure malice through sheer ignorance. Unfortunately, you were prey to those beasts, and in despair, you fell.

-Fell...

-Yes. If I were to add one word, it would be a fatal fall.

Kim ■ then recalled.

The school rooftop.

The iron door to the rooftop was securely locked, chained shut. Seeing the locked door sparked defiance in him. So, Kim ■ opened a 5th-floor classroom window and slipped out, climbing the pipe to the rooftop.

It was insane.

But, clinging to the pipe, inching upwards, Kim ■ felt alive for the first time.

‘Ridiculous.’

For the first time, he climbed out a window, ascended a pipe, and reached the rooftop. Never had he felt such vitality even when trying hard to live.

Choosing to abandon life made him feel more alive.

-.....

The sky he saw from the rooftop was red.

Kim ■ was grateful to the sky that turned red once a day.

For the first time - he felt thankful to the sky.

The red sky seemed kinder than the blue. He wanted to be consumed by its tender hue.

‘If I fall.’

Kim ■ looked down. The sports field, bathed in sunset, seemed vast like the Sahara.

‘They say you regret it right after you fall.’

Kim ■ neatly placed his indoor shoes on the ground. The soles, blackened with marker ink, weren’t his doing.

‘Will I regret it too?’

The sports field became noisy. Had someone noticed him? Students who were playing soccer before evening study crowded below, pointing up at the rooftop. Among them were familiar faces.

Kim ■ quietly moved his thumb. Click. He sent a prepared message to 37 students. They would all receive the same last words.

+

The one responsible for my death is you.

Don't forget.

You killed me.

+

Moments later, a notification for the sent message appeared.

Done.

It was liberating.

Kim ■ threw his phone. It plummeted and shattered on the sports field. The students below panicked at the sight of his broken phone. Some turned pale upon receiving their own epitaph.

‘May your lives be ruined forever.’

Kim ■ let himself fall into the red sandy field.

Falling, he thought of it as an unsuccessful flight.

-I am the Goddess of Protection.

And that's how he arrived here.

-I possess many powers. The Idol, The Pity, The Prayer, The Sacrifice, The Salvation.

Kim ■ remembered the day he first fell into another world.

-By borrowing my power, you can do anything, become anything, Hero.

The dazzlingly beautiful woman smiled at him.

-What do you wish to become, Hero?

[You have entered the 50th floor through an abnormal route.]

When I opened my eyes, a voice flowed into my head.

[The blessing from the 'Holed-Up Head Librarian' has been suspended.]

[Novice protection measures have been suspended.]

[Novice privileges are temporarily revoked.]

I smirked bitterly.

'Such a spine-chilling warning.'

I looked around.

First thing I noticed were the spires soaring into the sky.

Like the fingers of giants pointing upwards, five towers twisted and stood in the distance. It was a wonder they didn't collapse.

-Wow. Shit. It's been over a hundred fifty years since I've been here.

Fortunately, I had someone to guide me. The Sword Emperor. The former Guardian Spirit, who once climbed up to the 99th floor of the tower, had naturally set foot on the 50th floor too.

-But nothing's changed.

The Guardian Spirit looked around the 50th floor's landscape with a tired, almost exasperated gaze.

"What are those spires?"

-Magic Towers. They've been here for over a thousand years, hunkered down on the 50th floor. They chose to live here instead of climbing the tower...

A thousand years.

-Anyway, don't get too close to them now. Better not even look at them.

"Why's that?"

-If you stare for over 23 seconds, it automatically detects your gaze. In their world, the number 23 is like the number 18 in yours, implying 'What the fuck are you looking at?' It's a warning system reflecting their terrible personalities. See what I mean?

I quickly averted my gaze from the Magic Towers. A warning system activated by just looking!

-Oh, right. There used to be six towers, but I demolished one. They'd go insane if they knew I've returned as a ghost. They'd mobilize everything to chase you to hell, so hide well.

"...I see you're not a guide, but a troll. Damn. I should have known better."

That's when it happened.

[You are beginning to be eroded by the Void Poison.]

[Your current erosion level is Lv.1.]

I was shocked.

"What's this Void Poison? You're saying my body is being eroded?"

-Oh, right. Forgot about that. Yeah, it feels more like the tower now.

The Guardian Spirit shrugged nonchalantly.

-It's just a poison spread throughout the 50th floor. Who was it again? Anyway, the floor's manager had some issues with favoritism, being too friendly with certain hunters. Ended up dying in what they called the 'Midnight Liberation War' or something?

"And then?"

-He died without going peacefully, cursed the world, and that curse turned into this poison.

I blinked.

"Wait, that's like..."

-Yes, yes. Like that virus spread by a dying Constellation in the Martial Realm. Think of it as an enhanced version of that.

"No."

I incredulously asked.

"People live here with that kind of poison in the air? Since a thousand years ago? Are they crazy?"

-Well, yes, they're insane, but those who've climbed this high usually have some basic skills, whether it's aura, magic, skills, or even a Constellation's blessing. What are you doing, zombie? Use your aura to protect yourself.

As advised, I raised my aura. I enveloped myself in my red aura, especially fortifying my respiratory system. After catching my breath, I looked at the Guardian Spirit.

"What if I don't defend? What happens?"

-Well...

The Guardian Spirit hesitated, an unusual expression of struggling to find the right words.

-You end up with a very unique appearance and mental state...

"Kieeeeeek!"

-Oh, perfect timing. There's one over there.

I turned around.

There, a toad-like monster crouched.

"Kioeeeeek!"

The only problem with the toads I knew was that they didn't have roughly 36 legs or shark teeth in their mouths.

Another issue was that it seemed to weigh about 2 tons.

"What is that thing?!"

-Well, it was probably a human similar to you. Someone who ate, excreted, and occasionally spouted nonsense, like you. About 20 years ago.

While the Guardian Spirit casually murmured, the 2-ton monster toad leaped. It was clear that the toad was charging at me. I gasped in horror and focused aura on my feet to leap

away.

Boom!

The ground shook. The explosion was too fresh to be just from the toad. It was as if a small meteor had hit the ground.

"Damn it."

I drew out my holy sword and used the Demonic Heavenly God Art. Swish! My strike, imbued with red aura, sliced the monster toad in half.

Did I kill it?

-Oh.

The Guardian Spirit spoke abruptly.

-Sorry, Kim Zombie. I forgot to warn you. From the 50th floor onwards, it's literally a demonic realm. Acting on common sense here often leads to trouble.

"What are you trying to say?"

Just then, something emerged from the split halves of the monster toad. It was like tentacles. In an instant, dozens of tentacles extended, and the toad stood back up on the ground.

"Kieeeeek!"

"Kyooook!"

Now there were two of them.

-Yeah, like that.

"What the hell?"

-If you're scared, keep staring at the Magic Towers. If you look for more than 23 seconds, they'll talk to you, asking, 'Why are you staring at me?' Then you can ask them for help, and witches riding brooms will come to rescue you. How about that? Nice, right?

It wasn't just my feeling; the Guardian Spirit had been smirking subtly. And if he's smirking, it highly likely means he's teasing me.

So.

"...What do they ask for in return for the rescue?"

-Wow, sharp eyes. How did you know? A contract that sucks out even your soul, mortgaged for 12 years. As an SSS-class skill holder, you'll get tremendous affection. I'm so jealous!

Damn it...

"Hey, y-you over there! Run away!"

A desperate voice came from behind.

"This way! Run this way! Hurry!"

Looking back, three old men in shabby cloaks were beckoning. Their cloaks were dirty like homeless people, but

their eyes were mysterious. Their voices were earnest, making me almost head towards them.

-Huhuhu.

However, I couldn't proceed because of the Guardian Spirit's suspicious face. Reflexively, my feet stopped.

Instead of running to the old men, I scattered aura to attack them.

"Over here!"

"Run this way!"

"Hurry!"

As soon as my attack hit, something astonishing happened. Bam! Something rose from the ground where the old men stood.

It was like a hedgehog... 'something'.

"Hey, y-you over there!"

"Run away!"

"Over here!"

The hedgehog's back wasn't covered in spines but had three old men attached instead.

"Insane..."

In other words, those weren't living old men. They were just a disguise by the monster's shell to lure and prey on people who approached.

-Yeah, but still, Kim Zombie. You're naive but think things through. What kind of place do you think this is? Logically, why would old men help you for no reason? Right?

"Kieeeeek!"

"Run this way!"

"Kyooooook!"

"Hurry!"

Both monster toads and the monster hedgehog charged at me. The toad's skin wriggled with dozens of tentacles, and the hedgehog's back sang in chorus with the three old men.

Just watching was enough to corrupt one's mind.

"Is this place always like this?!"

-‘Exceptions’ exist, but generally, yes. Welcome to the demonic realm where cosmic horrors dance, fledgling. Now you realize how normal and sensible a hunter I am, right?

"This is not the time to say that...!"

Fortunately or unfortunately.

"---Bow your head, stranger."

The voice of the [exception] mentioned by the Guardian Spirit quickly manifested.

"I will cut it in half."

The voice, carried on aura, went straight into my head. It was telepathy. I quickly bowed my head as instructed. At that moment, the sound of the wind splitting and a chilling strike whizzed past my head.

Swish!

Both monster toads were cut in half at once.

Considering the regenerative scene of the monster toad earlier, I shouted in a chilling realization.

"No, if you cut them, they'll just split and regenerate...!"

I stopped mid-sentence. The monster toads didn't move after being split. In other words, they were dead.

‘What? They only split the first time and die normally afterward?’

-Nope~. They regenerate no matter how many times~.

‘Then why did they die now?’

-Because.

Before the Guardian Spirit could explain, another explained.

"To kill [those who split and die], one must..."

The telepathy user was speaking.

"precisely [split them in half]."

Dumbfounded, I looked again, and it was true.

The monster toads were split exactly in half down the

middle. Somehow, this exact splitting resulted in their permanent death.

"Next."

The telepathy user immediately targeted the monster hedgehog.

He swung his sword.

Boom!

Each strike exploded with a loud bang.

Despite the horrifying aura infused in the strikes, the monster hedgehog nonchalantly withstood them.

‘It’s like Lady Goldencup when she was protected by a blessing...’

The monster hedgehog, unharmed and charging, was continuously struck by the telepathy user.

"Over here,"

Boom!

The left old man's call was buried in the explosion.

"Run away,"

Boom!

The right old man's call was buried in the explosion.

"Hurry,"

Boom!

The middle old man's call was buried in the explosion.

"The true body of the Screamer lies in its scream,"

As the old men's calls were drowned out by the strikes, the hedgehog crumbled down like sand.

"Kill it by burying it in sound."

Both types of monsters were swiftly dealt with.

Profound knowledge of the prey and the overwhelming martial prowess to realize that knowledge.

‘A hunter...’

I stared blankly at that hunter, the telepathy user.

The Guardian Spirit grumbled.

-See, that bastard hasn't aged a bit.

The silver-haired young man I saw in Shiny's trauma.

"Leafanta Aegim..."

The Constellation Killer.

Leafanta Aegim sheathed his sword and tilted his head.

"Do you know me?"

His eyes, blue like a newly born star, were fixed on me.

Volume 6 – Chapters 126-149

Chapter 126:

Demonic Realm (2)

Upon seeing the eyes of Leafanta Aegim, I was momentarily at a loss for words.

'Why does he have such eyes?'

I've met all sorts of people in my time. I've encountered someone who wielded a sword colder than a snowy plain. I've met someone with a heart cooler than a white lily. But the eyes of the man before me were something I had never seen.

A Blank white paper.

Eyes devoid not just of emotion but seemingly of any memory. Not even a fragment of feeling, let alone a trace.

"Uh..."

[Shiny is deeply moved by reuniting with an acquaintance after such a long time!]

Before I could figure out how to respond, the Holy Sword reacted first.

[However, Shiny is still not convinced why its former master betrayed it. Before feeling touched, it wonders if it should first be overwhelmed with anger!]

"...You have an unusual sword."

Leafanta Aegim glanced down at my waist. There, the Holy Sword vibrated violently, expressing its will. A hint of curiosity flickered in Leafanta Aegim's expressionless eyes.

"Is it a magical sword or an ego sword? ...It's best to keep special items like this hidden here, stranger. There are many hyenas on the 50th floor targeting the skills and equipment of beginners who've just entered."

'Huh?'

I was puzzled.

It was strange. Leafanta Aegim's tone seemed as if he was seeing [Goddess of Protection] for the first time. If this young man was indeed the true Constellation Killer, he wouldn't fail to recognize the identity of this Holy Sword.

"Excuse me. Don't you recognize this sword?"

I unfastened the Holy Sword from my waist and showed it to Leafanta Aegim. Slightly pulling out the sword handle, the blade shone with a brilliant light.

"Hmm."

However...

Facing the light of the Holy Sword, once his tool and mark of the constellation... Leafanta Aegim furrowed his brow as if he knew nothing about it.

"I don't know."

His face tilted like a statue.

"It seems to be an item connected to me, but I don't remember. No, it would be wiser not to expect any past connections from me."

"Excuse me?"

Then, Leafanta Aegim casually dropped a piece of unexpected information.

"I suffer from amnesia, stranger. I remember nothing from more than a week ago."

The man spoke with a calm expression.

"It's dangerous to keep talking in this wasteland. Follow me. I know a relatively safe tavern."

Leafanta Aegim said so and led the way. Being new to the 50th floor, I quietly followed his guidance.

"Hey..."

"Look over there. It's Constellation Killer."

On the way to the tavern, I encountered several hunters. Presumably, all of them wielded significant power in other worlds. Yet even they stepped back, shoulders trembling, at the sight of the Constellation Killer.

"That crazy guy's up to some nonsense again..."

"Are the spiders from the towers going to be quiet today?"

"Shh. Better not get involved with that one..."

Not only hunters murmured amongst themselves.

[‘The Lonely Seeker’ feels curious about the new arrival.]

[‘The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth’ expresses caution towards the companion of Constellation Killer.]

[‘The Warhorse of the Eternal Plains’ recognizes you.]

[‘The Lotus Reflected on Water’ observes you.]

Numerous constellations.

The constellations I had encountered so far were limited. Unless they were rulers of each floor, no constellation sought contact with me. But was this also different from the 50th floor? Constellations I had never heard of revealed their presence.

"...Annoying."

Constellation Killer muttered coldly, perhaps sensing the messages from the constellations.

"Disappear. If any constellation remains to bother me, I'll start hunting down their apostles from today. If they want war, let them keep fussing. This is the last warning."

As the Constellation Killer muttered, the messages from the constellations abruptly ceased. The air surrounding us lightened.

"It's noisier than usual. Sigh..."

Constellation Killer sighed lightly and looked at me.

"It seems some are interested in you, stranger. Have you done something to attract the constellations?"

"Well, I have killed an apostle of [The Warhorse of the Eternal Plains]."

"...An apostle of Mahos?"

The Constellation Killer's tone changed. He took out a worn notebook, read something, then raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"Better than expected. Apostles of Mahos are exceptionally skilled and annoyingly protected by their blessings. They're not an easy foe... How did you kill him?"

"That's also related to what I want to discuss."

We entered a tavern.

The place described by Constellation Killer as 'relatively safe' was more like an open-air tavern. There were no walls, just tables and a bar set up outdoors. Despite the openness, there was a solitary door standing.

"...Is this a safe tavern?"

"The visibility isn't blocked by walls."

Constellation Killer blandly explained the advantage of the tavern.

"You can retreat anytime in case of a sudden attack. No risk of being trapped if the building is targeted. The downside is it's easier to become a sniper's target. Bartender, the usual for me."

"Hey. Do you know your actions caused this place to go open-air?"

The bald bartender grumbled. Constellation Killer calmly sat down at a table.

"Sorry. I don't remember."

"Hey, young man. Whatever your business, don't get involved with that madman. Over 600 hunters in this vicinity are out to kill him. If you're not seeking death, stay clear."

Constellation Killer took out his notebook again.

"Exactly 1,127. Only three hunters are a real threat. One of them has been missing for 154 years. Strictly speaking, it's safer for you to be with me than not."

"Crazy..."

The bald bartender looked exasperated.

It seemed Constellation Killer was notorious here as a lunatic.

"So, what do you want to tell me?"

"...I find it a bit challenging since you have amnesia."

I slowly recounted my experiences.

Your founded Aegim Empire was nearly destroyed. The reason was none other than your action of sealing [Goddess of Protection], allowing [Demon King of Autumn Rain] to grow.

Because of what you did, [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon] was destroyed, and [Tales of Sormewin Academy] was endangered...

I told him everything.

"..."

Leafanta Aegim listened attentively to my voice, sipping an unknown red beverage. Throughout the conversation, his expression remained unchanged, occasionally checking his notebook.

"Indeed."

Leafanta Aegim nodded.

"I heard your story and verified it with my diary. I believe most of what you said is true."

"Diary?"

"A storage for my memories."

Leafanta Aegim showed me the notebook.

It was densely filled with text.

"It looks like an ordinary notebook, but it's actually a relic of [The Great Puppy], a constellation. It has infinite pages and convenient search functions. I write what I do every day here. Thanks to this, even with amnesia, I don't lose my life."

"..."

"As you said."

Leafanta Aegim spoke bluntly.

"In the past, I apparently founded the Aegim Empire."

As if talking about someone else.

"I sealed the constellation [Goddess of Protection] I spent my life with. The world you mentioned, [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon], seems similar to the one recorded on page 236. The world of [Tales of Sormewin Academy] resembles the one on page 3215."

"..."

"The heirloom... the Sword of Sacrifice passed down because of the Goddess's fragment? Indeed. I once slept with a woman in that world. The woman you met, Raviel Ivansia, is likely a distant descendant of mine and that woman. The silver hair is a clear sign... It must be fate."

Something...

"You might have skills like [Uncovering Dark Past] or [Historian], reading my past."

Something's not right.

"But I have no past to read. It's impossible to steal and read

this relic as well. Only I can decipher its code. Therefore, stranger. I acknowledge everything you testified as true."

I came to accuse this man.

Because of your petty beliefs, innocent people suffered. Countless people were sacrificed, I came to say proudly.

But what is this?

"So."

How can you accuse someone who doesn't even remember their sin?

"What compensation do you want?"

Anger began to rise in my heart.

"What compensation?"

"For pointing out my mistake."

"...Do you even know what mistake you made?"

"Of course."

Constellation Killer said.

"My mistake lies in two things. First, I didn't consider the possibility of new constellations being born in worlds where constellations disappeared. Second, I underestimated the fact that a dead constellation could curse the world."

I was...

"Is that all?"

"Considering constellations from other worlds could invade after a constellation's death was intentional. No matter how many worlds a constellation rules, killing it ends it all. So, it's not a problem in reducing the number of constellations. Therefore, my mistake is limited to the two things I mentioned."

After finishing, Constellation Killer scribbled something in his notebook.

"I've recorded it. The same error won't happen again. That's why I mentioned compensation for your advice."

Advice.

Gratitude.

"People in the martial realm turned into zombies and died."

Shudder.

The Holy Sword, strapped at my waist and silently listening to our conversation, shuddered once.

Rage from my heart tinged my voice.

"Among them was an old man who, even as he was dying, didn't want to trouble others and chose to drown himself by setting his boat adrift. There was a child from the Beggars'

Sect who, until his last breath, struggled to save others of his age."

"....."

"Each death was tragic. What do you think about that, Constellation Killer?"

"Nothing."

Leafanta Aegim replied.

"As I said, failing to account for the aftermath of a constellation's death was undoubtedly my error. But mistakes are bound to happen. As I said, compensating you for correcting that mistake is all I can do."

"Ha."

My body, enveloped in red aura, became slightly darker.

"Then, as a compensation, would you die for me if I asked?"

"That's a compensation I cannot give."

The silver-haired man shook his head.

"I have a duty to annihilate all constellations. Until that duty is fulfilled, I must continue to operate."

His words were more like those of a machine. Shiny shivered on my body.

I asked.

"That's quite a duty you've taken on. Why do you bear such a responsibility?"

"I cannot answer that."

"I saw that coming. Why? Because you think I wouldn't understand your noble duty?"

"I cannot answer that either."

"Ah, I see."

I glared coldly at Constellation Killer.

"Then at least answer this: Why are you using a relic of a constellation if you aim to annihilate them all? It seems contradictory."

"That's a question I can answer. I plan to destroy it after annihilating all constellations."

"You learned from the Demon King of Autumn Rain incident that even after killing a constellation, another can emerge. What will you do about that?"

"I have a plan for that."

"What is it?"

"I cannot say."

Constellation Killer glanced at his diary.

"This conversation is getting too lengthy. Let's get back to the main point."

"I thought this was the main point."

"Not for me. State your compensation."

Compensation.

"As I said earlier, I cannot die. As my duty is not yet complete, dying cannot be a form of compensation."

He seemed to be reading the first page of his diary, which he had written before losing all his memories.

"Then name another form of compensation. I'll listen."

"....."

Right.

Not many things in this world can be resolved through conversation.

I reached for the dagger, then paused midway. Instead, I took out a handkerchief carefully folded in my pocket. It was the one imbued with Raviel's blue scent. I briefly buried my nose in it.

Hmm.

"Fine."

My anger subsided.

I rapidly processed my thoughts. How would I 'hunt' this hunter before me – incomparably more powerful than me?

My mind soon found an answer.

"Then I ask just one favor of you."

It was a simple matter.

Hunting a stronger hunter wasn't new to me.

"What is it?"

"Protect me [for as long as I am on the 50th floor], no matter what happens."

I tucked away the handkerchief.

"Not just my life. Ensure my body and mind remain intact. Of course, forcefully ejecting me from the 50th floor is off-limits."

"...You're asking for personal protection?"

"Something like that."

Constellation Killer pondered.

He tapped the table with his pen, thud, thud.

"I don't understand your intentions. From your stories, you seem a highly righteous person. Not just righteous, but also equipped with strength and cunning. Your proposal doesn't align with your character."

"Ah, so you can't grant my request?"

I scoffed.

"You're unable to die, unable to abandon your duty, and now you can't even protect me on the 50th floor? Impressive. Then what can you possibly compensate?"

"...I'm just worried about any hidden traps in your proposal."

"Traps? With your apparent confidence in your abilities, just break through them."

"....."

Constellation Killer deeply scrutinized his diary.

"That is true."

He moved his pen. Swish, swish. His hand glided over the diary.

"I'll record your proposal on page one. Until my existence ends, your proposal will drive my logic and actions."

Okay.

He took the bait.

'Sword Emperor.'

I turned to the Guardian Spirit.

-Huh?

'You said you once demolished one of those Magic Towers, right?'

The backdrop that caught my eye as soon as I arrived here.

Pointing at the towering spires under the ashen sky, the Guardian Spirit had said,

『There used to be six towers,』

『but

I demolished one.』

『They'd go insane if they knew I've returned as a ghost.』

The Sword Emperor nodded.

-Right. It was one of the things I'm most proud of in my life, ranking among the top six achievements.

'Do you remember what you said when you demolished it?'

-Oh, of course! I remember every word.

The Guardian Spirit chuckled.

-Hey, you losers! Sometimes you need to get some air. Staying cooped up all day like you guys isn't good for you. Here, consider this a favor! I'll give you a free remodeling today! Haha.

Guardian Spirit, reminiscing about his past glory, suddenly tilted his head in confusion.

-But why? What are you planning?

I turned my gaze towards the spires.

Staring.

Intently.

-Hey? Zombie?

Guardian Spirit spoke beside me.

-Don't look there, didn't I tell you? If you stare for more than 23 seconds, you'll be detected. With your level and ability, you can't handle them. Or what? Are you gonna ask them to eliminate the Constellation Killer? Forget it. They won't attack someone as dangerous as him. It's a loss for both.

But I continued to gaze at the distant spires.

-Uh? Uh? Hey, Kim Zombie! Turn your gaze away now!

But it was already too late.

「 Ah, ah. Mic test. Mic test. Who's that staring over there? 」

A telepathic voice echoed in my head.

Guardian Spirit's warning came true – the tower had detected my presence.

「 Looks like a newbie still fresh out of the box. I'll let it slide

this time. If you plan to stay in this neighborhood, don't stare at us. You'll get yourself killed.」

The voice was filled with boredom, like a public servant who didn't want to work.

「Oh, you're with that constellation-obsessed guy? Haha. Bad luck. Well, need any help? Right now, I can send an instant escape scroll with a 30-year binding contract.」

"Hey,"

I spoke up.

"You losers."

「Huh? This brat just now, did he really...」

"Sometimes you need to get some air. Staying cooped up all day like you guys isn't good for you."

「.....」

"Here, consider this a favor! I'll give you a free remodeling today! Haha."

Silence.

A complete stillness enveloped us.

-Oh, boy.

Guardian Spirit mumbled dumbfoundedly.

-Is this crazy guy for real?

Then it happened.

Screeeeeeeech!

From the five spires, a screeching noise burst forth all at once, as if five fingers were clawing the sky. Clang! The bald bartender, startled, dropped a glass. Hunters in the streets covered their ears.

"What, what's going on?!"

"What's happening right now..."

And then.

-Sword Emperorrrrrrrrrrrr!!

A gigantic voice thundered across the ashen sky.

-Sword Emperor, you've returned! I knew you would someday! Even when all the constellations announced your death, only we believed you, the bastard who wouldn't die even in death! Possession or reincarnation? Doesn't matter! Either way is fine!

All the hunters gawked up at the sky.

-Kill him! We will kill you, Sword Emperor! We'll tear your soul to shreds and scatter it across the world, then defecate over it! Kill him! Kill!! Kill him now! In the name of the tower's history, chase him down to hell!

From the spires, hundreds, thousands, millions of shadows surged forth.

They all mounted brooms and formed a formation in the sky.

"Alright."

I looked at Constellation Killer.

The silver-haired man gazed back at me, expressionless.

"You promised, didn't you?"

"....."

"Protect me."

A meteor shower rained down from the sky.

Chapter 127:

Demonic Realm (3)

“.....Indeed.”

Leafanta Aegim nodded.

“You have understood the logic behind my actions. You judged that it is impossible for you to defeat me by your strength alone and thus, have drawn in external forces. For a beginner who has just arrived on the 50th floor, such a feat seemed unlikely...”

As Leafanta Aegim spoke, countless meteor showers were cutting through the ashen sky. Ssshhh! Flames shot from a far distance. Thousands of attacks, comprised of immense magical power.

“It was my error.”

The meteor showers approached more rapidly. But Leafanta Aegim remained indifferent. With an impassive gaze, he began

scribbling something in his diary with his fountain pen.

“Henceforth, I shall consider the intervention of powerful external forces even when dealing with beginners.”

“Crazy! Let’s get out of here!”

“Have the spiders from the Magic Tower gone mad?”

The hunters around Leafanta Aegim reacted more quickly than him. Pop! Pop! Scrolls of instant teleportation, seemingly essential items for hunters living on the 50th floor, were being torn everywhere. The bald bartender did the same, but not before shouting a warning to us.

“Hey! Leafanta Aegim! I’m going to bill you for the remodeling costs again, so don’t forget to write it down! You’re paying for the scroll cost too!”

“Understood.”

Thud.

“I’ve recorded it.”

Leafanta Aegim closed his diary.

“As per our agreement, I will now protect this foreigner with all my might.”

At that moment, the meteor shower was upon us. Kwang! Bang! The relentless bombardment pummeled the streets. Just as the storm of destruction was about to engulf the open-air bar, a hand firmly grasped my wrist.

“Maximize visual and auditory perception. In return, I forfeit my memories of [1 hour].”

Leafanta Aegim muttered.

And then, an astounding feat unfolded.

He avoided the barrage of meteor showers, which seemed to cover the sky, by merely taking a few steps. One step. Two steps. Every time he pulled me along, the meteor showers fell perilously close.

-Huh?

A furious voice echoed from above.

-Hey, you starry-eyed freak! Why are you interfering? Back off! The guy you're with now is our sworn enemy of the Magic Tower! Unless you want to go against the Great Staff, just disappear quietly!

“First, I request a resolution through dialogue.”

Leafanta Aegim waved his right hand, and the dust cloud created by the meteor shower was cleared instantly. Both he and I were completely unharmed.

-What kind of nonsensical dialogue are you talking about? Go away, you maniac!

“I am bound to protect this foreigner at all costs. Protection means ensuring the safety of not only his physical body but also his mind. There is no room for compromise here.”

Leafanta Aegim again opened his diary with his left hand.

“The Magic Tower is an exceedingly selfish group. Being selfish, they can negotiate based on their interests and losses. I am a being who can inflict severe losses on them. Negotiate.”

-That guy is our mortal enemy! Mortal, enemy, I tell you!

“Every problem can be resolved through rational dialogue.”

-Hey! Hey! Everyone! Report if anyone knows how much memory Leafanta Aegim has left!

Above, thousands of mages were mounted on broomsticks. One of them replied.

-Reporting from the Constant Surveillance Unit, I'm Hong Boseok! Leader! Leafanta Aegim currently has 7 days of memory remaining!

-Damn, why did it have to be a full week!?

The sound of grinding teeth filled the air.

-It doesn't matter! That starry-eyed freak and everyone with him, take them all down! From this moment, the Magic Tower is in full mobilization! Every member of the Tower, from the first to the fifth finger, hunt down Leafanta Aegim and the Sword Emperor! I repeat, this is a full mobilization order!

“...Negotiations have failed.”

Leafanta Aegim murmured.

His diary fluttered open.

“Search, Magic Tower. Additional search, combat. Detailed search, countermeasures.”

Leafanta Aegim glanced briefly at the diary and nodded. He took out a rubber band – a cheap item that can be bought in the outside world, a yellow rubber band – and tied his long silver hair.

"....."

I watched from close by as Leafanta Aegim tied his hair. It might have taken only 2 seconds, but I knew that gesture was

one of the few rituals and ceremonies he had left.

“We are now entering combat.”

-Kill them!!

From above, tens of thousands of mages charged down.

-Ensigns, surround them!

Not all enemies charged at once.

-Singers, stay in the back and chorus!

-Yes!

In the ashen sky, the formation of mages was displayed. The formation resembled gigantic rings. Hundreds of mages formed five rings, beginning their chorus.

Six layers of melody resounded.

-Oh.

The Guardian Spirit remarked.

-It's been a while since I've seen that. It's the Pseudo-Star Singing.

‘Pseudo-Star Singing?’

-You see, there are five towers standing, right? Each tower has a sealed constellation in its basement. Well, it's technically more of a confinement than a seal. Anyway, they manifest the powers of the sealed constellations through songs and borrow them, and the effect is...

[Warning. You are targeted by an area-wide attack.]

[Warning. The power of the aura you emit is halved!]

[Warning. The power of the magic you emit is halved!]

[Warning. The power of your mental defense is halved!]

[Warning. All types of penalties you receive are doubled.]

The Guardian Spirit nodded.

-Hmm. The effects are quite troublesome.

‘Are you kidding?’

-They call it a spider web. That's why they're nicknamed spiders.

Truly fitting for a monstrous group that has reigned over the 50th floor for over a thousand years. Before the battle even started, our power had been drastically reduced. The Guardian Spirit, who had torn through such a web 150 years ago, must have been a monster beyond monsters.

“---Single strike. Enhanced.”

In front of that monster stood a man. In my sight.

“In exchange, I forfeit my memory of the beauty of sunsets.”

Suddenly, a sword appeared in Leafanta Aegim’s right hand.

One step.

With a dance-like grace, Leafanta Aegim swung his sword.

The air split apart.

It was more like a typhoon than a sword strike. A blue aura split the ashen sky in two. One of the six rings formed in the sky got caught in the typhoon.

-Re-regroup! Regroup!

-Retreat!

Hundreds of mages screamed as they fell, unable to control their broomsticks and crashing to the ground. The black hats dropped by the mages fluttered like black flower petals.

[The effect of the doubled penalties is restored.]

But Leafanta Aegim did not stop.

A blunt voice flowed from his lips.

“Single strike enhanced. In exchange, I forfeit the memory of the sound of rain falling from the sky.”

The sky was torn apart again.

[The power of the halved aura is restored!]

-That crazy man! The maniac! The starry-eyed freak!

-The thumb ring is destroyed! The index finger ring is destroyed! It's difficult to maintain the formation!

-Leader! It's reckless to fight Leafanta Aegim when he's fully charged for a week!

-That damned starry-eyed freak! Just shut up and charge!
Charge!

The mages shot fireballs. Ice blocks were vomited out. At ground level where Leafanta Aegim and I stood, roots and weeds grew instantly, trying to grab our ankles. The air churned. The jungle grew. Fog spread, obscuring the vision. Countless spells and miracles, innumerable to even mention, engulfed us both.

And then.

“Single strike enhanced.”

Leafanta Aegim merely held a diary in one hand and a sword in the other.

“In exchange, I forfeit the memory of children’s smiles.”

Every spell and miracle was torn apart.

[The power of the halved magic is restored!]

[The power of the halved mental defense is restored!]

[The designation as a target of an area-wide attack is lifted.]

The fireballs were destroyed. The ice blocks were split. The roots were cut, and the weeds decayed. A blue wind swirled through the air, and the jungle disappeared. After the fog lifted, the mages were left groaning.

-The middle finger ring was destroyed! The ring finger ring was destroyed! The little finger ring, destroyed!

-The Pseudo-Star Singing has been completely shattered, Leader!

-He's attacking precisely the weak points of the rings?!

-Damn...! Who leaked our secrets...!

I watched the great battle unfolding before my eyes in a daze.

The mages persistently attacked, but to no avail. Leafanta

Aegim fought by sacrificing trivial memories – the drink he just had, the streets he walked yesterday, and other minor recollections.

A single hunter was combating thousands of mages.

-How is it? It's a completely opposite fighting style to yours, isn't it?

The Guardian Spirit chuckled.

-What Leafanta Aegim uses is also a kind of Demonic Art. The Demonic Heavenly God Art you use is based on memories, like the memories of hunger, loneliness... Leafanta Aegim does the opposite. He [forsakes memories].

A Demonic Art opposite to mine.

-Watch closely. This is a level of combat you will eventually encounter.

Leafanta Aegim's method of fighting was calm yet tragic.

“I forsake the memory of walking under a gentle sky.”

He relinquished his memories one by one. Leafanta Aegim's tone was plain, and his swordplay was straightforward. In this sense, his fight was calm.

“I forsake the memory of the timbre of screams in human agony.”

But the memories Leafanta Aegim discarded were anything but trivial. As the fight dragged on, his memories opened up like boxes being unlocked in sequence. It was like Pandora's box – once opened, the contents evaporated.

-Leafanta Aegim lives with a week's worth of memory at most, or a day's worth at the least.

The Guardian Spirit spoke.

-He seldom retains memories longer than a week. Because every time he accumulates a week's worth, he goes hunting constellations. To hunt constellations, a week's memory is sufficient.

"....."

-You said he suffered from amnesia? Strictly speaking, that's incorrect. He sacrifices his memories to carry out his duties.

That was, more precisely, burning his own life.

[Shiny cannot bear to watch the previous owner's fight.]

My holy sword trembled.

[Shiny recalls that the previous owner never fought like this. Shiny does not know when or why he changed to this extent.]

The mage army of the Magic Tower was already exhausted.

The circular rings were long destroyed.

Initially, they had maintained a strict formation, attacking and retreating from Leafanta Aegim... but perhaps they had reached their limit. The formation crumbled. The mages only participated in sporadic attacks.

-Leader, look. Fighting Leafanta Aegim with a full week's memory... it's impossible....

-He's an overpowered character as we proclaimed....

-Pouring more magical power into this would only incur more losses!

-The surveillance team has been noisy since a while, Leader. The constellations are monitoring this place due to the anomaly. There's a high possibility they'll invade while we're weakened.

-Tsk!

The apparent leader of the mages, a woman, ground her teeth. She took off her conical hat and crumpled it in her left hand. Filled with immense rage, she glared at me.

-Sword Emperor... Sword Emperor, Sword Emperor, Sword Emperor!!

-Oh my. My popularity doesn't wane even in death.

The Guardian Spirit shrugged.

-See, Zombie? Being too exceptional also has its problems.

-I see you've allied with Leafanta Aegim! Just you wait! Our Magic Tower won't hold back in hunting you down! This might end simply as a power struggle, but next time, definitely!

The mages looked disgusted.

-Wow... Leader, that's a typical loser's excuse for running away....

-Quiet. Don't mess with the Leader now. You'll be turned into a frog and eaten.

-We'll definitely crush you!!

As the mages scattered and turned their brooms away, Leafanta Aegim spoke.

“Wait. Tower Master of the Magic Tower.”

-What!

“I still have 23 hours worth of memories. Using 22 hours of it to enhance a strike, I can destroy one of your towers.”

- ...Are you threatening us?

“Yes.”

Leafanta Aegim calmly affirmed.

“According to my records, Tower Master, you are extremely concerned about face. Failing to eliminate me even after declaring a full mobilization must be a considerable loss. But losing a tower would be an even greater blow. Consider my threat.”

-.....

The Tower Master’s face twisted like a goblin’s.

“For the next week, prohibit any attacks or schemes against me and this man. Attacks and schemes refer to all actions and accidents that harm us. Prohibit both indirect and direct methods, and if subjective judgment is needed, we will exercise that judgment. Your opinion is not permitted.”

-You goddamn swordsmen, both of you....

“Once again, I threaten. Accept a week-long truce.”

Leafanta Aegim gripped his sword.

"If you don't accept, I will destroy it."

A hush fell over the devastated wasteland.

-You... know this, you're now on the Magic Tower's hit list.

“Do you agree to the truce?”

As the Tower Master clicked his tongue, a piece of paper materialized in front of Leafanta Aegim. It was a golden,

shimmering contract. Leafanta Aegim glanced at it indifferently, then signed it with his pen.

“A satisfactory negotiation. Now withdraw.”

-When we kill the Sword Emperor, we'll bury you with him.
Leafanta Aegim.

“I'll record your hostility clearly.”

-Ptui!

The mages turned their brooms. Like a swarm of autumn locusts, they slowly receded into the sky.

The surroundings quieted down.

Besides Leafanta Aegim and me, there was no one else around.

Leafanta Aegim turned to face me.

“I have fulfilled the promise to you, Stranger.”

"....."

“However, as I observed, I have fallen into a trap. I won the battle but at the cost of reducing a week’s worth of memories to just a day. My strength has been significantly weakened. Such a power reduction must have been your aim.”

Leafanta Aegim described his situation impassively.

As if talking about someone else’s story.

-Gong-Ja.

The Guardian Spirit's voice deepened.

-Don't let your guard down. Right now, he's deliberately engaging in conversation with you to buy time. Don't see him as human. He is a weapon, moving strictly according to the content he has input.

‘Yes.’

I gripped my holy sword.

‘I am aware.’

And glared at Leafanta Aegim.

“Yes, I will bring you down.”

“On the other hand, as per the promise, I cannot attack you. I can only avoid or defend against your attacks. ...It’s a dangerous situation. If what the Tower Master said is true, and you are the Sword Emperor himself or his successor, it would be particularly dangerous.”

“My name is King of Death. I am the Vice-lord of the Demonic Cult, and the consort of the Ivansia Ducal Family.”

Leafanta Aegim flipped open his diary and wrote down my name. He questioned me while moving his pen.

“What is the Demonic Cult?”

“The sword that responds to every scream.”

“What does being a Vice-lord entail?”

“The first sword to be swung.”

“What does King of Death mean?”

I raised my red aura.

“The name of the person who will take you down.”

Now it was my turn to ask.

“Leafanta Aegim. Do you possess the memory of hunger?”

“It's recorded in the diary. But if we talk about the memories I can consciously recall, then no. I do not have any memory of

hunger."

I nodded.

"That will be your downfall."

And then, I charged.

Chapter 128:

Compatriots (1)

-Hero, have you regained consciousness?

Kim ■ blinked blankly.

A wasteland turned to ruins.

There, holding a sword, stood Kim ■, motionless.

-Where is this...?

-You were just engaged in a fierce battle.

A voice came from the sword. The voice of a goddess. The tone of the constellation that had summoned him. Kim ■ recognized the goddess but felt somewhat hazy in his head.

How did he end up here?

It was as if his memories were sung. Trying to recall, digging with his fingers, only brought up black dust from the burnt remains.

-Hero, you fell into the enemy's trap.

The goddess sounded choked up.

-Faced with an overwhelming surprise attack, battling further would have led to certain defeat... For the first time, you used the power of the Salvation Sword.

-Salvation...

-Yes. Sacrificing something, as much as you sacrifice, grants you the power to save. You discarded [a letter of your name].

Kim ■ finally realized what the soot in his memory signified.

-That's right. Yes, that's what happened.

He had forever discarded a letter from his name.

No matter what, Kim ■ could no longer recall his original name.

In return, he gained the landscape before him. His own strike had turned the surroundings into ruins.

The group that had cunningly attacked him with evil tactics and stratagems had vanished without a trace. Once again, the hero had survived an unsurvivable ordeal.

-...It's not so bad?

Kim ■ murmured.

-I never liked my name anyway. To think I gained such power by just losing a single letter.

Kim ■ was mildly surprised at the value his name held.

To him, his life before coming to this world had no value at

all.

At least, that's how Kim ■ thought.

-Hwiya.

-Yes, Hero...

-I can save this world a bit faster now.

Discarding a worthless time to obtain a valuable landscape.

Kim ■ knew what he had to do.

-But first, let's create a new name.

Leafanta Aegim.

Leafanta, in ancient language, meant 'Human of the Wilderness.'

Kim ■ had never called himself Leafanta. But at some point, people began to revere him as Leafanta, calling him by that name.

Kim ■ became a man from the wilderness.

The land scoured by the mages was a wasteland.

I, like a gust of wind, swept across the ruins transformed into desolation.

The man with silver hair watched me calmly.

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The First Form.

Sword of Starving Death.

The gesture of a child who died of starvation is embodied in the sword. Claws that scratch the heavens. The most primal

action and the most primal scream, I aimed to split Leafanta Aegim's head.

“...Enhanced senses. I sacrifice an hour.”

Leafanta Aegim gripped his sword. Clash! My blade collided with his sword. Leafanta Aegim blocked my attack and looked at me expressionlessly.

His blue eyes.

"An unusual sword technique."

In his other hand, he held a diary.

"Is this a martial art using aura as Ki? Traditional martial artists obsess over Ki techniques. You must have learned this sword technique from the unorthodox faction, not the orthodox, and that must be the Demonic Cult you mentioned..."

I swung my sword.

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Second Form.

Sword of Parched Death.

A dry wind blew across the wasteland. The musty sand dust fluttered. Thirst. There were those who died of dehydration, surrounded by seawater yet unable to drink a drop. To them, the world was a desert. I summoned a desert and hurled it at Leafanta Aegim.

“Enhance defense. I forsake the taste of water.”

Facing the desert wind, Leafanta Aegim blinked. Clash! Again, my sword was halted by his swordplay.

"This way of fighting is not good. King of Death."

His voice resembled a desert.

"You are a righteous man. If your justice is built upon correct

logic, then you..."

"Baraya."

I chanted the prayer.

"Baraya."

The only prayer I allowed myself.

The red aura roared. My blood boiled. My accumulated memories, the landscapes of death I had collected, the cause and effect I had walked through, answered the prayer.

"Agabaraya."

There were deaths from not drinking seawater amidst the ocean. Deaths from drowning in seawater. The ways people die are so diverse that every alley I once gazed upon, every ground I once tread, had been a record of someone's death.

Therefore, the essence of the world is demonic.

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Third Form.

Sword of Submerged Death.

"....."

Leafanta Aegim swung his sword.

"Interception enhanced. I forsake the smell of the ocean."

"How far do you think you can go!"

"As long as my life continues."

I clenched my teeth.

'I understand now.'

While launching a relentless offensive and blocking each of Leafanta Aegim's moves, I realized something looking at the man with silver hair.

'This man represents one of the endings I could reach.'

A hero who had mastered demonic arts to their limit.

150 years ago, the Guardian Spirit confronted this hero.

Thus, when he fought my master -the Guardian Spirit had exclaimed.

『I'll teach this guy ways to be happy.』

What becomes of a person who only sacrifices himself.

The Guardian Spirit knew because he had seen it firsthand and fought my master knowing it.

If I didn't have the Guardian Spirit.

If I hadn't met Raviel.

If I thought [My memories are worth sacrificing].

Then eventually, I would have become like the man before me.

"Leafanta Aegim!"

I swung my sword.

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Fourth Form.

Sword of Frostbitten Death.

Leafanta Aegim swung his sword.

"I forsake both the warm and cold winds."

Our swords crossed.

“Did you mention justice!”

“I did mention it.”

Our eyes met.

“If I am just,”

“Then you wouldn’t threaten my life,”

“You...”

“I...”

Our voices collided.

“Did you say so!”

“I did.”

Our clashing voices pushed against each other.

I cried out like an angry wave.

“Then what is your justice!”

Leafanta Aegim's voice spread like rain, covering my shout.

“My justice. It is the eradication of constellations,”

“Why!”

Leafanta Aegim said he couldn't answer.

But as the Guardian Spirit said, Leafanta Aegim was now bound to be talkative, trying to buy time he could sacrifice. He opened his mouth.

"-Constellations rob humans of their freedom of choice."

He spoke of justice.

"Goodness is based on human freedom. Therefore, constellations that infringe upon it are evil."

He spoke of good and evil.

"You mentioned defeating the [Immortal Missionary of Happiness] constellation. Then you know. Humans living there were infected by the constellation, forced into happiness without choice."

He spoke of rights.

"What about the [Warhorse of the Eternal Plains]? Under that constellation's hooves, the world becomes nothing but a battlefield, an arena. Even everyday conversations turn into sharp disputes. There's no room for human freedom there."

He spoke of freedom.

I swallowed his rain-like voice and shouted.

"Did you say humans must be free!"

"Yes."

"Then..."

I swung my sword.

"What are you!"

"I am..."

"Nothing but a machine that moves as written in the diary!
Where is the freedom in that!"

"A valid point."

Leafanta Aegim, while swinging his sword in his right hand,

never let go of the diary in his left. His indifferent eyes scanned the diary.

"I will answer it this way. If sacrificing my own freedom can save the freedom of others, it is only right to do so. I decided that, and at the moment of decision, I was free to choose. Therefore..."

"Don't make me laugh!"

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Fifth Form.

Sword of Noxious Death.

"By doing so, how are you any different from the constellations you just mentioned!"

"....."

Leafanta Aegim hesitated, but only for a moment. He quickly

defended against my strike, gathering the world's toxins.

"I forsake the scent of all flowers."

"A week of smelling flowers, watching sunsets, drinking, eating, feeling the wind, and it's all useless! You just keep forsaking it!"

".....Constellations negatively influence the world. They infect humans with their psyche and events, unifying humanity into one. There is no room for choice, therefore,"

Leafanta Aegim recited from his diary.

"I, to give humans at least the freedom of choice, will eradicate constellations,"

"That..."

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Sixth Form.

Sword of Plague Death.

"Is no different from what you do!"

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Seventh Form.

Sword of Contusing Death.

"I'm asking how!"

".....I forsake all dreams I've had for a week, the pain when I was injured, the scenery of morning, day, evening, night..."

"Just moving as written in the diary! Constellations at least know what they are doing, but you just act as per the text!"

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Eighth Form.

Sword of Scorching Death.

"Your name is not [Slayer of Heavenly Constellations]!"

Leafanta Aegim.

"You are [The Constellation that Kills the Heavens]!"

"If eradicating constellations is your only mission and duty - start by killing yourself! Constellation that Kills the Heavens"

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Ninth Form.

Sword of Self Death.

My sword pierced Leafanta Aegim. But what was slashed was

not his body, but the diary. The old notebook he couldn't take his eyes off.

It was split right in the middle.

"....."

Pages fluttered in the air.

His days and days scattered like petals.

".....I forsake, a second."

Leafanta Aegim muttered.

After the fierce battle with the mages of the Tower and the prolonged fight with me, all his memories of the week were exhausted. Finally, the bullet fell from Leafanta Aegim's hand.

"I forsake, a second."

Yet, even at this final moment, Leafanta Aegim did not cease to function. There was still something left to sacrifice. No, the sacrifices were unending.

"I forsake, a second."

Moment by moment.

He sacrificed the endless present, swinging his sword, summoning his aura, protecting himself.

"I forsake, a second."

Yes.

"I forsake, a second."

That is your scream.

"I forsake, a second."

Demonic Heavenly God Art is the sword that answers all screams.

"I forsake, a second."

I reached here, feeling the screams of the snowy field, the heart, the child, and naturally, your scream that created all those.

"I forsake, a second."

Leafanta Aegim muttered, swinging his sword. His voice lacked tone, so it was colorless. His eyes lacked soul, so it was heartless. The colorless and heartless man with disheveled silver hair continued to block my sword strikes.

"I forsake, a second...."

Then my sword sliced through his shoulder.

".....I forsake."

He did not stop.

"I forsake, a second."

We kept swinging our swords without stopping. Blood flowed from his shoulder, blood burst from his calf. Every time my sword connected, red splashed onto the ashen wasteland.

"I forsake...."

I plunged into Leafanta Aegim's embrace. He couldn't stop my charge. Thud! Pushed by me, Leafanta Aegim fell backward. I pinned him down, unable to move, and raised my sword high.

"Leafanta Aegim."

"A second...."

"I will reap your scream."

And then I pierced Leafanta Aegim's heart.

"-----."

Blood surged from Leafanta Aegim's lips. His esophagus was blocked. His mouth was sealed. Leafanta Aegim, with an expressionless face, looked up at me. Even as he did, his lips moved, but his voice was muffled by the blood.

".....to,"

But that's the nature of a scream.

"....."

Blood flowed from where Leafanta Aegim's heartbeat resided, from where his voice dwelled. The blood spread out in concentric circles. Leafanta Aegim's silver hair, tinged with a blend of white and gray, was soaked in the pool of blood.

"....."

Slowly.

He closed his eyes.

[Your existence becomes better defined.]

A soft voice echoed.

[Hunter Kim Gong-Ja is leveling up.]

[Your skill slots have expanded.]

[You are now a C-Rank hunter.]

[May fortune be with you.]

It didn't end there.

[Your existence becomes better defined.]

[Hunter Kim Gong-Ja is leveling up.]

The voice of the tower declared.

As if all the causes and effects I had walked through thus far exploded at once.

[Your skill slots have expanded.]

[You are now a B-Rank hunter.]

[May fortune be with you.]

The surroundings fell into silence.

I quietly withdrew my sword from his heart. Leafanta Aegim's body was tranquil. As if death had been preordained for him, he lay in his blood pool, expressionless.

At that moment.

['The Lonely Seeker' is shocked by Leafanta Aegim's death.]

[‘The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth’ watch you warily, disbelieving the situation.]

[‘Warhorse of the Eternal Plains’ expresses astonishment at Leafanta Aegim's death.]

Worlds expressed their astonishment.

Chapter 129:

Compatriots (2)

"What?"

Of course, it wasn't just the Constellations who reacted to Leafanta Aegim's death.

"What? Wait, what... Leafanta Aegim is dead? Really?"

A dazed voice echoed under the ashen sky. The leader of the mages who had just been in a fierce battle with Leafanta Aegim. The so-called Magic Tower Master expressed her astonishment.

Her voice marked the beginning. Slowly, people began to gather in the wasteland. Hunters who had fled the clash between Leafanta Aegim and the Tower were now approaching one by one.

"It's impossible. Leafanta Aegim is dead?"

"Who is that guy?"

"Who's the Sword Emperor?"

"Damn. That crazy lunatic has reincarnated..."

People were astonished, yet they hesitated to approach rashly. Their eyes were filled with caution. Caution against the unknown hunter who suddenly appeared and hunted down Leafanta Aegim.

'It's dangerous. I need to disappear before attracting more attention.'

I steadied my breath, heated from the battle with Leafanta Aegim.

'If they discover my martial prowess is weaker than expected, I won't know when they might attack.'

I hunted Leafanta Aegim by setting a trap. If we had fought with full preparation, I would have been defeated a hundred times. Thankfully, the other hunters didn't know this... and it was a relief they didn't.

'I need to hurry.'

I lifted Leafanta Aegim's body onto my back and muttered.

"Transfer."

I envisioned the majestic lobby of the Great Library in my mind. Soon, I would be teleported there with Leafanta Aegim's body. I planned to persuade the 'Holed-Up Head Librarian' according to a certain plan.

".....?"

But nothing happened.

"Transfer."

I muttered again, but it was the same. The surroundings were still a desolate plain. The blood from Leafanta Aegim's body sticky on my back. Hundreds of hunters were looking at me, baffled.

"....."

Suddenly, a bad premonition engulfed me.

'The stage clear hasn't been declared yet!'

Leafanta Aegim was undoubtedly dead. Yet, I hadn't heard the voice declaring, '[Stage cleared.]'

'Why? What's missing?'

I desperately reviewed what could be lacking. Was killing Leafanta Aegim not enough? Since he wasn't the owner of the 50th floor, was it not recognized as clearing the floor?

"...Why is that guy just standing there?"

"Wait a minute. My observation skill is showing that his level is B-Rank?"

"B-Rank?"

As I was lost in thought, the hunters murmured among themselves. The atmosphere, previously frozen in shock, began to shift. Shock gradually turned into suspicion, and suspicion into speculation.

“Stop kidding around.”

“Maybe he has a skill to disguise himself. Leafanta Aegim was estimated to be at least S-Rank, no way he’d die to a B-Rank.”

“Hey! Someone talk to him!”

“Is there any hunter here who was active when the Sword Emperor was alive?”

Sweat dripped down my forehead.

‘This isn’t good.’

The flow of the air was uneasy. Not just because the hunters seemed to be approaching me. Not just because they were likely higher level than me and thus extremely dangerous.

A sense of missing something as a hunter.

"....."

Instinctively, I looked to my side.

"....."

Beside me, the Sword Emperor was grinning.

-What are you looking at?

‘Be honest. You know something, don’t you?’

-I have no idea what you’re talking about. I’ve already given you all the advice I can.

Even as he said this, the Sword Emperor continued to smirk, a hint of mischief at the corners of his mouth. Damn it. I grumbled curses in my mind while quickly recalling the Sword Emperor’s advice.

『 "Gong-Ja." 』

『 "Don't see him as human. He is a weapon, moving strictly according to the content he has input." 』

A weapon, not human. A battle machine.

'If I were Leafanta Aegim? A man obsessively calculating everything. Wouldn't he have considered, even the slightest chance of his own death?'

My thoughts accelerated.

'Leafanta Aegim has even met the Sword Emperor.

In the dream of trauma, I saw Leafanta Aegim's face for the first time. The Sword Emperor was with me then. He immediately recognized Leafanta Aegim.

『 "Where have I seen that guy before?" 』

『 That silver haired guy. He looks so familiar. He's definitely

the Constellation Killer.」

『"Yes. I wondered from which world such a madman could have emerged. So, he's from Aegim."』

I asked the Sword Emperor what his relationship with that man was. He shrugged and replied.

『"What relationship? We had a proper fight, that's all."』

『"He was strong, but not strong enough to be on par with me."』

So.

'The Sword Emperor had previously defeated Leafanta Aegim.'

Constellation Killer had a history of being defeated by the Sword Emperor.

Then, isn't it strange?

I felt the Constellation Killer's blood running down my spine and looked at the Sword Emperor.

'You...'

-Yes.

'You wouldn't have left Leafanta Aegim alive.'

The Sword Emperor.

A mad lunatic, but a man who held a noble attitude only towards the sword and martial arts.

The Sword Emperor killed my master. He righteously cut her down in a fair duel. My master was beautiful, as good as she was, but "that's a heretical doctrine of the Demon Cult," the Sword Emperor asserted, and cut him down.

-Hm.

Leafanta Aegim was far too sinister compared to my master.

-Smart kid.

Having subdued Leafanta Aegim... it's impossible the Sword Emperor didn't kill him.

-That's why I like you. To be a hunter, you need to be smart. A hunter's qualities are threefold: intelligence to think of ways to win, courage to execute those methods, and the ability to make them successful. Smart, bold, and capable.

There's only one conclusion.

The Sword Emperor had definitely killed Leafanta Aegim once before.

Simply, Leafanta Aegim didn't end with that.

-Leafanta Aegim is a hunter. Just like you, Kim Gong-Ja.

The sky split.

“Enhanced strike.”

It was thanks to my extreme vigilance that I could avoid that strike. I had enhanced my senses to the maximum with aura, keenly observing the flow of the air. I sensed the blade that tore through all flows.

I stamped the ground.

I abandoned Leafanta Aegim's body. I abandoned my stance, focusing solely on escaping that spot. Lazy Mule Roll, a technique that martial artists would ridicule or at least smirk at, I executed without a shred of shame.

That's why I survived.

Kwaang!

The wasteland shattered. The ground broke apart. The strike from nowhere swept through the crowd gathered to watch me. Unlike me, the hunters weren't guarding their surroundings. Due to a slight negligence, more than twenty hunters were slaughtered.

It all happened in an instant.

“On my way here, I looked down at a white flower.”

Someone stepped forward. Thud. In the wasteland now heavy with screams and groans, his footsteps echoed.

“That flowerpot was small. It was modest. The man’s life had aged and shrunk, now fitting entirely in one flowerpot. I briefly admired the flowerpot holding the old man’s life. I thought, no matter the size, life can be so beautiful if it can be contained somewhere.”

Silver hair.

“One strike. Enhance.”

A voice flowed from beneath the hood.

“I forsake the memory of the old man and his flowerpot.”

A whirlwind blew.

[‘The Lonely Seeker’ rejoices.]

[‘The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth’ watches the new events.]

[‘Warhorse of the Eternal Plains’ abandons the plan to attack you.]

The number of deaths doubled in an instant. Except for the hunters who reacted swiftly, everyone was caught in the strike. A man who rashly charged at the hooded figure had his limbs severed, imprinting the difference between courage and recklessness on everyone.

“I heard the murmur of people in an alley.”

The wind lifted the man’s hood, revealing his face.

“It wasn’t clear enough to be called a voice. Too noisy to ignore. Something you can’t understand but want to. Perhaps that’s the sign of beauty. I thought the sounds of the alley were beautiful.”

His blue eyes.

“I deduce. Among them is the one who killed me. The most

likely person is... the one who was carrying my body.”

An old notebook.

“My death is an event that happened after 153 years, 7 months, and 2 days. The hunter who killed me before, the Sword Emperor, was clearly more skilled than me. Therefore, I added a rule on page 2 that [If I am killed by a stronger opponent, I should flee]. This is a lesson learned after fighting the Sword Emperor three times and losing my life each time.”

The man with silver hair and blue eyes scanned through the old notebook.

“I have made a judgment.”

Then he looked at me.

“You have dodged my two strikes. However, if you were a martial artist of the Sword Emperor's caliber, you would have counterattacked immediately after evading. The Sword Emperor described the martial arts he practiced as 'Cosmic Sword.' You lack the skills befitting that level.”

My waist-sheathed holy sword trembled.

“Considering your level, the reason for my assassination by you seems hard to comprehend.”

The Constellation Killer.

“It means you are intelligent enough to devise a method that I find hard to predict. A hunter more intelligent than me is dangerous. If you acquire more formidable martial power, you might grow to be a hunter comparable to the Sword Emperor.”

A human weapon.

Someone who even anticipated his own death and thus had spare bodies prepared, whether it was through cloning, puppets, or some Constellation's power. Leafanta Aegim was standing there.

『"Do not see him as human."』

『"Leafanta Aegim is a hunter. Just like you, Kim Gong-Ja."』

Like me, who never truly dies no matter how many times I'm killed.

Leafanta Aegim was also a human who prepared for death.

“I judge it necessary to eliminate this dangerous individual immediately.”

The Constellation Killer pulled out a yellow rubber band. Slowly, he tied up his silver hair.

“The battle commences now.”

The world split apart.

-Come, Kim Gong-Ja.

The Sword Emperor laughed heartily.

His worn robe fluttered in the wind.

-This is the world beyond the 50th floor!

I raised my red aura to its limit.

"Damn it! A puppet! This makes him no different from an actual machine!"

"In the battle with the Sword Emperor, there were no witnesses, except for one Constellation."

The Constellation Killer alternated between looking at the notebook and me. Thankfully, he only looked. Meanwhile, relentless strikes came at me. I dodged them with all my might.

"The Sword Emperor regarded his duel as sacred. He called it a martial contest. But this time, there are far too many witnesses to my death. It's difficult to eliminate them all."

-That crazy lunatic....

A distant, dazed voice echoed from the sky. It was the Magic Tower Master's voice. Ignoring it, the Constellation Killer

continuously calculated his 'action logic.'

“Therefore, I choose to threaten rather than eliminate. Hear this, see this. I announce to those who oppose me and will oppose me in the future: I have artificially acquired immortality. Even if you kill me, I will stand before you again.”

-.....

“And anyone who once kills me, I will definitely kill. If a group participates in my assassination, I will annihilate that entire group.”

Kooooom!

I barely dodged the Constellation Killer's strike. The strike I evaded ended up slicing through [Leafanta Aegim's corpse] instead. The corpse was severed at the waist in an instant. Crazy. The Constellation Killer had just cut a body identical to his own.

“I declare not just to threaten, but to prove it. I will kill you here.”

Yet his face remained expressionless.

As if his own body held no value to him.

“Enhance, one strike.”

The Constellation Killer rushed at me.

“I forsake all the beauty in the world.”

‘Ah.’

I was seized by the illusion that time had stopped.

A single strike tore through the air and the earth, rushing towards me. I looked into Leafanta Aegim's eyes. They were indifferent.

Pure madness.

Eyes that feared no sacrifice or consequence to execute their determined conviction. Yes, the Sword Emperor was right. This man, like me, was a human living as a hunter.

‘It’s me.’

I lamented.

‘Me, without meeting Raviel—’

Staring at the approaching death, I gave up on defense. Neglected it. But it wasn’t a reckless surrender of life.

『"Do not commit suicide without my permission."』

『"Do not die even in the face of seemingly inevitable death."』

『"Even if it seems you can't escape death, struggle till the very end."』

Instead of defending, I swung my sword. If I couldn't avoid

the inevitable strike, I at least had to land one hit before dying.
That was my nature. It was a promise with Raviel.

Swoosh!

My sword intersected with Leafanta Aegim's strike.

My blade managed to tear through the notebook in Leafanta Aegim's left hand.

"....."

I saw Leafanta Aegim's silver eyebrows move slightly.

"-----."

And his strike pierced me.

‘I admit it.’

Cough, blood surged up my throat. My vision blurred white. Amidst the boiling sensations throughout my body, I glared at Leafanta Aegim to the very end.

‘You are a monster. Stronger than me. As cautious as me. But, the opportunity next time isn’t only yours, Leafanta Aegim.’

[The 'Holed-Up Head Librarian' sighs.]

‘Kill me. I’ll let you kill me now. Kill and keep killing. Let’s kill and be killed! Let’s contest your hell and my hell. The last one standing will be me. You are wrong!’

[The 'Holed-Up Head Librarian' rejoices and despairs.]

I will defeat you.

[You have died.]

Wait.

[Your current Hunter Rank is B.]

[Due to the enhanced penalty, the skill activation order changes.]

I will definitely, you—.

[Warning.]

[Re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

[Extracting the necessary data from your memories.]

My whitened vision turned red.

[The level of penalty is High.]

[Animal Realm.]

My consciousness faded.

From a distant world, as if crossing over from beyond death,
a melody reached me.

Ding,

Dong,

Dang,

Dong.

.....

It was an oddly familiar sound.

A bell sound I seemed to have heard long ago somewhere.

'Where have I heard it... Ah, where... Where was it?'

I struggled to open my eyes. My eyelids felt as heavy as if

laden with lead. My whole body felt numb, pinned down. Only a blurry, unrefined melody, a muffled bell sound, reached me.

Ding, Dong, Dang, Dong....

Then, at some point, another sound began to emerge.

-Attention to all students remaining in school, this announcement is from the Broadcasting Club.

In school?

-Except for those participating in the evening self-study, we ask other students to please go home now. Once again, this is an announcement from the Broadcasting Club.

Going home.

-Recently, there have been cases of students staying in school after the end of the school day. To all students remaining in school who have not signed up for evening self-study, please go home.

Ding, Dong, Dang, Dong.

The bell rang again, interrupting the voice.

"....."

What in the world was this all about?

I struggled to break free from the paralysis. Despite my struggles, it was futile, so I focused all my consciousness to one point. I felt my body twitch. As I tried to move my fingers, thud, something hit my head.

“Senior, wake up! It's time to go home!”

Only then did I move as if released from a binding spell. I gasped for air. Gradually, I felt the contours of my body. My senses returned. First hearing, then sight.

“Ahaha.”

Led by a familiar laugh, I lifted my head.

“Lying down on the desk is bad for your health! Bad for your back, and above all, it prevents you from getting proper sleep. I understand you are studying hard with midterms coming up, but you should go home and sleep!”

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled down at me.

But something was different.

“...Heretic Inquisitor?”

The Heretic Inquisitor was wearing a school uniform.

“Huh? Heretic Inquisitor?”

He tilted his head in confusion.

“Who is that?”

“...Could it be Goldencup? Have you possessed the Heretic Inquisitor again?”

“Possession? Oh. Did you have a dream? Ahaha. You read a lot of books, Senior. You must have had an interesting dream!”

"....."

I slowly looked around.

The place where the two of us were... was a library. A library that, compared to the Great Library of All Knowledge, was rather modest. If the Great Library was a grand mansion, this was more like a cramped doghouse.

Looking out the window, I saw a wide schoolyard.

"....."

Like an ordinary school.

‘Sword Emperor.’

I murmured inside, feeling dry-mouthed.

‘We’re in trouble, Sword Emperor. It seems with the increase in level, the penalty has become quite strange. Before, I used to experience trauma like a dream, but now it’s like... Sword Emperor?’

No response came.

I looked around again.

‘Hello?’

Silence.

‘Hey. Sword Emperor.’

Nothing.

"....."

And then I realized.

“Come on, Senior. You should go home now. The Student Council President is probably waiting for you at the school gate! Don’t make your girlfriend angry! I’ll finish tidying up the books, so you go ahead!”

I had entered a new phase.

And a trauma of a completely different dimension was unfolding.

Chapter 130:

Compatriots (3)

“Hurry up, hurry! Cherish your relationships! The main character of a historic romance at Shinseo High should not keep his lover waiting!”

I was practically chased out of the library by the Heretic Inquisitor. My mind was in a daze. I didn't know how to respond.

While I was hesitating, thud, the library door closed behind me.

“Uh...”

The school was quiet.

The gray granite floor of the corridor was slippery. It glistened red when the sunset hit it. There was no one around, just the sound of students kicking a soccer ball, echoing from the distant playground.

“What’s happening here...?”

I walked as if in a trance.

『The Student Council President is probably waiting for you at the school gate!』

『Don’t make your girlfriend angry!』

I had never attended high school, but I did go to middle school for about two years. The school environment was somewhat familiar to me.

‘Let’s head to the school gate.’

The pillars and walls of the corridor were white. Painted with light green paint. The light green wasn’t pretty; it was a color that seemed incomplete. Even that tacky, artificial color felt strangely familiar.

‘Stairs. There should be stairs nearby. Ah. Found them...?’

That's when I felt someone's presence as I reached the stairway. Following the sound, I looked up and saw,

The staircase leading to the rooftop.

A student was standing right in front of the metal door.

".....?"

It was a small-bodied kid. The student was staring blankly at the locked door. It seemed like he was looking at the chain and padlock on the doorknob. Realizing my presence, our eyes met.

A face I had never seen before.

"....."

The student nodded slightly and then silently walked past me down the stairs.

As he passed, I saw the collar of his school uniform shirt. Stains and old grime marked the white collar. From those

stains, I could smell a familiar scent. The smell of poverty. Of course, it was just a fleeting glimpse.

The student disappeared down the corridor.

[Behave respectfully♪]

[Live joyfully♪]

[Feel happy♪]

After the student left, colorful slogans hung on the stairway railing filled the empty space. Meaningless words, even worse than saying nothing. It was a failure.

They looked hideous.

Desperately trying to hide its uselessness, the slogan's font was cute, and the colors were adorable. It took me a while to snap out of it.

“...Right. I should go too.”

I arrived at the school gate.

There was a black limousine parked outside.

"....."

Wait a minute.

Let me explain what I just saw. I normally walked down the stairs, passed by the ordinary sandy playground, and reached the gate, which should be ordinary.

But why? Why was there a black limousine, a luxurious one like from a movie, parked at the gate?

"Hmm. You're a bit late today."

And the person closest to my heart was standing next to the limousine.

"R-Raviel...?"

“It’s a lovely evening, Gong-Ja.”

My love spoke calmly.

“The sunset becomes even more beautiful upon seeing your face. The sunset seems to turn red just to hide your blushing cheeks.”

There were still students in the playground who hadn't gone home yet. Students playing in the basketball court, those taking a short walk before entering the evening self-study room, students kicking a football. All of them stopped what they were doing and looked our way.

“Look over there. That senior...”

“Oh, that’s the guy dating the chaebol girl...”

“So jealous...”

“At the festival, he confessed in front of everyone...”

Crazy.

“Why such a dazed look, Gong-Ja? While your clueless expression is part of your charm, it's a bit too much right now. Have you decided to explore new charms?”

“Raviel... were you a chaebol heiress?”

My head was spinning. What was this insane trauma trying to show me? Was it a gift of seeing Raviel in a school uniform? Should I take a picture? Preserve it forever? Has technology developed in this day and age to transfer recordings from trauma to reality?

“What strange talk... my boyfriend. I was born into a chaebol family and still live as a member of one.”

Crazy.

Raviel just called me her boyfriend.

Boyfriend!

What should I do? Record it? Tape it? Photograph it? Has technology developed to transmit recordings from a trauma to reality? What are scientists doing? Isn't this negligence and a strike?

“R-Raviel. Sorry, but how old are you now?”

“...I am a second-year student at Shinseo High.”

“And me?”

“Driver, book an appointment with a psychiatrist right away. My boyfriend seems to be suffering from mild amnesia. And to answer your question, of course, my boyfriend is also a second-year like me.”

“Ah, to have met Raviel since high school... To share school days with Raviel, what is this? Such a tremendous blessing...? I'm the happiest guy in the whole world...”

“Driver, cancel the appointment. He's just as usual.”

We had a brief moment of affection in front of the school gate. It was a happy time. Even though screams erupted from

the playground, I didn't mind. According to the Heretic Inquisitor, we were the official couple of the school.

“In another life, even if we are reborn, I will love you, Raviel...”

“I love you from my past life to my next. The name of love will always be replaced by the three letters, Kim Gong-Ja. But for now, let's live in the present. Get in the car. I'll take you home.”

Home.

To me, home meant the orphanage. Could it be that she's taking me to the orphanage? No, but this [Trauma World] was clearly different from [The Outside World]. I had never attended high school, and I had never heard of Shinseo High.

What would my home be like here?

“Something big happened at my boyfriend's house yesterday.”

Raviel said as we got into the limousine. The inside of the

limousine was spacious and comfortable. But we deliberately sat close to each other.

“A big incident?”

“Hoo. Is such an event not significant enough? Well, my boyfriend has always disliked talking about that person. I dislike it too... But family is family. I've handled it, so tell your mother and father not to worry. No. It's better if I tell them myself.”

"....."

I didn't understand what she was talking about. It seemed like an incident had occurred, and Raviel had taken care of it. But the words that shook me were [mother] and [father].

‘My parents.’

I had called the orphanage director father as a child. I had called a volunteering sister mother. But all were born out of a child's ignorance and play.

The parents Raviel spoke of... were not like that.

‘In this world, I have a home and parents.’

That felt strangely unfamiliar.

‘Raviel once arranged a one-day father for me at our wedding...’

I was happy then. But it was more like the joy of being given something fleeting by the person I loved.

But not just something that existed and will continue to exist like parents.

‘I can’t even imagine what that feels like...’

The limousine stopped. Looking out the window, I saw a small, shabby detached house in an old neighborhood.

“Oh.”

And in front of the house, a burly man was sweeping with a broom.

“Are you back?”

The long-haired man grinned broadly.

“Wow. Your girlfriend even drives you in a limousine. My son is lucky. It’s all thanks to me passing on my good looks. Always respect your father who made sure you were born handsome!”

It was the Sword Emperor.

"....."

My mind was reeling.

“Were you well? Father.”

“Oh, don’t bow your head, young lady. Someone as precious as you shouldn’t bow to a person like me. But, about our son, did he do anything rude? This guy is inherently good but has a bit of a crazy streak...”

“It’s alright. I cherish every aspect of Gong-Ja.”

“Heh. How can every word from the lady be so gracious? Hey! Hey! Kim Gong-Ja, you scoundrel! Bow down and pay your respects right now. If you dare mistreat the lady, I’ll cut off our relationship that day. Understand? Just like that. You’ll be erased from the family register!”

I was dizzy with the realization.

“Come on, let’s head home.”

We headed inside the shabby, old house.

The inside was small but filled with warmth. In the living room, a woman was cooking. She had a gentle smile and a kind face, much like how a mother would look in an old movie.

“Welcome back, Gong-Ja.”

“Mom...”

I called her mom without thinking.

This strange and unfamiliar feeling filled my heart. A feeling of having a family, a place to return to, parents waiting for me.

This trauma, this illusion, was giving me a taste of what I never had, a normal life. It was both beautiful and heartbreakingly painful.

Raviel and the Sword Emperor were chatting amiably.

The scene of their conversation was real.

I passed out right there.

"Um."

Raviel gently caught my falling body.

"Today, Gong-Ja is acting quite strange, Father. Earlier, he even asked me about my age."

“That boy has always been a bit strange. Let me tell you, when he was five, he.... Ah, would you like to stay for dinner? I prepared cockles, and they are really good.”

“Yes, I wouldn’t refuse.”

“You’re such a kind person! Gong-Ja, what are you doing? Haven’t you bowed yet? Shall I bend your knees for you?”

We entered the house.

“Welcome home, Gong-Ja.”

My master was sitting on the sofa, reading a newspaper.

“How was school today, my son?”

"....."

I fainted.

“My goodness? You even brought your lover home. Welcome, Miss Ban Siah.”

“Please call me Raviel, Mother. The foreign name is more comfortable.”

“Is that so? Hmm, alright. The customs of today’s kids are hard to understand.”

Mother.

MOTHER.

M.

O.

T.

H.

E.

R.

“Honey, you don’t know anything. Gong-Ja wouldn’t dare invite a lady home. I invited her. I tempted her with my cockle dish.”

“Ah, indeed, darling. Our son couldn’t possibly do such a thing. It’s about time for dinner anyway. Let’s eat together...”

Honey.

Darling.

HONEY.

DARLING.

Honeyyyy!?

Darlingggg!?

-Continuing with the news about the popular singer Yoo Soo-Ha.

The TV in the living room announced with the voice of an anchor.

-After shocking the public with an assault video where singer Yoo Soo-Ha was seen assaulting an individual, a twist has emerged. The video was revealed to be fabricated. Surprisingly, the whistle-blower who reported the violence admitted the manipulation.

I blankly watched the TV screen. On it was a long-haired, ponytailed handsome man.

-The whistle-blower said, 'I reported it as a joke. I didn't know it would blow up like this. I sincerely apologize to everyone affected by my actions'...

Photos of Preta and Goldencup appeared on the screen. So, images of Flame Emperor, Preta, and Goldencup were displayed in sequence.

-Meanwhile, group members Estel and Silvia have refrained from officially commenting.

Footage of the singers dancing appeared. Preta and Flame Emperor were dancing, and Goldencup was singing.

-However, the concert scheduled in 10 days has been abruptly canceled. It's expected that the group's activities will be disrupted for some time.

Crazy.

Isn't this insane?

Have we gone mad?

“Hmm.”

The Sword Emperor nodded slightly, putting down the newspaper. He looked seriously at Raviel.

“We have a lot to talk about at the dinner table. Gong-Ja, go

call your brother. Let's have a family dinner together after a long time. Is that alright with you, Miss Raviel?"

"Certainly."

Brother? Not just Father and Mother, but I have a brother too?

"Where is my brother?"

"He's in your room."

The Sword Emperor gestured towards the bedroom with his eyes. I felt an inexplicable fear. If Father is the Sword Emperor and Mother is my teacher, then who could possibly appear as my brother?

Creak.

I cautiously, slowly opened the door.

"Huh?"

A man was lying on the bed, crunching potato chips. In one hand, he was reading a comic book from a rental store. Seeing my face, he lazily greeted me with his chip-covered hand.

“It’s been a while. Damn it, did you see the news? What happened to me yesterday, huh. Ah, I was so pissed off with the constant stalking, I hit the guy, and it was all recorded. I almost ended my career as a singer.”

It was the Flame Emperor.

"....."

I fainted.

“I got lucky this morning. That damn snitch ran off with his tail between his legs. Phew, I got a real earful from Mom... Huh? Hey? Are you okay? You look pale. Kim Gong-Ja? Hey, brother. Did you lose your mind? Why are you staggering around like that...?”

“Die!”

I lunged at the bed.

“Die! Just die, you maniac!”

“A-are you crazy? Hey, calm down!”

“How can I calm down when you just called my master 'Mom,' you bastard! Die! Apologize to my master with your death!”

“What the hell are you talking about... no, wait, huh? What the hell? Since when did you get so strong... ack, ugh, aargh!”

I was choking Yoo Soo-Ha. Seriously. If it's acceptable that the Sword Emperor is my father, let's just go with that. But this guy as my brother? This psychopath as my brother?

“Dieee!!”

“Mom! Help!”

Yoo Soo-Ha gasped for air and screamed.

“Gong-Ja is hitting me! Mom!”

This is insane.

Chapter 131: The Wasteland (1)

“I know it’s an intrusion, but I’ve handled the incident involving brother-in-law.”

After a bout of chaos, we gathered at the dining table. Yoo Soo-Ha had a black eye, and I had a lump on my head from being hit by my master..

“To handle such incidents, they should be suppressed early on or buried in time. The latter is usually preferred, but the timing was bad this time. The political sphere was quiet, and brother-in-law’s concert was scheduled in 10 days.”

Raviel skillfully picked out the seasoned cockles with her chopsticks. There she was, existing right there.

‘She’s beautiful.’

Ah, I was thankful for the invention of chopsticks. Chopsticks must feel honored to be used by Raviel. Despite the

frustration and twist in my gut that a scumbag like Yoo Soo-Ha is referred to as "brother-in-law."

".....My boyfriend."

"Yes?"

"Don't stare so intensely."

Raviel spoke as if troubled.

"Look away. Or bow your head. I'm speaking to your parents right now. I don't want to show such impropriety in front of my boyfriend's parents."

"Yes...."

I obediently bowed my head and just ate my meal... What's with this cockle salad? It's damn delicious! Was it really prepared by the Guardian Spirit? Does he have a knack for cooking too? My world is shaking....

“Ah. But please stop calling him brother-in-law. That guy doesn’t deserve to be called that by Raviel. Just call him scumbag.”

“You, you brat. You’ve lost your manners since I last saw you, haven’t you?”

“Hmm.”

My master slowly sipped her drink.

“It’s somewhat surprising, Raviel. I understand you’re doing this for Gong-Ja, but as you know, Soo-Ha and Gong-Ja don’t get along well. Was it necessary to use your family’s power to help Soo-Ha?”

“There was no need.”

Raviel spoke calmly.

“I just wanted to show you something.”

“Show us? What do you mean?”

“You both may be underestimating our love. To you, it’s just a fling for a chaebol’s daughter. A pleasant memory of high school. An experience in life. Whether it’s in a good or bad sense, you must be thinking that way.”

Raviel’s voice flowed over the dining table.

“But I’m serious. I intend to welcome you as my new family with all seriousness. There’s opposition to our relationship in my family, but I’ll crush all those objections. Dealing with this incident was to show you my capability and determination.”

"....."

“Please grant us permission to marry. Mother. Father.”

My master chuckled wryly.

“.....What a wonderful girl has come to my son. It feels strange to see my son being loved. But it's good to know I didn't raise him in vain.”

Master.

“Wow, so now we’re becoming a chaebol's in-laws? Ha, my singing career is over. Over. Hey, sister-in-law! There are singers breaking into China these days. Could you maybe...”

“Soo-Ha, if you cause trouble again, I’ll kick you out of our house. Know this. No, that’s not enough. Go apologize to the person you assaulted. Kneel and seek forgiveness. Until then, I won’t recognize you as a part of this family.”

“Mom, what!?”

I quietly observed the scene at the table.

"....."

A home.

Parents.

Things I never had.

After officially receiving permission to marry, Raviel left. We even set a date for the meeting of families. The Guardian Spirit even exclaimed, "Haha! I should get a suit tailored for my son! This is happening faster than I thought!"

"....."

My master and the Guardian Spirit's professions were writers. After Raviel left, the house quieted down, and the sounds of their work gently filled the still living room.

My master wrote with a pencil. With a cup of coffee by her side, she occasionally scribbled a few words on the manuscript, deeply lost in thought. Her profile, immersed in thought, was serene.

Meanwhile, the Guardian Spirit typed on a typewriter. Tap, tap. The rhythm of the typewriter keys gently echoed. While writing, Yoo Soo-Ha frowned like an irritated otter and sometimes went to the kitchen to make his own cocktails.

"....."

A quiet world.

‘Why?’

Even as I went to school the next morning, I couldn’t understand.

‘Why is this the trauma of the Constellation Killer?’

On the way to school, students in uniforms passed by. They all looked familiar or somehow known.

“Good morning, senior!”

Among them were students who bowed respectfully upon seeing me. Loosely buttoned shirts. Tight trousers. Shortened skirts. Those who seemed rebellious bowed to me.

“Did you sleep well last night!”

“.....The Four Demon Lords?”

They were none other than the followers of the Demonic Cult.

A middle-school student, spitting image of Moon Shadow Demon, tilted his head.

“Four Demon Lords? We are the Four Kings of Shinseo High, senior.”

“Crazy.....”

In this world, are the Four Demon Lords just delinquents? Am I the leader of these delinquents? Then am I the school thug who dates the chaebol girl and student council president?

This is madness.

“You guys... Why do you act like thugs? Stop it. Study or something. Forget studying, just disband whatever delinquent group or whatever you have.”

“We’ve been behaving lately! Since you started dating the queen, you told us to keep it low! We’re keeping it low! We can’t even bully the bread shuttles anymore because of you, senior!”

“That’s not what I mean... Never mind. The Four Kings, you

say? And you guys, do you really call Raviel the queen? This is crazy.”

“Don’t speak formally, senior! It’s scary!”

The craziness continued even after I entered the classroom.

“Attention. Wish the teacher!”

The Black Dragon Witch was our class president. Neatly dressed, her aura screamed model student.

“Okay. Class president, collect the phones.”

“Yes!”

“Anyone hiding them will face my wrath. Got it?”

And Viper was our homeroom teacher. With an indistinguishable appearance of a teacher or gangster, Viper swaggered on the podium, holding a cane.

‘I’m going nuts.’

The Black Dragon Witch walked around the classroom with a storage box. Students voluntarily or reluctantly handed over their phones. Not smartphones, but flip phones or slide phones.

"....."

And the Black Dragon Witch just passed by my seat without a word.

Silently.

‘Huh?’

Looking around, I was the only student the Black Dragon Witch skipped without a word. Countess (a classmate!) and Paladin (also a classmate!) obediently handed over their phones.

“Uh... class president?”

Using the unfamiliar title, I stood up and put my phone in the storage box.

“What is it?”

“You didn’t take my phone... Here.”

It felt awkward to speak informally to the Black Dragon Witch. It seemed not only me but also the Black Dragon Witch was surprised by my action.

“.....Right. The Princess is reforming the Foolish Ondal.*”

*References the folklore of Princess Pyonggang who was married off to an idiot.

“What?”

“Nothing, forget it.”

The Black Dragon Witch shook her head lightly and walked to the front row.

On the podium, Viper the teacher was smirking.

“Look at that. The great Gong-Ja hands over his phone. Kids, take note! You don’t need nagging or a cane to change a person. Just love. When you go to college, earnestly look for your significant other.”

Paladin raised her hand.

“Teacher, Gong-Ja said he’s going to Seoul National University. He told me seriously.”

“Strange, he told me he’s going to Oxford.”

The Countess chuckled.

“The student council president is going abroad for study. He said he’d follow her no matter what.”

“Hmm. So his safe choice is Seoul National University and his ambitious choice is Oxford. Truly Gong-Ja, a man with a different level of standards...”

The students giggled. It seemed the mood in the class was mainly driven by Paladin and Countess, with Countess chuckling.

“Class president, be careful. You might lose your top rank.”

“.....Unnecessary meddling.”

The Black Dragon Witch replied curtly.

Despite wearing a uniform, everyone had familiar faces, making me feel odd.

No.

Not everyone.

"....."

In the back row. A seat by the window.

There, the student I had encountered yesterday on the rooftop stairway was sitting. The student had a notebook open and was quietly writing something.

‘A classmate, huh.’

The wind blew through the window.

The curtain fluttered.

The child was small enough to be almost hidden by the curtain. Thus, the student appeared and disappeared between the curtains. The thin curtain, like a veil, seemed to distance the child a few steps from the classroom.

“Ah, hello. Everyone...?”

Someone entered the classroom at that moment.

“The first period is math... isn’t it?”

“Yes, teacher.”

“Th-then, let’s start the lesson....”

It was the Apothecary.

‘Nothing surprises me anymore.’

Right. After the Four Demon Lords were crowned and the Flame Emperor turned out to be my own brother, what more could surprise me?

Even Preta and Goldencup formed an idol group and sang with the Flame Emperor. The Apothecary being a math teacher is nothing. Yes, indeed....

The day passed by quickly.

“It’s big bro Gong-Ja!”

“Brother Gong-Ja! Let's play together!”

During lunchtime, as I stepped out of the cafeteria, middle school students swarmed around me. The 10th floor. The

children from the [Hellfire Mansion].

"....."

"Lately you're only studying! Play with us too!"

"Let's play soccer, soccer!"

The children, who were tortured and died without any guilt, were now middle school students, laughing brightly.

I felt a bit suffocated.

".....Sure. Let's play together."

In the schoolyard where the high school and middle school stood side by side, I played with the kids.

An old security guard was standing at the school gate. It was NamGung Woon, the Head of the Martial Alliance.

In the afternoon, during the physical education class, I saw elementary school students leaving school beyond the gate. They were the apostles of [The Immortal Missionary of Happiness]. The elementary students paired up in twos and threes, some holding hands with their partners, passing by the ginkgo tree-lined road.

"....."

I don't know.

I really don't know.

Even though the last class ended, I didn't go home. I just sat blankly on a bench in the schoolyard, watching the students leave.

'Everyone is alive.'

In this world, the Guardian Spirit is not a ghost. He's Alive. I can't even imagine what kind of novel they would write... but they live as a writer.

My master, she is also alive.

The children from the mansion are alive.

Even the Flame Emperor, who hasn't changed his rotten nature, lives as a human, nagging at his parents and getting scolded. Preta too. Even Goldencup.

Among the students leaving school earlier, there were familiar faces. Hunters who were eaten by tentacle monsters as examples for challenging the Holed-Up Head Librarian. Even nameless hunters were alive, passing by on their way home.

'Is this Leafanta Aegim's trauma?'

A gentle everyday life, isn't it?

A happy hypothesis, isn't it?

Which part of this world resembles hell?

"You were here, boyfriend."

I turned my head.

Raviel approached behind me with a smile.

“Raviel....”

“Your face looks troubled. I was worried something happened because you didn’t answer your phone. It’s not good to unnecessarily worry your lover.”

“Ah.”

I hurriedly took out my phone and turned it on. I had forgotten to switch it on after getting it back after school.

“I’m sorry. I was just a little distracted....”

“What could have shaken my boyfriend’s heart? Ideally, apart from me, nothing in this world should cause even a ripple in your heart.”

I leaned my head back slightly. Raviel leaned forward.

Separated by the backrest of the bench, we shared a moment of breath.

“Raviel.”

“Hmm.”

“Do you know the names of my parents, by any chance?”

Raviel blinked.

“Of course.”

“Can you tell me now?”

“Mother’s surname is So with BaekHyang being her given name. She has the characters for “White” and “Fragrance” in her name*,”

*‘Baek’ means the color white and “Hyang” means fragrance in korean.

And then.

“Father’s surname is ■ with ■ and ■ in his name.”

"....."

Silence.

When Raviel mentioned Guardian Spirit’s name, noise like static covered the sound.

‘Ah.’

Of course.

I did not know Guardian Spirit’s real name.

If this were a dream... it wouldn’t specify facts I didn’t know.

‘As expected.’

Today. During the break.

I flipped through the attendance book placed on the classroom podium.

To see if names like Black Witch or Paladin were written.

But....

+

Roll No. 1. Kim Gong-Ja

Roll No. 2. ■■■

Roll No. 3. ■■

Roll No. 4. ■■■

Roll No. 5. ■■■

+

Most names were not written.

Even if I tried to find out, I couldn't recognize them.

As if someone blackened them out with scribbles.

“.....Raviel. It might sound strange, but I'm anxious. You're a young lady from a wealthy family. Logically, in a school like this, with someone like me, it's impossible for you to be spending your school days.”

“I find your words unsettling. What are you talking about?”

“Maybe. Just maybe, all of this.....”

Buzz buzz.

My phone vibrated.

+

1 unread message.

Sender: ■■

+

An ominous feeling overwhelmed me.

“Sorry, Raviel. Just a moment.”

I opened the phone.

A moment later, words appeared on the screen.

Compared to a smartphone, the screen was cramped.

+

The one responsible for my death is you.

Don't forget.

You killed me.

+

My body froze.

The air seemed to turn to ice.

The next moment.

“Kyaaaaaaak!”

A scream tore through the schoolyard.

Chapter 132: The Wasteland (2)

“Look over there! Over there...”

“Wh-what should we do? Should we call a teacher?”

Students gathered in the playground, pointing towards the rooftop.

“What’s he planning to do?”

“I don’t know. Looks like he’s going to jump...”

There was a student standing on the rooftop.

“What should we do?”

“Crazy! Someone call a teacher!”

“There! Over there!”

Students playing soccer, students taking a walk, even those leaving school a bit late. Students scattered around the schoolyard began to gather in groups. It was an instinctive response. They felt that something they couldn't handle alone was happening, was about to happen.

"This is bad.....!"

Instead of helplessly gathering, some chose to act quickly.

“This is not good. Gong-Ja! Call 119*. Tell them the name of the school and that a student is about to jump from the rooftop. Hurry! I'll go up to the rooftop and try to persuade the child!”

*119 is the emergency dial number in South Korea.

Raviel didn't send someone to call a teacher. Instead of looking for someone to take responsibility, she acted promptly to address the situation. Without waiting for my response,

Raviel quickly ran towards the main school building.

“Ah....”

Seeing Raviel's retreating figure, my frozen body thawed. Right. Whatever the situation, there's no time to hesitate. I quickly dialed on my phone. 1... 1...

Thud!

Something fell in the schoolyard just before I could press 9. At first, I thought a student had jumped. But the sound was too trivial for a human body falling. It was the sound of the student on the rooftop throwing down their phone.

"....."

I looked up at the rooftop, pressing 9.

Our eyes met.

It was the face I had seen in the classroom. The student

sitting alone in the back row by the window, silently doing advance study. But it felt like only now did I really see the student's face clearly.

The student's pupils were black.

The student's cheeks were white.

"-----."

The student lifted the corners of his mouth in a sneer.

Slowly, the student's lips moved. Silence. The voice, obscured by the distance, was read by my eyes through the movement of their lips. It was a two-syllable last word I couldn't help but recognize, even if I tried not to.

[Die.]

And then.

Small claw-like fingers let go of the rooftop fence. Letting go.

The wind.

The person...

"■■■■■■■■!!"

Students screamed. The world was engulfed in noise. "Mi■!" Someone cried out in a fit. "■■Aaaaaa■■■ack!" Someone shook, tearing at someone else's sleeve.

"Teach■! Teach■r!" "Shi■," "■ck!"

In an instant.

The school was no longer a school. Everything shattered. The playground was a bleak desert. The main building was nothing but a grotesque prison.

The classroom was a slaughterhouse for butchering beasts or a breeding ground for raising them. The beasts were always starving for prey. In a world where people are slaughtered and bred, they were nothing but corpses to become.

Red.

A person had died.

"....."

I stared blankly at the schoolyard. The bricks held a hue of red. The redness spread further. Fearing that their toes might touch the red, students stepped back. A few took out their phones. Click! The artificial sound rang out.

"Ah."

That sound moved me.

"Don't take photos."

I approached the students.

"What are you doing right now? Don't take photos! Stop it!"

The students flinched. But more and more students were gathering. Leaving the soccer ball in the desert, abandoning flowers on the walking path, turning their backs on the way home, more people gathered.

“Don’t take photos!”

As I stopped one group, another took out their phones on the opposite side.

“Stop it, damn it! Stop!”

A nameless emotion surged up my esophagus. Tears seemed about to flow. It was anger. Contempt. Disgust. From the school main building, on the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th floors, students poked their heads out to look here. Countless faces. Countless eyes.

Watching a person.

“Stop, don’t!”

The sunset was red.

“Damn it,”

Why.

“Just stop it, will you!”

Hundreds of faces were expressionless. On the 1st floor, Black Witch looked this way. On the 3rd floor, Heretic Inquisitor peeked out. In the schoolyard, Paladin and Countess looked on. The children from the Hellfire Mansion surrounded me. The cultists stood in the playground. Click! Click.

They moved their fingers and took photos.

+

The one responsible for my death is you.

Don't forget.

You killed me.

+

I looked up at the rooftop.

"....."

Raviel was looking down at me.

"But, Gong-Ja."

Raviel's voice flowed against the reddened sky.

"Weren't you the one who killed him?"

The world crumbled.

The sky was stained red.

Red paint fell, drenching the ground.

People turned red, and my vision reddened.

“---As you know, there has been an unfortunate incident at our school.”

In the auditorium, the principal spoke. The principal had the face of the Sword Saint.

“But I believe in our Shinseo High students....”

Red.

“That guy, he sent such a crazy message. Isn’t he totally insane?”

Students murmured in the classroom. They had the faces of Countess and Paladin.

“That’s right. Looking back, he was always a bit weird.”

Red.

“Don’t bother about those making a fuss with it. Those who can’t even squeak in front of you are now making a big deal with just their fingers. Ugh. Those kinds of people should have their fingers cut off.”

At home, my father drank whiskey. He had the face and laughter of the Guardian Spirit.

“That’s right, kiddo. It happens in life, hitting and all. Just for that, he dies? Isn’t he just an attention-seeker? Hey! Call the Four Demon Lords! Let’s go play games together!”

My brother put his arm around my shoulder. The Flame Emperor spoke cheerfully.

Red.

“Yes, the teacher is very sad. Sad, but.”

On the podium, the homeroom teacher spoke. The teacher had the face of Viper.

“It’s a crucial time for you all. Time flies in the 3rd year. The real game changes in the 2nd year. Think about what’s

important to you and get your mind in order.”

The students opened their mouths. All of them answered in unison.

“Yes, teacher.”

Only the class president bowed her head silently.

The class president had the face of Black Dragon Witch.

A white flower was placed on that child's desk. One day, two days, three days. Before a week passed, the desk disappeared somewhere. It was unclear who removed it.

No student asked who removed it.

A new desk did not enter the back row by the window.

"....."

The wind blew.

The curtain fluttered.

Where the wind blew, there was no one.

[Repeating the Trauma of your killer.]

And then.

[The level of penalty is High.]

[Animal Realm.]

Ding,

Dong,

Dang,

Dong.

An eerie melody rang out.

It was noise masquerading as sound. An electronic sound mimicking natural sounds. The melody became more lively and spirited, as if to hide the fact that it was just a poor imitation.

-Attention to all students remaining in school, this announcement is from the Broadcasting Club.

An imitation

-Except for those participating in the evening self-study, we ask other students to please go home now. Once again, this is an announcement from the Broadcasting Club.

Something which failed.

-Recently, there have been cases of students staying in school after the end of the school day. To all students remaining in school who have not signed up for evening self-study, please go home.

Feeling nauseous, I opened my eyes.

“Senior, wake up! It's time to go home!”

"....."

“Oh, you're already awake.”

The Heretic Inquisitor grinned.

“Lying down on the desk is bad for your health! Bad for your back, and above all, it prevents you from getting proper sleep. I understand you are studying hard with midterms coming up, but you should go home and sleep!”

I didn't wait for the Heretic Inquisitor to finish speaking. I stood up and ran out of the library. The Heretic Inquisitor's voice followed from behind.

“Oh, senior! You shouldn't run in the hallway!”

I bit my teeth as I ran through the hallway.

‘I understand now.’

The mystery was solved.

This was undoubtedly the trauma of the Constellation Killer, Leafanta Aegim.

My memories had been overlaid on Leafanta Aegim's nightmare like a [skin].

The same situation.

The same roles.

Only, the characters weren't those remembered by Leafanta Aegim, but those I had seen in my life. Therefore, Black Dragon Witch, Paladin, and Countess became students. My master and Guardian Spirit became my parents.

And I was.

‘I am the perpetrator.’

A bitter taste filled my mouth.

‘I am the main culprit assigned to this role.’

In all the traumas I had experienced before, I had always been an [observer]. There was always a sense of being a first-person observer. But as my rank increased, so did the penalty.

Here, I was a party involved.

Not just me, but everyone I remembered.

Except for one person.

‘Damn it!’

I reached the stairs.

[Behave respectfully♪]

[Live joyfully♪]

[Feel happy♪]

On the stairs hung a ridiculously inappropriate slogan. Stop joking. Really, stop it. I cursed inwardly as I looked up the stairs leading to the rooftop.

There stood the only person in this world [not in my memories].

‘Constellation Killer.’

A small-framed student. Holding the unopened iron door, the student was pulling it back and forth. Clank. Clank! The chain was too firm to easily break.

“Haah... the key...”

The student sighed and turned around. Our eyes met for a moment. The student paused briefly, but then politely bowed their head.

The student bowed to me.

‘Why didn’t I realize sooner?’

When I realized this student was my classmate, I should have noticed something strange. Isn’t it obvious?

What classmate bows their head in greeting to another classmate?

Something was wrong.

"....."

The student glanced at me and then quietly walked away. As they were about to pass me, I called out to them.

“Wait a moment.”

“Yes?”

The student naturally used formal language. They didn't look at me directly but cautiously looked up with a practiced angle.

My throat clenched.

"..... Can I see your phone for a moment?"

"....."

"Please."

The student obediently handed over the phone. There was a brief silence, not resistance to my request, but rather surprise at my use of formal language.

I unlocked the phone, which wasn't password protected.

+

47 Unread Messages.

+

I opened the messages one by one.

I saw them.

[I feel so sorry for our juniors TTTT ■■ They're supposed to call you senior, right? Have you thought about how they feel? Doesn't your conscience hurt?]

[Hey, you gonna answer?]

[I'm shocked! There's a student who doesn't wash their uniform!?!]

[■■... really disgusting. Even worse than the math teacher lololol]

[I greeted you in the hallway yesterday, and you seemed so happy hahaha Hey! I did it because I lost at rock-paper-scissors! Please don't get it wrong π π]

[■■ lives in a garbage dump. They reuse everything, shoes, uniform. The only thing that can't be recycled is ■■.]

[Your smell is really bad. Seriously, you stink.]

[Let's meet after class.]

Thud.

I closed the phone.

I couldn't read any more.

"....."

I closed my eyes and breathed. Breathing somehow calmed me down. In this trauma, I didn't have the dagger's hilt. Nor the handkerchief Raviel gave me. It took a lot of effort to calm my emotions.

"Why..."

I looked at the [Constellation Killer's past].

“Why do you bring your phone to school? Just don’t bring it.”

The student replied.

“...They said they’d kill me if I didn’t bring it.”

A cold chill ran down my throat.

My head spun.

“Then, just, throw it away. If you lose it, they can’t blame you.”

“This.”

The student,

The person who would later be known as Constellation Killer, softly opened their lips.

“This phone was given by you, sir. An old one you used...”

"....."

“In our house, we don't have money... and you're even paying for the bills. You said to come out immediately when you call. For that purpose. They said if I lose it, they'll kill me...”

The grotesque building.

Friendship imitating friendship, love imitating love, meaningless imitations of meaning, pretending specialness and staging extraordinariness – in this masquerade of a breeding ground, only malice.

“Is it really okay to throw it away?”

Only malice was not fake.

Chapter 133: ■■ (1)

The director of the orphanage where I grew up was indifferent, neither kind nor unkind.

The children at the orphanage grumbled about it.

-It's too sloppy. All our birthdays are on January 1st?

-Maybe she's too lazy to celebrate more often.

-And what's with my name? Kim Maeng-Ja*?

*Maeng-Ja is the Korean name of the Chinese Philosopher Mencius.

-Hey, at least your name starts with Kim, which sounds natural. I got Kim Han-Bi-Ja... Just call me HanBiJa**.

****Han-Bi-Ja is the Korean name of Han Feizi.**

I thought so too. Even after entering the Tower, I continued to think so.

But now, having met many people, the Sword Emperor, my master, Raviel, and many others, I think differently.

-Why does the director act like that?

It might sound strange, but the director always seemed wary and cautious of loving us too much.

-Doesn't the director love us?

I remembered a conversation I had with the director the day I received my middle school uniform.

Upon hearing my question, the director looked serious and said, "Wait just one day, please." Whenever faced with a serious question, the director always asked for a day's delay.

And then answered.

-You asked yesterday why I don't show more love to you kids.

-Yes...

I felt somewhat guilty for even asking that question over the day. But the director, seemingly uncaring about my guilty conscience, methodically explained what had been thought over that day.

-Gong-Ja, people tend to pretend. It's the easiest thing in the world. Pretending to be smart, strong, kind, as if they truly know something... You do that with your friends, right? And I do that too, giving you kids names of sages. Adults do it as well.

The director washed their hands.

-People all wear masks. There's no need to take off these masks. But if you get too used to it, at some point, you forget you're wearing a mask. You forget. That's what intoxication is.

The director looked at me carefully.

Checking if I was following the conversation.

-Imagine this. If I show my irritation in front of you kids, what would you think?

-Oh, the director must be stressed today...?

-Exactly.

The director smiled bitterly.

-Sorry. I do that sometimes.

It happened about once a month.

-Anyway, the important thing is, I'm someone who occasionally gets irritated, and you kids know that very well. Do you understand? I'm that kind of person. And you know me.

But, the director continued.

-What if I was always a loving person? Always saying [I love you], smiling [You kids are the joy of my life], hugging you saying [I cherish nothing more than you]. What if I, being that person, show irritation once a year?

The director shook their head.

-Then you'd think, [Why is the director angry at us?] You wouldn't understand. Because you would think I'm the person who loves you the most.

[The director loves us the most, so why did she get angry?]

-.....

-You're still young. So you can only think of the easiest answer. [Ah, I must have done something wrong.]

The director shivered slightly.

-Even if I get irritated only once a year, Gong-Ja. If that adds up over 10 years, that's 10 times. Even if you remember only half of that, it's 5 times. And those 5 memories are more than enough to shape one's personality.

The director then fell silent for a while.

-Don't do that.

The director murmured.

-Remember me as someone who easily gets stressed and irritated. Someone too lazy to even host birthday parties. That's the truth. Don't blame yourselves. You did nothing wrong. Don't let someone like me twist you.

-.....

-You can become strong. As strong as possible.

In the principal's office, a printed A4 paper was tacked on the wall. Directly opposite the director's desk, it was usually seen as part of the background, like wallpaper or floor covering.

But that day, I particularly glanced at the A4 paper.

+

I solemnly swear, based on my free will and honor, to:

Ensure that all people enjoy a dignified life,

Grounded in the beliefs of human dignity and social justice,

Working alongside individuals, families, groups,
organizations, communities, and society as a whole.

Always stand with those marginalized and suffering,

Defending their rights and interests,

Rejecting social injustice and corruption,

Prioritizing public interest over personal gain,

Upholding the ethical code of social workers,

I solemnly pledge as a moral and responsible social worker.

+

I looked at the director.

-.....

The director seemed lost in thought, staring blankly into space.

Black eyes.

Those pupils remained in my memory.

“Sorry, Raviel. I can’t walk home with you today.”

I said as I walked out of the school gate.

"Mm."

Raviel looked at me. Her gaze slowly moved downward.

There, my hand was held. Not just my hand, but someone else's as well.

"....."

It was the Constellation Killer's hand.

Constellation Killer, with his hand held by me, had been dragged here. He didn't ask why their hand was held or where they were being taken.

He simply bowed his head quietly.

".....My boyfriend sometimes shows extraordinary action. Almost a mystery in itself. I think that side of him is impressive."

Raviel murmured.

“Do as you wish. Follow your heart. Is there anything I can help with?”

“Not yet. But I’ll tell you right away if something comes up.”

“I’ll be trusting you. Always.”

Raviel kissed my forehead and then got into the limousine without hesitation. The limousine, driven by a butler resembling the Empire's Head Butler, disappeared into the distance.

“Well then.”

I turned to Constellation Killer.

“Let’s go.”

“...Where to?”

“To your home.”

"....."

Constellation Killer hesitated for the first time. They seemed almost repulsed. But my mind was made up. I intended to first meet Constellation Killer's parents and apologize.

'I don't know where to start unraveling this.'

Of course, apologizing wouldn't end this [trauma]. It wouldn't be resolved. As the difficulty increased, the trauma itself seemed to have turned into a stage that needed to be resolved.

'Let's start with what I can do.'

As always.

However, my attempt to resolve the trauma was frustrating from the start.

"...This is it."

Seeing the [home] that Constellation Killer led me to, I was at a loss for words.

It was a garbage dump.

Below a hillside, in a place sparsely covered with pine trees, there was an empty lot. This lot was the small garbage bin of the city. Discarded PET bottles, dirty styrofoam, bundles of paper messily piled up.

Right in the middle, there was a shack made of boards.

[■■ lives in a garbage dump. They even reuse shoes and uniforms. The only thing that can't be recycled is ■■.]

My head throbbed.

I had thought it was just a message smothered in malice.

Those bastards.

“Are your parents working? What do they do?”

That shack was not a haven but a hideout. The walls did not reach the roof, leaving gaps everywhere. Grey plastic covered the roof.

“My father collects scrap and sells it.”

Plastic trash surrounded the shack like a moat. Unlike other garbage around, the plastic encircling the shack had its labels torn off.

It was clean.

That made the shack appear to be floating on a white plastic sandbank.

“And your mother?”

“I don’t have a mother.”

"....."

Of course.

"Is this a friend ■■?"

After waiting for two hours, Constellation Killer's father came home. He was a man marked by poverty. But more than his poverty, he was someone crushed by life. I realized that the moment I saw him.

A small room.

Sometimes when I looked in the mirror, I saw myself in that way.

"No, he's not a friend."

"Hmm...?"

The elderly man furrowed his brow. He looked too old for someone with a high school child.

He resembled the ferryman I saw in the trauma from [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon.]

“I am someone who has beaten and bullied this child.”

“Uhhh...?”

The old man blinked blankly.

"....."

I realized within a minute of starting the conversation with him.

‘It's too late.’

It was already too late.

The old man in front of me had already worn out his wick to burn. He was different from me in my days of living in a small room. That was the difference between that past me and this man.

Where that difference stemmed from, I couldn't tell.

“Here's the evidence. If you look at this phone, you'll see the messages. If you see this...”

One thing was certain.

This man had no strength to take responsibility for the Constellation Killer.

"Uhhh."

I showed him everything I could right away. The old man closed his eyes to the hellish scenes his child was enduring, blinking slowly.

“So that's how it is...”

The old man just stared blankly at me.

When I finished speaking, his responses stopped. It felt as if the conversation had completely ended. The old man simply waited to see if I had more to say, and if not, he just waited.

He seemed to have nothing to say to me.

'Hmm.'

I checked the Constellation Killer's expression. He wasn't looking at his father. His face didn't show any shock or insult from the conversation that just took place. Expressionless. Constellation Killer was just sitting quietly on the floor.

As if what was normal just flowed naturally.

'Yes.'

That's how it was.

"I've been quite rude."

I stood up and bowed to the old man.

"If it's okay with you, I'd like to stay with your child for a while. I want to invite him to my house. Would that be alright?"

“Go ahead...”

The old man clearly didn't understand what I was saying. He was listless. But I explained several times, not for the old man but for the Constellation Killer.

“It might be a long stay at our house. A week, a month, maybe even longer. I'll come every Saturday evening to tell you how your child is doing. Is that alright with you?”

“Yeah, do that.”

Good.

I turned to the Constellation Killer.

“Let's go.”

"....."

“Pack what you need. As I told your father, you might stay at our house for a while.”

Constellation Killer looked up at me solemnly.

“What are you trying to do now?”

For the first time, Constellation Killer's words weren't polite.

“Trying to whitewash your past because you're marrying a rich girl? Afraid it might cause trouble later? Smart move.”

My heart ached.

“Or is this another game? If you want to play, just say so. Tell me what game it is. Don't bother with this. I'll play along again. Should we go to the school playground at night?”

The Constellation Killer's voice was blunt. No inflection. That was the voice of a person who had chosen to fall just the day before.

“I'm sorry.”

“You're insane? Kim Gong-Ja, you've lost it.”

“Please, just give me one more day. I’ll do whatever it takes. Please endure just one more day.”

"....."

For me, it was one of many days to come, but for the person in front of me, it was their last day.

I had no choice but to earnestly hope, to plead. There was nothing else I could do but wish and pray.

“Do whatever you want...”

Constellation Killer muttered wearily.

I grabbed Constellation Killer’s wrist and headed towards [home]. To find the unknown path, we had to pass through the school. It was only when the sunset had completely faded and the sky darkened that we arrived in a residential area.

“Wait here for a moment.”

“I’ll be back soon. Within 20 minutes. Could you wait for me?”

“Do whatever you want...”

I left the Constellation Killer by the roadside and went home first.

“Oh.”

The Guardian Spirit was in the yard. He seemed to be enjoying the night sky alone, holding a glass of whiskey.

“Back, son? You're a bit late today. Heh. Don’t tell me you're late because of your girlfriend. Let me tell you, don’t get serious until after high school graduation. Rushing in relationships never ends well.”

Sword Emperor. My partner.

The person who taught me how to look ahead.

In this world, my,

“Father.”

“...Huh?”

The Guardian Spirit blinked.

“That’s odd? What’s this?

It’s strange being called father by you. Not just strange, it's incredibly awkward... As if I’m getting goosebumps. Is it because I’m tipsy?”

“Father.”

I called him again.

“You wouldn’t have raised me this way.”

“What?”

“You're an amazing person. Terrifying. You might seem like a self-centered psychopath, though you do have that side, but at least you decisively end things where you think [this is not right].”

Guardian Spirit frowned.

“What are you talking about, son?”

“If you were my father, I wouldn't have grown up as a delinquent. I might stray, but before completely going astray, you would beat me up, even half-kill me to bring me back.”

That's who you are.

“Let alone bullying a weak child to the point of suicide. You...”

『Don't bother about those making a fuss with it.』

『Those who can't even squeak in front of you are now making a big deal with just their fingers.』

『Ugh. Those kinds of people should have their fingers cut off.』

“You wouldn't say that. You're not someone who could. You're someone who would promise to teach happiness in suffering.”

"....."

“I'm the kind of person you despise the most. Such a person wouldn't be affectionately called [son] by you. It's impossible. This is an impossible world.”

Silence settled under the night sky.

In a yard where not even an insect's sound could be heard, I looked straight at the Guardian Spirit.

And said,

“You are not the Sword Emperor.”

"....."

“Get lost. Out of my sight, right now.”

At that moment.

-■■■■■.

The Guardian Spirit disintegrated.

His skin flowed, bones melted, and everything forming him evaporated. I blinked, and there was only an indistinct, oozing shadow, like a ghost.

-■■■■■, ■■....

I couldn't understand what it was saying. I couldn't recognize its face. I just knew it was the bare face of [my father] in this world.

The bare face of this world.

"....."

I walked past the Guardian Spirit into the house.

"Welcome back, Gong-Ja."

In the living room, my master sat on the sofa.

With a face and form I thought I'd never see again.

"How was school today, my son?"

Master smiled gently.

Chapter 134: ■■ (2)

"Ma....."

I couldn't finish the three syllables of 'Master.'

My heart pounded violently.

In an instant, numerous emotions intertwined. It felt as if my heart had become a rag, wrung tightly, ready to spill dark emotions.

Master. My extraordinary fate. The sole peony who became my master.

"Mother."

"....."

Master looked at me. Her always composed eyes wavered for the first time. I had called Master 'mother' for the first time, and she was addressed as such for the first time by me.

".....How strange."

Master put down her blunt pencil. Perhaps she was writing a manuscript. The living room table was scattered with her handwritten manuscript.

"I can't remember the last time I was called mother. No, even saying it's been a long time feels wrong... It's like..."

"I love you, Mother."

Master's fingers stopped.

"I wanted to see you again. Did you know? I've found someone to love for a lifetime. That it's possible to love someone sincerely and be loved completely. I wanted to introduce you first to Raviel, the one I'm holding hands with."

"....."

“Mother, you would have been good friends with Raviel. I... I am alive. I'm living well. Trying my best to live well. I often think of the words you told me.”

Master.

“I wanted to see you once more.”

Master slowly stood up and approached me. Her long, slender fingers wiped my eyes.

“Are you having a nightmare?”

“I am in a nightmare.”

“Life is no different from a dream. But that doesn't change anything. Does evil become good if we call it rationality? Does a mistake become ignorance and heal everyone's wounds? My son, don't be fooled by words. Always watch your heart. Don't entrust your heart to hollow words and fragile sentences.”

Master hugged my shoulders.

“Whether you call me mother or not, I remain in your heart as me. Likewise, you do too. Being human is not about memorizing a few words or spouting a few lines. Humanity is about how much weight of others one can carry in their heart.”

I fit snugly into Master’s embrace.

My mouth opened and closed several times.

“Mother wouldn’t have raised a child... Yoo Soo-Ha like that.”

“Yes.”

“Mother wouldn’t just lash out in anger, she isn’t that kind of person... She wouldn’t invite such a person to dinner. You would have driven them out of the house. Before that, you would have corrected them. And before that, you would have raised them as a good child.”

“That’s right.”

“So.”

I opened my mouth.

“Mother, you’re not So BaekHyang.”

Master smiled.

“Survive. Gong-Ja. You must live strong.”

As she smiled, she disintegrated.

"....."

Master’s face melted away.

Her smile dissolved.

The hands that hugged me vanished.

All that remained was a shadow.

-■, ■■■ ■■■.

The shadow had no face, no clear outline. Slithering like a giant worm, the shadow left the living room.

Another layer of the world was peeled away.

That was [my mother's] true face in this world.

"---Ugh."

I rushed to the bathroom. Leaning over the toilet, I bowed my head. A sense of loss, guilt... dark emotions surged back up.

My heart vomited.

“Huh?”

Behind me.

A voice came from near the bathroom door.

“What, did you eat something bad? Why are you throwing up as soon as you get home? Kid. You must have picked up some crap outside again. Didn’t I tell you to take care of your food properly?”

It was Yoo Soo-Ha.

“Should your brother give you a back rub?”

“...Yoo Soo-Ha.”

“Whoa. Did you throw up your brain along with your stomach? Short on words, little brother. What’s up?”

I sat on the bathroom tiles and looked up at Yoo Soo-Ha. He was munching on squid legs, standing there.

“You damn idiot...”

“Ah, you really did throw up your brain. Hey, it's normal for

people to get into fights sometimes! I was scared after the news broke yesterday. Got a real earful from mom and dad too. But family should support each other, right? Eh?”

“That crazy bastard...”

I muttered, holding onto the toilet bowl.

“You’re, fuck, such a bitch.”

“Huh?”

“If beating up a stalker was all you did it’d make you an angel. The kind of guy who, after beating a stalker to pulp, would bury them in the mountains and then start a forest fire.”

“Wha... That's psychotic. You saw your big brother like that?”

“You are that psychopath! You damn dog!”

My head spun.

“Idol? Singer? You think you could do those jobs? With no idea about fan service, swearing in every interview, and even asking about parents as a dessert, what kind of idol or singer are you? Stop joking.”

“Uh...”

“And get scolded by parents? Seriously, would they even scold someone like you? It's a miracle if they don't slap you across the face. Damn it! Yoo Soo-Ha, you're not the type to pat your brother's back when he's vomiting. If only you were that kind of person. If only.”

I glared at Yoo Soo-Ha's face.

“I wouldn't kill you, if you were..”

"....."

“I wouldn't, you damn dog. I wouldn't. If only you were that kind of person... I wouldn't have to...”

Sometimes, I dream.

“What kind of, really, what kind of vile acts you committed, really, you are.”

If I did not have to kill you.

『Hey, Hunter! Please save me!』

I scream.

『Huh?』

Yoo Soo-Ha turns around.

『I was attacked by wolves.』

『Geez, really. Did you mess with these monsters? Damn it, my hunt is spoiled for today.』

Yoo Soo-Ha clicks his tongue.

『Please, give me a potion...』

I plead, and

『Alright, but be careful next time. Damn. Hardly made my day's quota.』

Yoo Soo-Ha gives me a potion.

Sometimes, I dream.

『I'll give you the potion, but you gotta pay the life fee.』

Yoo Soo-Ha says that, and

『For... forty gold,』

I say.

『Fine, just give me everything you have.』

Yoo Soo-Ha says, so I give everything, and then

『Alright. Be more careful next time dude.』

Yoo Soo-Ha gives me a potion.

11 years ago, Yoo Soo-Ha was still such a person, a greedy bastard but still someone who wouldn't kill a wounded weakling, so that I didn't have to kill my once hero by my own hands, sometimes, but still I dream,

I dream....

“You damn dog...”

Yoo Soo-Ha's black hair fluttered.

“Get lost. Your place is in my shadow. If you're thinking of setting up a new address in this hell and washing away your sins, forget it.”

And the black hair collapsed.

-■■, ■■ ■■■■.

[My older brother] became a spirit, uttering dismal sounds.

Right. A spirit.

Not even a ghost, a spirit that lost its existence in this traumatic world. These entities, stripped of the appearances extracted from my memory, were now mere shadows.

"....."

I washed my face at the sink.

Water dripped from my eyebrows.

“Okay.”

My mutterings quietly settled in the house of spirits.

“It’s okay. I can do this. Kim Gong-Ja, you can do it.”

This is not my home. This is not my world.

It’s just that the life I wanted to save is trapped in this hell.

I left the house and returned with the Constellation Killer.

"Ah....."

Constellation Killer couldn’t recognize the spirits as spirits. In his eyes, the spirits appeared as my father, mother, and older brother.

Or maybe the opposite.

-■■■?

-■■ ■■■.

To Constellation Killer, the humans in this world might have always looked like spirits. To him, the sounds of these people were mere noise.

“Hello...”

“Don’t greet them.”

I cut off sharply.

“There’s no need to be polite.”

I grabbed Constellation Killer’s wrist and entered the room. Constellation Killer couldn’t finish his greeting and was led by me.

-■, ■■■ ■■■.

The older brother, who had just been wearing Yoo Soo-Ha's face, followed us. He tried to enter the room with us, but I

pushed him out, making sure he couldn't come in.

“Don't come in. I'm warning you.”

-■■■?

“For a while, I'll be taking care of this kid. I'll handle everything, so no one else needs to interfere. Don't come in or talk to him unless he allows it. I've made myself clear.”

I locked the door.

-■■. ■■■?

The spirits outside the room murmured. Ignoring them, I prepared a bed for Constellation Killer. He stared blankly at me, still carrying his backpack from school.

“Is it okay to talk to your family like that?”

“Every family is different. To you, they're the family of your bully.”

“.....Don't speak formally. It's weird. It feels bad. Really, I don't know what big scheme you're planning, laying groundwork like this.”

“Think what you want. Just get some sleep for now.”

“Where will you sleep?”

“Anywhere. Rest. You'll feel a bit better after some rest.”

“.....”

From that day on.

I began to erase the existence of each person in this world, one by one.

-Who are you? Eh? Soo-Ha's younger brother? Why would his younger brother call me...?

I stealthily used my older brother's phone to call Preta.

-Eh? Oh, I've heard from Soo-Ha. Didn't we meet once before? But what's the matter? Surely, Soo-Ha isn't sending his younger brother to apologize on his behalf?

I used the same method to call Goldencup.

With just one call, I disintegrated Preta and Goldencup.

Occasionally, the idol group they belonged to appeared on TV, but their faces weren't shown. Like smeared with black graffiti, only shadows flickered.

[The implementation of the trauma is deteriorating.]

Finally, there was a response.

[Trauma material has been corrupted.]

[Extracting data from your memory to restore... Failed.]

[Data restoration failed.]

The gap I created began to puncture holes in the world.

[Extracting data from the owner's memory... Failed.]

[Data restoration failed.]

I accelerated my actions.

The Four Demon Lords disintegrated. The children frolicking in the Hellfire Mansion disintegrated. I turned every character from the trauma I encountered into spirits.

With each one, the world of trauma crumbled a bit more.

“Hm? It's rare for you to come to the faculty room, Gong-Ja.”

Even Viper, the homeroom teacher.

“Student G-Gong-Ja? Why did you call me alone to an empty classroom? Eek. A relationship between a teacher and student is fundamentally forbidden, it's against the rules...!”

Even the math teacher, Apothecary.

“I heard you requested a meeting. You’re quite a unique student, so I arranged this at the request of the student council president. What do you want to talk about?”

Even the principal, the Sword Saint.

One by one.

[The implementation of the trauma is deteriorating.]

[Data restoration failed.]

About two weeks later.

Most of the students and teachers in the school had turned into spirits.

But it wasn’t just the school that was affected.

-■■ ■■■■■■.

No matter which channel I turned on the TV, there were spirits in the announcer's seats. The guests on the shows just murmured shadows of silent faces, incomprehensible.

I even tried taking the subway to go outside the city once.

After a while, the cityscape continued, but then darkness enveloped everything outside the window. When we reached the dark area, the subway disappeared.

[The implementation of the trauma is deteriorating.]

[Requesting data from Zuraqua... Failed. Request denied.]

[Data restoration failed.]

A broken world.

A failed monstrosity.

“.....Gong-Ja. I need to talk.”

One day, after class, Paladin approached me.

She seemed unusually tense.

“What’s the matter?”

“I can’t talk about it in the classroom. No, more like I don’t want to.”

Paladin glanced behind her.

-■■■■! ■■ ■■■■.

There, already turned into a spirit, someone sat at a desk. It was the Countess. She had a conversation with me two days ago and then disintegrated. After glancing at her friend’s condition, Paladin lowered her voice.

“Let's go to the hallway.”

We stepped out into the hallway.

“So, what’s it?”

“...It might sound strange. No, it is strange. But somehow, I feel I need to consult you about this.”

In the middle of the hallway, surrounded by spirits, Paladin looked around nervously.

“Something is wrong.”

"....."

“If you ask what, I can’t exactly answer. But it's clear. This isn’t normal. Last weekend, I planned an outing with my family. We were supposed to go. I prepared lunch from morning. But then I blinked, and it was evening.”

Paladin shivered slightly.

“At first, I suspected memory loss. But then, at the dinner

table, my family talked about how great the outing was today. I have no memory of it, no recollection of what we did...”

Paladin looked around again. Really, apart from a handful of students, there were only black, oozing spirits in the classrooms, hallways, and playground.

“...Something is wrong. Something’s gone wrong. Maybe I’m the one who’s become strange. Sorry, Gong-Ja. I’ll book an appointment with a psychiatrist. Maybe it’ll get better after the consultation.”

“The back of the classroom.”

I spoke up.

“The student sitting by the window. Do you remember?”

“Um...?”

Paladin furrowed her brows.

“Of course. Isn’t he a classmate? His name was ■■, I believe.”

“Do you know he received these messages?”

I pulled out the Constellation Killer’s phone and showed her.

"....."

“I should mention this is not manipulated.”

As she read the messages, Paladin’s face turned pale. She was shocked. But the shock was short-lived, and soon she burst out in anger.

“What. This kind of behavior... No, there’s no way that kid would send such messages. It’s unthinkable! This is not something to be taken lightly!”

“Are you angry?”

“Of course! There are things we can overlook because we are

kids and things we can't. A wound, whether on an adult or a child, is the same. In fact, wounds on children are even more vicious!"

"What are you going to do now?"

"We have evidence. We must report to the police! I know how it works. If we complain to the school, they'll just take the evidence and tell us to resolve it among friends. Just the two of us going to the police won't be enough, so we need to gather as many people as possible and go as a group...!"

"That's right."

Paladin.

"That's the kind of person you are."

Someone who tries to minimize victims.

"If there had been even one person like you in that wide classroom, it wouldn't have happened."

“...What?”

“You wouldn’t overlook such deeds. You wouldn’t just let it go, and you couldn’t have missed it. Since there wasn’t a single person like you in that classroom.”

I closed the phone.

“That’s why this happened.”

"....."

“It’s okay. Please disappear. I’ll take care of the rest.

I blinked.

-■■, ■■■■■■■■.

A faceless spirit fluttered.

"....."

Slowly.

I stood in the hallway, surveying the surroundings.

-■■ ■■■?

-■■ ■. ■■ ■■■.

The students passed by, conversing. They chatted. Laughed as if it were fun, and even when it wasn't. They shared a season of youth with each other. When a teacher passed, they bowed in greeting.

That was...

-■ ■■■■ ■■■■ ■■ ■■■ ■■ ■■ ■ ■■■■ ■■■■■■ ■■ ■■
■■■■■? ■■ ■■■?

-■, ■■?

-■■■! ■■■■ ■ ■■■ ■■■■ ■■!?

-■■■... ■■ ■■■■. ■■■■■■ ■ ■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■

-■■■ ■■■■ ■ ■ ■■■■■■ ■■ ■■■■ ■■■■■■ ■! ■■ ■■■■■■
■■■ ■ ■■! ■■ ■■■■■■ ■■

-■■■ ■■■■■■ ■■. ■■■■ ■■■■ ■■ ■■■■■■ ■■. ■■■■ ■■■■
■ ■■ ■■■■.

-■ ■■ ■■ ■■. ■■ ■■.

-■■■ ■■■■ ■■.

Just noise from people.

Words didn't form sentences, and sentences failed to become writing.

On the stairs, a cheerful slogan was posted.

[■■■■ ■■■■♪]

[■■■■ ■■■■♪]

[■■■■ ■■■■♪]

That was...

The Constellation Killer's world.

Chapter 135: ■■ (3)

The world gradually narrows.

First the outskirts of the city, then the downtown area.

[The implementation of the trauma is deteriorating.]

[Data restoration failed.]

From the fringes of the city, the consuming darkness slowly crept into the streets. Wriggling and crawling, the darkness resembled living tentacles. I decided to call this ominous, dark fog "Emptiness."

"...I'll go to school a bit early today."

Many things became invisible. People's faces. The church spires. The signs plastered onto the shops like tree bark.

The world was stained with Emptiness.

“I need to go to the animal pens to feed the rabbits.”

But there were things that became visible for the first time.

“Animal pens?”

“Yeah, behind the school... oh well.”

Constellation Killer sighed.

“Like you’d know. Anyway, there’s a place where we keep rabbits and chickens. I have to feed them.”

‘Is there such a place?’

I recalled, at the orphanage, there was also a place for raising animals, though it vanished quickly. Perhaps middle and high schools also had animal pens in the past.

“Why are you the one feeding them? Shouldn’t there be a designated person for that?”

“...There used to be an animal care club. Remember last year, a foreign woman broke into the school at night and jumped with her newborn? The baby, unfortunately, fell into the animal pen. After that incident, no one wanted to join the club anymore.”

This was news to me. But Constellation Killer spoke as if it was a well-known incident. It seems various events have occurred at this school.

“A foreign woman and her child at another country’s school...”

“She was a child conceived during a teacher’s overseas trip.”

"....."

“A middle school incident, not high school,” muttered Constellation Killer.

“Anyway, the club no longer exists. The middle school class

presidents take turns managing the pens... but you know how middle schoolers are. They're not diligent about this kind of stuff. It's mostly the security guard, me, and some kid from the middle school who end up feeding them."

That was...

A corner of the world I never knew existed.

The animal pens.

There, rabbits and chickens were confined in cramped cages, their limited space becoming their entire world.

Were they not being properly cared for? The stench of chicken manure and rabbit urine was strong. The carelessly dumped, bulk feed, soaked and dried repeatedly, also emitted a foul smell.

"Ah, seriously. Someone pretended to do it and left again."

The Constellation Killer frowned.

“If they’re going to be like this, they might as well not be assigned. Doing nothing is better than this.”

“Need help?”

“No, it’s fine. I have to finish it all anyway.”

Constellation Killer rolled up his sleeves.

“Just stand there. Or go back to the classroom if you want.”

He removed the rotting fluffy piles and dumped them into a large sack. He fetched a broom and rake from the storeroom and cleaned up.

The task seemed very familiar to him.

He then picked up a rubber hose and sprayed water around the animal pen.

Shhhhh-

In a world where much became invisible, rusted by Emptiness, a high school student at Shinseo High was scattering water around 6:40 AM. It was quiet. The water mirrored the color of dawn.

"....."

I glimpsed a scene spread in the void of the world.

[You stink.]

[Even worse than the math teacher.]

[You really stink.]

The world.

Gradually narrows.

[The implementation of the trauma is deteriorating.]

Meaningless things to the Constellation Killer, or ■■, began to disappear, one by one.

[Data restoration failed.]

Mountains surrounding the city were engulfed in dark fog. This world was under siege. Day by day, Emptiness tightened its grasp.

Streets and paths were severed.

-■■, ■■ ■!

-■■■.

Spirits kept appearing and disappearing on the broken paths. Flickering. Where people came from, where they went – none of it mattered in the [Constellation Killer's World].

Humans were not characters in this world.

Weeds sprouted in the gaps of the sidewalk blocks.

[The implementation of the trauma is deteriorating.]

In a corner of a garbage dump, an unpruned ginkgo tree bent its back.

[The implementation of the trauma is deteriorating.]

As evening fell, the red sunset faded.

[The implementation of the trauma is deteriorating.]

Finally, Emptiness completely enveloped the school.

"....."

Raviel was standing at the school gate.

Beyond the gate was pitch-black darkness.

“Raviel.”

It was dismissal time.

Amidst spirits walking towards the absorbing Emptiness, Raviel stood quietly. Even as I called out, she didn't turn her head.

"Yes. I did feel something was wrong."

She whispered softly.

"Thinking back, it was strange to be called by a foreign name. Ban Siah. That was the name given to me. Yet, for some reason, I felt compelled to be called [Raviel], as if under an obsession."

"....."

"Most of all, I can't recall how I met you. No, that expression might be misleading. I remember receiving a confession from you at last year's school festival. I had harbored affection and fondness for you even before then. We easily became a couple."

Raviel turned to face me.

“But now, I question the truth of it. Gong-Ja. Our love was not like that. We would never fall in love so easily.”

"....."

“Kiss me. Now.”

Carefully, I placed my hand on Raviel’s shoulder. With my left hand, I gently tilted her head and pressed my lips to hers.

“Hmm. As expected.”

Raviel smiled.

“My heart flutters.”

She caressed my earlobe.

“There is no falsehood in my love. It’s impossible for me to love you so deeply just because you’re good-looking and articulate. But to reduce us to just a couple in Shinseo High’s history... Tell them to stop. You and I are the strongest in the

universe.”

“Yes.”

“If my love is true, then surely my memory has been distorted. This must be a hallucination or a dream. Gong-Ja. Am I dreaming of you? Or are you dreaming of me?”

“I am dreaming of you, Raviel.”

“Interesting. Truly fascinating.”

Raviel bent her finger and stroked her chin.

Her chin, not mine.

“I am your one and only beloved.”

“Yes.”

“Even if it’s a dream, even in a fleeting moment of dreamland, I should always be the one you long for. Only I am worthy of that place.”

“That’s true.”

“Praise be. My lover. You love me well.”

Raviel let out a laugh.

“Now close your eyes.”

"....."

“Don’t open them. Call my name with your lips. Understand? Never open your eyes. If you do, I’ll scold you.”

I closed my eyes.

"Raviel."

"Yes."

"Raviel... Ivansia. That's the name of the person I love."

And then.

The hand that was stroking my chin disappeared.

"....."

I opened my eyes.

Raviel was gone.

"....."

She did not show me her crumbling into a shadow.

Until the last moment.

That was Ivansia's way.

[The implementation of the trauma is deteriorating.]

[Data restoration failed.]

Now there is no breath of Raviel here.

The world has narrowed that much more.

-Ding, Dong, Dang, Dong.

The speaker installed in the schoolyard rang.

A nameless, formless broadcaster spoke.

-■■■■ ■■ ■■ ■■■■■■ ■■■■■■ ■■■■■■.

Attention to all students remaining in school, this announcement is from the Broadcasting Club.

The world of trauma was beginning to crumble.

“---What are you doing there?”

Someone spoke from behind me. It was the Constellation Killer. Carrying a worn-out bag, he stood still, looking at me strangely.

“Not going home? Well, if not, it's fine. I was getting uncomfortable mooching off your parents anyway. I get you want to sincerely apologize to me, so let's just stop this. It's awkward for both of us.”

Constellation Killer walked towards where the school gate had been. Just as he was about to pass me by, I grabbed his wrist and yanked him back.

“Hey, what? What's going on!”

The Constellation Killer nearly stepped into the Emptiness. Even now, black fog continued to flow from the gate and over the wall, pouring into the playground. If swallowed by [that], everything would end.

“Come with me for a bit.”

“Again? Where are you taking me this time?”

“Somewhere you can still live, even for a moment. Somewhere you can breathe.”

“...What?”

“This place is already dangerous. Let's move.”

I pulled Constellation Killer across the schoolyard.

Emptiness relentlessly devoured the school in pursuit of us.

“...I don't understand what you're saying, Gong-Ja. You've been acting too strange since last month. Why are you so scared? What are you trying so hard to do? You were never like this.”

“I promised to fight desperately no matter what. My master swung her sword even as the world ended. My lover defended

her country even as the world repeated. There are such people in the world. I strive to be with people like them.”

“I really, truly, don't understand any of this.”

“Even those who endlessly abandoned themselves for what they believed was right.”

We entered the school building.

Still, Emptiness did not stop its relentless advance.

"....."

In the hallway, lost souls wandered aimlessly. However, one among them, with the face of Black Dragon Witch, [Class President], just stood blankly in front of the girls' bathroom. She was the only person I hadn't dismantled yet.

Because.

In the last trauma, when Constellation Killer jumped, she

was the only student who lowered her head in grief.

“...Strange. Why do I feel guilty about entering the girls’ bathroom?”

Black Dragon Witch seemed lost in thought about her sexual identity, a common confusion during that turbulent period. I approached her, still holding Constellation Killer’s wrist, and grabbed Black Dragon Witch's wrist with my other hand.

"Huh?"

“Come with me. You can't stay here.”

“Huh? Oh, wait. What? Gong-Ja? Hey, what are you doing...?!”

Black Dragon Witch panicked, but then suddenly noticed Constellation Killer. Her surprised expression quickly turned stern. She frowned, hung her head low, and let me pull her along.

[Warning!]

[The implementation of the trauma is deteriorating.]

[Data restoration failed.]

[Unable to maintain the trauma.]

Emptiness swallowed the first floor of the school.

I rushed up the stairs with the two of them. Quickly. We passed the first floor, sprinted up the second, skipped the third, crossed the fourth, and ran up to the fifth. Behind me, Constellation Killer and Black Dragon Witch panted heavily, but it couldn't be helped.

Emptiness was rising with terrifying force.

[■■■■ ■■■■♪]

[■■■■ ■■■■♪]

[■■■■ ■■■■♪]

The mottoes on the stairs were submerged. The black mist turned into a dark, murky water surface, engulfing the first, second, third, fourth, and fifth floors.

Only one place remained in this world.

“Huff, huff... Huff...”

“Ugh. I feel nauseous...”

I stood in front of the rooftop's iron door. Four locks were coiled around the door handle, accessible only to teachers. But I released Aura from my fingertips and easily cut through the chains.

“Let's go out.”

“Huh...?”

Constellation Killer, still panting, stared blankly at the door.

“It's open...?”

“Wait a minute. We can’t go to the rooftop! It’s against school rules!”

Black Dragon Witch panicked and shouted. If not for Emptiness threatening to engulf us, I might have respected the school rules more. I pushed Constellation Killer and Black Dragon Witch onto the rooftop, half-forcing them, then---

Thump.

I closed the door.

"....."

I stared quietly at the door. It was silent. Fortunately, Emptiness had not invaded the rooftop. It was probably just a brief respite, but for now, we were safe from the flood of Emptiness.

“Good. We should be safe for a while.”

“What’s safe about this?!”

Black Dragon Witch exploded in a frenzy.

“You have no idea how sensitive our school is about rooftop access! After all that happened in the middle school last year! My god!”

“It’s okay.”

“Do you know what will happen if the teachers find out I was here?! My school record... That jerk! You’re responsible for my college admissions!”

The world was completely engulfed by Emptiness.

Beyond the fence on the rooftop, all that could be seen below was pitch-black darkness. The playground, the schoolyard, the main building of the middle school opposite.

In this trauma, only three remained.

“Class President.”

“What!”

“You knew what was happening in our class.”

"....."

Three survivors.

The perpetrator.

The victim.

“...So?”

And finally, the bystander.

Black Dragon Witch, with the face of the Class President, glared at me.

“Do you have something to say to me?”

Chapter 136:

Surviving (1)

The Black Dragon Witch glared at me.

"You called it 'the second worst bullying case at Shinseo High.' You were laughing and came up with that name, Gong-Ja. Thanks to you, what happened in our class was...."

In Black Dragon Witch's eyes was long-standing contempt.

But the contempt didn't last long. Black Dragon Witch frowned, then returned to an expressionless face. A look of weariness from her own emotions. It seemed a sigh had been carved into an expressionless face.

".....Forget it. I don't even want to talk about this with you. Talking will only make me feel worse. Damn it! If I knew I'd still see bullying in high school, I should've gone to a different school."

"You are the class president. You have responsibility for what

happens in the class."

"So what? Are you saying it's my responsibility?"

Black Dragon Witch sneered.

"Amazing. So it's true. You've been going around with ■■, meeting every student one by one. [Gong-Ja has repented. Gong-Ja has changed his heart.] Even the teachers were praising you in the staff room. Good for you."

A cold sneer appeared at the corner of Black Dragon Witch's mouth.

"People like you have it easy. Apologize after hurting someone else and that's it. Plead for forgiveness with such earnest apologies. All mistakes were just that, mistakes. All the hurt caused was just a joke."

"....."

"How can life be all mistakes and jokes? Do you die if you don't make mistakes or jokes for even a moment? Do you see the world as a trash can for your mistakes and people as trash

bins for your jokes? You're like contagious disease carriers. Worthless...."

Snap. Black Dragon Witch closed her mouth.

Again, she stopped just before her emotions got more intense. Black Dragon Witch looked down at her indoor shoes, appearing anxious. Since coming to the rooftop, she hadn't looked at Constellation Killer even once.

"Class President."

".....Don't do this to me."

Black Dragon Witch muttered.

"Don't bring ■■ here with me. You're just going to tell me to apologize or admit I was wrong, aren't you? I did nothing wrong. The wrongdoing was yours...."

"But you don't think so."

"....."

When Constellation Killer attempted suicide in the last trauma, the school desperately turned a blind eye. The classroom tried to forget and cover up the [incident] with various tactics.

『He sent such a text. Isn't he crazy?』

『Yeah. Looking back, he was always a bit strange.』

Constellation Killer was the crazy one. The weird person.

On the other hand, we are 'normal.'

Maybe we sent a bullying text as a joke. But it was just a joke. A momentary deviation. Since everyone jokes and deviates, we are still normal.

Maybe we laughed at the Constellation Killer. But that was a mistake. Not our true intention. Not a serious action, we just got carried away by the atmosphere. We did nothing wrong.

『Think carefully about what's important to you and get your act together.』

『Yes, teacher.』

That's how the classroom pushed away one of its students.

Even suicide, even death, could not awaken their guilt.

+

The one responsible for my death is you.

Don't forget.

You killed me.

+

Except for one person.

The Black Dragon Witch didn't say 'Yes, teacher.' She didn't speak.

She just silently lowered her head.

"Don't do this to me, really...."

When countless perpetrators were brazenly mad, only one bystander remained silent.

"I did my best. In the first year, I tried to stop it. Damn it."

And there were hundreds of reasons why a person falls silent.

"You know what? I researched all this stuff because of you guys. Do you know? This school is part of the Serun Education Foundation. There are ten board members. Among them are Gong-Ja, your girlfriend's parents. Didn't know that, did you? You just took ■■ for granted without knowing such things? The board also includes the chairman of the Serun Church of the Samwon Church Association. That's the church my family goes to! Every weekend!"

Black Dragon Witch covered her forehead.

“Why do I have to know all this because of the crap you guys stirred up! Just, please, enough. I’m in my second year now... Studying four, five hours on little sleep. I’m busy. I entered as a scholarship student just like ■■... You might just laugh and enjoy school life!”

Ill will is easy.

“I don’t know if you bully others without thinking!”

But good will is always impossible.

"I’m desperate here! This school has that damned Scholarship Selection Committee, and our great homeroom teacher is the second-year head there! You don’t know, do you? It doesn’t matter if you don’t. Damn, I even brought up ■■ to the homeroom teacher... Please, just stop it. I didn’t want to know all this! It’s all disgusting. You guys, the homeroom teacher, the school, just everything... I’m busy trying to survive, so just, deal with it amongst yourselves!”

“I’m sorry.”

Committing evil only needs one reason.

But to act with goodness, one must carry hundreds of reasons.

“Sorry? Ha, how sorry are you? No. Fuck it. Don’t apologize to me. Don’t apologize, Kim Gong-Ja. I don’t need an apology, nor do I have the right to receive one. And you don’t need to apologize or have the right to. Because you’re trash. Just die as trash. Live until you die as trash. I beg you, after we graduate from this school, let’s never see each other again.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize! You trash!”

Black Dragon Witch kicked my shin. A tingling sensation. My bone resonated. Black Dragon Witch spat angrily and slapped my cheek.

The violence, like a curse, continued.

I gave myself up to Black Dragon Witch and said.

“This kid, he was going to commit suicide.”

Black Dragon Witch’s hand stopped.

“He would have fallen a month ago. From here.”

Silence settled on the rooftop.

"....."

Black Dragon Witch turned her head.

For the first time, she saw the Constellation Killer.

Black Dragon Witch moved her lips several times.

“Really...?”

Awkwardly.

As if she found it difficult just to talk to the person in front of her.

“Were you going to die...?”

She asked cautiously.

Constellation Killer faced Black Dragon Witch expressionlessly.

“Yeah.”

“.....”

“I don’t know how Kim Gong-Ja found out. But yeah. I was going to die.”

“.....”

“The Class President had such thoughts. I never knew.”

The rooftop became quiet.

Gradually.

Black Dragon Witch covered her face with both hands.

“I’m not sorry...”

Whimpers seeped through her young fingers.

“I’m not sorry for you, just... In the first year, I tried to collect data on school violence and accidentally found out about this school’s board of directors. I gave up thinking nothing would change even if I blew it up. In the second year, I tried talking to the homeroom teacher and then gave up. I’m just that kind of person. Remember me as that kind of person.”

"....."

“But don’t die. Don’t die... Why would you die? You shouldn’t die because of those trash. It shouldn’t be like that. ■■. You should live. Right? If you live, get into a good university, somehow earn money, then leave this damned city...”

“I’ve thought about it too.”

Constellation Killer muttered.

“That would make those bastards forget.”

"....."

“They’d live as if nothing happened. No, they probably won’t even remember. I hate that the most. I wanted to fuck them up. They’ll forget anyway...”

Constellation Killer looked down at Black Dragon Witch.

“I’m sorry. Class President.”

"....."

“I didn’t mean to hurt someone like you.”

Black Dragon Witch knelt on the ground, covering her face with her hands, suppressing her cries. She gritted her teeth, holding back the sounds. The contained cries electrified her body, making her shoulders tremble.

The Constellation Killer spoke softly.

"There was someone after all."

He knelt down.

"I thought there was no one."

Lowering himself.

"To the same height as Black Dragon Witch."

"I'm glad I didn't die back then, a month ago."

The Constellation Killer slowly wrapped his arms around the Black Dragon Witch. She flinched. He leaned his head closer to her.

"I'm glad there's at least one person I can forgive."

"....."

The Black Dragon Witch's breath broke. Tears flowed. She couldn't hug Constellation Killer back. She just bent her body, enduring the heart-wrenching sobs. Constellation Killer embraced her for a while.

"I'm sorry....."

Black Dragon Witch's body crumbled.

"I'm sorry, ■■. So sorry. I'm sorry."

But it melted away.

Into a shadow. Not falling as a ghost.

The faceless person, someone I knew, wailed.

"Don't die. Please. I beg you.... You have to live."

That was a face I recognized.

A voice I had heard somewhere.

"We can live. We have to live. We can live better. You have to live, ■■. Just try a little more, I'll try a bit more. Together...."

[The implementation of the trauma is deteriorating.]

The iron door to the rooftop was consumed by the void.

The black tentacles like mist crept through the gaps of the door. Silently. The black tentacles wrapped around the door.

Engulfing it.

The void that had submerged up to the 5th floor climbed the school walls and flowed onto the rooftop fence.

"No one cares about you. No one, not anyone. Nobody.... You shouldn't die because of those beasts. You have to live. Live stubbornly, study, yes. Go to a good college... leave this damned city."

I saw the person behind Black Dragon Witch's facade.

"For the unhappy children, let's live...."

That moment.

"Let's give our time to those more unfortunate than us. We can do it. We can really do it. I'll help you.... I've researched a lot. Studied. It's not a foolish delusion. We can really do it if we try---."

A chill ran down my spine.

"---Let's start by getting into a social work department. We need certifications."

My head shook because of the shock.

"To survive here, to survive in the world, we need to become stronger. ■■. We have to make others unable to look down on us, unable to interfere, we need armor. Let's study. I can help you.... I can help."

Ah.

"Let's help the children together. I can't do it alone... It might be too hard alone. Yes. I might not endure it. I might hurt the children. But if we're two, three, four. With just four people, we can do anything. We can do anything."

Director.

"Try hard..."

My orphanage's director.

"This world isn't everything. It can't be. ■■. We can create our world. Start small... with just two people, we can create a world. Don't die.... let's live together in a different world, just the two of us..."

The face of the young director.

『Don't do this, dear.』

『You did nothing wrong.』

Her tired voice overlapped with the past.

Looking back now.

It seemed like the director was worried and cautious about loving us too much.

『Don't get twisted because of someone like me.』

She always seemed afraid.

"....."

The Constellation Killer gently stroked the young director's hair.

“It seems hard to make money.”

“We can't earn much...”

“It seems tough.”

“It's going to be really tough...”

“But it seems better than now.”

The Constellation Killer smiled.

“I gave up on studying since the second semester of the first year. It will be a bit hard.”

“It's okay. It's not too late. Nothing is too late yet.”

“Yes. Black Dragon Witch. In this world...”

[The implementation of the trauma is deteriorating.]

“Let's survive together.”

[Data restoration failed.]

The rooftop crumbles.

The school melts away.

The bell signaling the end of school rings.

[Trauma re-enactment complete.]

The possibility, the hypothesis, the faint hope, are all buried in the black void. Constellation Killer's smile. The youth of the director I never knew. Two classmates, one smiling, the other crying.

The past.

The failed time of the past. Regrets. Remorse.

[The target's ego has remained intact.]

Everything disappears.

[Penalty finalized.]

The world is drowned in noise.

■.

■,

■,

■.

I opened my eyes.

Chapter 137: Surviving (2)

I woke up in a dark abyss.

Surrounded by pitch blackness.

It was the Netherworld I returned to every time I died.

[The condition for your skill has been fulfilled by your death.]

[Randomly copying Constellation Killer's skills.]

I was stunned.

I knew Constellation Killer's story took place in the past. But never did I imagine that past also contained the director's childhood... It never crossed my mind.

‘The Constellation Killer and the director were classmates.’

They attended the same school. Were in the same classroom. Shared the same moments. One of them had time eternally halted. The other, the hands of their clock perpetually frozen.

One’s clock shattered.

The other’s clock broke.

‘Why...’

Anger pressed down on my heart.

‘Why is it always the righteous ones who get shattered and broken? Why are those who inflict pain unscathed, while those who are hurt have to die? Why does the world become hell only for those who feel guilt?’

My anger settled at the bottom, endless. My emotions subsided. But sunken emotions don't disappear. They just accumulate from the bottom.

The water level of my heart rose a bit more.

Eventually, it will overflow into raging torrents.

-Cough.

A voice flowed into my heated head.

It was the Guardian Spirit.

-As expected, it's most delightful to see the zombie bastard get killed due to his carelessness. I've seen it all as a ghost, the disgraceful and the not-so, but if there's a silver lining, it's watching Kim Zombie's defeat. Kukkukuk!

"....."

-How about it? Floor 50 is not easy, right? Constellation Killer isn't an easy prey, is he? Why did you use tricks to get to the 50th floor? It's all your own doing, your karma, damn it!

Guardian Spirit chuckled.

As if [I had just fought Constellation Killer until a moment ago].

Hearing Guardian Spirit's tone, I guessed.

‘...The Guardian Spirit didn't join this trauma.’

Until now, we had been together on the journey of trauma. Starting from [Hellfire Mansion] with Preta, my master, Raviel, and Guardian Spirit. Sometimes he complained while watching trauma, sometimes he was silent. But he was always with me.

This time was different.

I was alone, peering into a month-long trauma.

“I had a nightmare.”

-Eh?

The Guardian Spirit blinked.

-A nightmare? What kind of nightmare?

“A trauma. This trauma was a bit strange. Sword Emperor, you weren’t with me, and Constellation Killer’s psyche wasn’t fully reproduced. It was like an error had occurred...”

I talked about the trauma. I skimmed it. Of course, I didn’t mention that the Sword Emperor appeared as my father. If I did, I’d be nagged about it until my hair turned white.

-Hmm.

After listening to my story, Guardian Spirit sank into deep thought.

-That’s weird. Why? Because it doesn’t make sense that I wasn’t with you. Technically, I’m being called a ghost or a spirit for convenience, but to be precise, I’m a [Skill].

Guardian Spirit was right.

[Sword Constellation]

Rank: A+

Effect: From another world, he cleared his world's tower up to floor 99 but failed on the 100th. Unsatisfied, he was unable to give up on his earthly desires, and has become a spirit.

He cannot physically affect anything in this world, but is able to communicate with the holder of this skill.

Be awestruck by his skill and experience, and ask him for guidance!

*Only the holder of this skill is able to feel his presence.

*Skill copied from Marcus Calenbury.

+

The Guardian Spirit's identity was essentially a skill.

Though he retained the memories of his life, he was ultimately stored within a skill card.

-So, basically, I'm like a person living off you. A mental tenant, perhaps? Unless you forcibly tear up the card, there's no reason why I couldn't follow you into trauma.

But Guardian Spirit didn't participate in this trauma.

".....That's strange. Something's off."

-Hmm.

In the darkness, we both pondered side by side. Time passed without finding an answer. Eventually, Guardian Spirit, tired of thinking, got annoyed.

-Ah, forget it! Thinking is tiresome! Just remember the weird stuff, and the answers will come someday. Quickly, draw Constellation Killer's skill already! It's been so long since we got anything after that Demonic Cult Art! Goldencup or whatever, she only had the blessings of the constellation, but no skills, right?

As if responding to Guardian Spirit's words, cards began to float up in the darkness.

[Creating skill cards.]

[Please select a skill card.]

A total of 10 cards were formed. Arrays of silver and gold cards. They flitted through the air as if they had wings.

-Come on. Let's check out Constellation Killer's inventory! Look at this guy. Hiding all the cool skills to himself. This is why hunters who focus on skills are so unlucky. Oh? Look at this?

Guardian Spirit excitedly read the backs of the cards.

Among them, two skills caught my attention.

+

[Puppeteer's Parade]

Rank: S

Effect: There once lived an old puppeteer in a world. The puppeteer feared being loved by someone. But he was not strong enough to endure eternal solitude.

"Let's create another me." The puppeteer thought. "Let the other me be loved. Let it live. With people, among people. And if it gets hurt--- let's throw it away." The puppeteer whispered. "Erase it forever."

Countless puppets lived.

Countless puppets were discarded.

This skill is a sorcery for the weak. The right to choose memories to keep and discard. You can create 13 puppets with the same appearance and abilities as you. When a puppet dies, another wakes up. Broken puppets can be repaired.

Granting you a replicated immortality. An assembled eternity.

*However, memories are not shared between puppets.

+

Constellation Killer's secret was there.

‘So, there are 13 puppets in total.’

What happened to the Constellation Killer's original body? Is the original body also included in the puppets, or is it separate, asleep somewhere in this vast world?

I then eavesdropped on the next secret.

+

[The Torn Goddess's Salvation]

Rank: A+

Effect: There was a goddess who dedicated herself to a hero. Although torn apart by the hero, the goddess still wanted to stand by his side. She descended from heaven and sealed herself into a skill card.

The goddess converts memories into power. By offering memories to the goddess, you can enhance your abilities and strength. The more important the memory you offer, the more amplified the enhancement effect.

*However, the enhancement effect does not last long.

+

The goddess must be referring to the [Goddess of Protection].

The hero would be Constellation Killer.

Undoubtedly.

The [Goddess of Protection] was split into five parts: Idol, Pity, Prayer, Sacrifice, and Salvation. I've gathered four of these goddesses. The last remaining Salvation took the form of a skill in Constellation Killer's possession.

-Hmm.

Guardian Spirit snorted.

-Look at Constellation Killer, as expected. Every single one of his skills has a creepy vibe. All ominous. The abilities are fine, but there's nothing pleasant about them. No wonder the constellations obsessed with gloomy people love it...

I nodded.

"I've decided. Which one to choose."

-Hmm. Isn't the downside too great compared to the advantage?

Guardian Spirit argued.

-Just pass them up. Neither [Puppeteer's Parade] nor [The Torn Goddess's Salvation] is necessary for you right now. I hate to admit it, but your current skill lineup is pretty complete. Except for that damn Goblin High Society...

"Goblin High Society will soar to great heights one day."

-The only thing soaring will be your head. Oh wait, it already did spectacularly. Anyway, adding a half-baked skill now would only mess up your synergy, right?

"Yes. I think the same. But there's a use for it."

I need to defeat the Constellation Killer.

But my victory does not mean erasing Constellation Killer.

'I must do much better.'

I have to make Constellation Killer acknowledge that his way is wrong.

Not just my power overwhelming his, but [my way] defeating [his way].

That's true victory.

'Constellation Killer.'

I reached for a card.

'Leafanta Aegim.'

Thinking of the hunter with several names.

Thinking of the first name I still don't know.

[Selection complete.]

[Copying skill.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

■ ■ .

Let's end our long nightmare.

When I returned to a day ago, I had yet to clear the [Fairy

Tale] world.

Although I spent a month in Constellation Killer's trauma.

In the tower, not even a day had passed.

So, I had to clear the [Fairy Tale] world again. Knowing in advance that [The Immortal Missionary of Happiness] was planning an ambush made it easier than before. But it still drained my mental and physical energy.

‘Next time, I should rest at least a day while climbing the tower...’

I realized anew the importance of save points.

"Countess."

"Hmm?"

Right after clearing the fairy tale world and returning to the Great Library, I approached the Countess.

"I have a favor to ask."

"What is it, what is it? You are the treasure of our tower, the gem of the Sang-Ryun. Anything you say, I'll listen!"

The Countess greeted me more radiantly than usual. Her lips formed a 'w' shape. Maybe she was happy because clearing the stage cost less than she expected.

For a moment, I recalled the Countess's image from the trauma.

『That guy sent such messages.』

『Isn't he really crazy?』

I hesitated.

"Why so?"

The owner of Sang-Ryun tilted her head in front of me.

"Your complexion suddenly turned pale."

"...No. It's nothing. Just spaced out for a moment."

I shook my head quickly to rid myself of those thoughts.

The classmates in the trauma were just imitating the Countess's appearance. They were fakes. To even slightly equate such a fake with the person in front of me is a huge disrespect to the Countess.

"Perhaps you've exhausted yourself too much in the Revelations? Be careful. Taking care in youth ensures you won't run out of steam when you get older. Anyway, what's your request?"

"I want to send a letter to the outside world."

I said.

"It doesn't have to be a letter per se, but I need to contact someone in the outside world as soon as possible. You have the ability to communicate with the outside world, Countess. I would like to ask you to send a letter."

"Oh? Of course, that's an easy task."

The Countess waved her fan.

"If it doesn't have to be a letter, then a more convenient method should be used. To which country shall the letter be sent? It's a bit difficult to send letters to countries where the government has collapsed."

"That's alright. I'll send it to the country I was born in."

"The country of the King of Death... Ah, that should be fine. It's a nation with an ambassador, so it can be contacted immediately. Let's see. Where did she go?"

The Countess looked around. Not only us, but all hunters with aliases were gathered in the Great Library. The Countess found one and pointed her fan at them.

"Communicator! Madam Communicator! Come here, please."

"...Again? What is it?"

A middle-aged hunter approached.

Ranked 7th, the Wide-Area Communicator.

The Wide-Area Communicator was wearing a traditional Indian sari over her shoulder. She frowned all the way here. Did she have a bad relationship with the Countess?

"Let me introduce you. This madam right here is the Wide-Area Communicator. We come from the same place. Ahaha, though our origins are as different as heaven and earth!"

"If you called me just to spout nonsense, I'll leave."

"Whoa, whoa. Calm down. Brahmin, ma'am. I will designate a sacred area right now for communication with the outside world. Just help us connect for a moment. It's a country with an ambassador, so it shouldn't be too troublesome."

"Why should I....."

"It's not for me, but a request from the King of Death here."

The Wide-Area Communicator turned to me.

I respectfully bowed with my hands together.

"Please."

"....."

The Wide-Area Communicator also bowed. The middle-aged hunter glanced back and forth between me and the Countess, then sighed as if giving up.

".....If it were just the lowly Countess's request, I would have refused without a second thought. But King of Death, I have seen your dedication to the tower from afar. Reciprocity follows dedication. I will help."

"Yaaaay. It's always easy to talk to noble people. Excellent, excellent!"

"Another word, and I'm leaving."

"Alright, alright. Got it. Just hurry up!"

The Countess laughed as she pulled out a small pouch. She took a handful of purple glittering powder from the pouch and scattered it on the library floor.

"Great Mother, I beseech thee. Grant us your blessing, so this wish may not tear into screams. Allow me to stand by your side. Here, I, Countess, request a small sacred area."

Whoosh!

Purple light emanated from the powder. An area the size of a phone booth was colored in purple.

The Wide-Area Communicator then addressed me.

"Give me your smartphone."

"Ah. Yes."

I handed over my phone. The Wide-Area Communicator

flexed her fingers and tapped three times. It seemed like she drew a triangle.

"Let it connect. Let it bond. When noise turns into sound when reaching someone, where there are people here and there, the forest sings, and all things join in chorus."

The smartphone was enveloped in blue light.

The Wide-Area Communicator nodded lightly.

"Take it."

I took it back.

The Countess smiled broadly.

"Enter the sacred area, King of Death."

The Wide-Area Communicator frowned.

"Make the call, it will be received. Send an email, you'll get a reply."

"Telephone charges will be calculated separately, but that's something you can afford!"

"However, according to the agreement with the outside world, all communications must be within the bounds of international law. It's unlikely to happen, but do not include any talk of criminal activities in your communication."

"Well, if you ever need to communicate something truly confidential, just tell me. There's always a way."

The two spoke casually. But it was the cooperation of the 5th and 7th ranked hunters. Only a handful of people could enjoy such privileges.

"Yes. Thank you."

I entered the sacred area with my smartphone.

"....."

And I dialed [the first phone number I remembered since birth]. It had been years since I dialed that number. Human memory is strange, remembering the first number no matter how much time has passed.

Ring... ring...

The ringing continued for a while.

If the other party had changed the number, it would all be meaningless. But she had said she would never change her number, so I could call anytime.

That wasn't a lie.

-Hello?

I was at a loss for words.

-Hello? Who is this?

"....."

The voice was slightly older, a bit more weary than the one screaming on the rooftop in my trauma. But the essence was unchanged, and I regretted not contacting her sooner.

I should have reached out much earlier.

Even if I abandoned the outside world to enter the tower, there was no need to abandon people.

"...Director. It's me, Gong-Ja. Kim Gong-Ja."

Silence followed on the other end of the line.

-Yes. It's been a long time.

The director.

The oldest voice in my memory reached me.

Chapter 138:

Surviving (3)

-I thought you might contact me someday. You seem to be doing well.

"I'm sorry for contacting you only now. I should have done it sooner..."

-It's a busy age, everyone's immersed in their own lives at your age.

A cough came through the phone. Cough. The director cleared her throat.

-Sometimes, strangers come asking if you're from our orphanage. At first, I thought you had committed some serious crime. But after one of your peers showed me a video, I understood it was a misunderstanding. By the way, they call you the 'King of Death,' right? What a naming sense.

"It's not an alias I chose myself. In the tower..."

-Right. Hearing your voice after such a long time is somewhat reassuring.

"....."

-Gong-Ja?

-Is something the matter?

I tightly grasped the phone.

Suppressing the emotions rising in my chest.

"I have something to ask you, director."

-Tell me. No, wait a moment. How serious is this matter? Tell me that first.

"It's very serious. Probably the most serious thing I've ever discussed with you..."

-Then give me 2, no, 3 minutes. I'm currently lying on the sofa. I need to get up, grab some coffee, and listen to you properly. Don't hang up; just wait 3 minutes.

"Okay."

When I think about it.

How harrowing must her life have been.

I imagined the evils one must face to become a righteous person in this world. If we gathered all the righteous people living in this world, we could probably exhibit all the evils.

"How is the orphanage doing these days? Are you well?"

-Trying to change the subject? Must be a serious matter indeed. I'm fine. We have more teachers now than when you were here. I'm technically the director, but I don't do much. Donations have increased... Oh, and the food has gotten a bit tastier.

"That's good to hear."

-Yeah. I'm now sitting in my office. Go ahead and start.

I took a deep breath.

"Director. Did you graduate from Shinseo High School during your school days?"

-.....

Silence fell.

Tension hovered in the air. I heard the sound of water rippling. The director took a sip of her coffee. She was swallowing black liquid.

-Yes. I graduated from Shinseo High. It's still quite a prestigious school even now.

"Perhaps."

I hoped it wasn't true.

"When you were in the second year of high school, were you the class president?"

I wished the trauma had fabricated a phantom. That the past scenes I thought I had witnessed were all false, and the director was just a purely kind person who had an untroubled school life.

I hoped.

Silence lingered for a while.

-Yes.

The director's voice flowed.

-I was the class president. It's been over several decades.

"....."

-.....

Both the director and I remained silent. My heart throbbed with what I was about to say. A sinister air. The director also seemed to sense the ominous atmosphere and thus kept her lips sealed.

"Director."

-Yes, Gong-Ja.

"When you were the second-year class president. Was there someone... On the school rooftop?"

-.....

"Did such a person exist?"

Breathing stopped.

-Yes.

The director spoke.

-There was.

The nightmare was confirmed as reality.

-Although I never really talked to them. Yes. There was.

The corridors I walked in school, the rooftop iron door chains ■■ looked down upon, the desolate playground, the plastic junkyard floating like a white island on a raft, all of it, without a single lie, was true.

Only.

『Please don't die. I beg you. Let's live in a different world together.』

『Yes, class president. In this world, let's survive together.』

The parts that should have been the most false were true.

What should have been the most true was just a dream.

That was the story of ■■ and the director.

"Director..."

I barely spoke.

"Do you remember that person's name?"

No one in this world knew his name. He was a wanderer from the wilderness. The people of the empire reverently bestowed upon him the name Leafanta. He was the one who killed constellations. The people of the tower called him the Constellation Killer.

He was a person abandoned by the outside world. No one tried to remember him. Thus, now, only one person testified his name.

-Kim Yul.

A person was called by one.

-That child's name was Kim Yul, Gong-Ja.

"....."

I closed my eyes.

I recalled the conversation I had with the Paladin in the school corridor.

『The student sitting in the back row, near the window, remember?』

『Of course, a classmate. I think the name was,』

The noise clears.

『Kim Yul.』

There was a person with such a name.

『I'm not sorry, Kim Yul.』

A child who was hidden by the white curtains when the wind blew in through the classroom window.

A child who quietly pulled out an old notebook and looked into it before class started.

A child who pulled at the iron chains of a door that would never open.

『I'm sorry, Kim Yul. I'm sorry.』

Decades ago.

Before I was even born.

『I'm sorry.』

Such a child existed in this world.

-Gong-Ja?

And there was a person who lived for decades.

-Are you crying now? No. No. Um. Anyway, how did you hear about Kim Yul? There shouldn't be anyone who knows him.

She was smart enough to receive a scholarship to attend school. She held the top rank in his class at a prestigious school. She studied four, five hours a day, barely sleeping, paving the way for the future she dreamed of.

What dreams did she have when she entered high school?

What future was she dreaming of?

-I don't know how you came to know that child. Really.

But she witnessed it.

She saw humans.

She saw beasts.

She saw death.

『No one cares about you. No one, no one, no one...』

At that moment, one person's time stopped.

The freedom of choice that everyone deserves vanished.

The rest of the director's life became merely about proving something.

[That there was a child named Kim Yul at that place and time.]

"Director, he's here."

-What do you mean?

"Kim Yul. Your classmate. That child."

-I don't understand what you're saying...

"He lived in the junkyard at the foot of the mountain, Kim Yul."

-.....

"In the last row of the classroom, by the window. That's where he sat."

-.....

I spoke.

"Your school uniform's white shirt collar was stained. Remember, the student council president at that time dated a guy who was terrible. His older brother was a singer. They falsely accused Kim Yul of owning a phone he didn't have, and everyone in the class texted him with harassment."

-.....

"Did you know about the animal pets behind the school? Raising rabbits and chickens. Originally, the animal club was responsible, but after a foreign woman with a baby attempted suicide, no one took care of it anymore. So, Kim Yul ended up taking care of it."

-How...

The director's voice trembled.

-Gong-Ja, how did you...

"You tried to stop it, director. Since the first year, you tried. But upon investigation, you found that the perpetrators' girlfriend's parents were on the school's board of directors, so you had to give up, right? The chairman of the church you attended was also involved, the Serun Church. You spoke to the homeroom teacher, but couldn't push it due to the scholarship issue."

-How...

"He is here, director."

I bowed my head, still holding the phone.

"He is here."

-.....

A long silence ensued.

-Give me four days.

The director spoke.

-No, a week. Please wait a week.

The student whose time had stopped decades ago, now with a voice slightly older and more tired, said.

-I will come there.

A week passed in the blink of an eye.

During that week, the director sorted out her estate. Anyone can enter the tower, but you can't bring anything from the outside world. The director let go of everything she had built and preserved over decades.

"I was planning to retire anyway."

When I met the director again, she looked even older than before.

"I had already arranged a successor. There were a few tasks I was handling in the region, but... Once you enter the tower, even government officials can't do much. They'll have to manage without me now."

"Welcome, director."

"I'm no longer a director, but call me whatever you like."

The director gave a bitter smile.

Without an alias, the director couldn't yet access the Great Library. However, I had a talk with the [Holed-Up Head Librarian], who allowed me to bring the director in.

"Seeing it in person, I can tell how successful you've become. Everywhere I went, it was all about Gong-Ja. When I entered the tower, dozens of people rushed to guide me..."

"Um, I have made quite a name for myself in the tower. I'm the 2nd ranked hunter, director."

"I never understood why people struggled with math until I started raising you kids. Gong-Ja, it's a good thing that tower rankings aren't based on test scores."

The Sword Emperor chuckled from behind.

-Today's going to be full of Gong-Ja's embarrassing stories. Good, good! Keep talking!

The director and I engaged in pleasant conversation.

I had spoken to the Librarian earlier to prevent our conversation from being broadcasted outside. The Librarian

agreed to my request. Not only that, the Bookmark Maids served us tea and snacks.

"This world is really strange..."

The director eyed a Bookmark Maid suspiciously.

"So."

Her gaze swept across the vast library and finally settled on my face.

"Where is that child?"

I told the director everything. About my abilities, the trauma, the person known as [Leafanta Aegim], and [Constellation Killer].

"....."

The director listened to my story expressionlessly. However, expressionless doesn't mean emotionless. For over an hour,

the director sat without taking a sip of her tea, quietly listening.

"It's hard to believe any of it."

"Yes."

"But the fact that you know Kim Yul... that's impossible."

The director's expression was hard to read, as always.

But now, after experiencing the trauma, I could understand.

The director was afraid.

"Kim Yul didn't appear in the graduation album. There was no trace of him... Think about it, Gong-Ja. Couldn't we have at least left an empty space for him?"

"....."

"Why did the album photos look so bright? Those people... that person... how could they smile? I couldn't understand it for a long time. They're probably still living well now."

The director gazed thoughtlessly at her tea.

She quietly drank the long-cold tea and looked at me directly.

"It's alright."

"....."

"Let's call forth that child's trace."

I nodded.

"Ghoul Reincarnation."

Shadows spread.

The shade writhed, coming alive. Black, puddle-like water rippled and then formed the shape of a person. The ripples turned into silvery hair, and the puddle dressed itself in neat attire.

".....Hmm."

Leafanta Aegim.

Constellation Killer looked around.

"An unexpected situation."

The silver-haired man muttered gruffly.

"Kidnapped? I have been forced to awaken as a puppet. I cannot use force... Either the puppet's system has been modified, or a very powerful psychic magic has been applied."

This man lost his black hair. Lost his name. Lost his memories. [Kim Yul] was merely the starting point of his existence, so the man in front of me was completely different from [Kim Yul]. He was Leafanta Aegim. The Constellation Killer.

Therefore, no one had the right to call him [Kim Yul].

".....Kim Yul."

Except for the one witness to his starting point.

Constellation Killer looked at the director.

The director slowly knelt on the library floor.

"I am one of the people who killed Kim Yul."

"....."

"I have wanted to say this for a long time. I am truly..."

The director bowed her head.

"Sorry."

The Constellation Killer's face hardened.

Chapter 139:

Latecomer (1)

The protagonists living in stories shone like constellations in the sky.

I had no interest in the constellations twinkling in the night sky. To me, stars were the protagonists. Their unfolding stories were my dazzling constellations. Ah, the universe was filled with countless stars, and the myriad of things held infinite stories.

-I wish to see more of the story.

I unintentionally touched the starlight.

-Just a little more.

That was all.

Silence descended in the library.

The Great Library of All Knowledge. Each book encapsulating a world. Numerous worlds inhabited by countless characters, each harboring their own story. Among them, two characters from the world of [Leafanta Aegim] were here.

"....."

Constellation Killer quietly looked down at the director.

"You claimed to be one of those who killed me?"

"Yes, Kim Yul."

"What a strange statement."

Constellation Killer's voice was bleak.

"My death is recorded as having occurred 153 years, 7

months, and 9 days ago. The one who killed me at that time was named the Sword Emperor.”

Constellation Killer pulled out an old notebook from his bosom. That diary was [Kim Yul]'s final destination, a declaration of not remembering the past he had traversed.

“The description of the Sword Emperor in the diary doesn’t match yours.”

Just like my skeletons clutching their daggers even when devoured by Reincarnation of a Hundred Ghosts.

Constellation Killer, too, had only one old notebook.

“Are you a successor to the Sword Emperor?”

“.....”

“Based on my understanding, the Sword Emperor was not one to apologize or seek apologies from others.”

The director must have realized.

“I conclude that you are not a successor to the Sword Emperor, nor are you one of those who killed me. There is no reason for you to apologize to me.”

That she was already too late.

“Therefore, I will not accept your apology.”

"....."

“Moreover, my name is Leafanta Aegim. My alias is Constellation Killer. You called me Kim Yul. However, there is no record in the diary of me being called Kim Yul. Perhaps you’ve mistaken me for someone else?”

“Kim Yul.”

The director's voice trembled.

“Kim Yul was the name you had before being called Leafanta

Aegim. Before you obtained that diary, long before that, in your past. The world you originally lived in..."

"It's futile."

Someone approached and murmured beside me. It was the Head Librarian. He whispered to me in a voice too soft for Constellation Killer and the director to hear.

"What a touching scene. Even I, a Constellation, acknowledge that. One is a victim whose time was sealed. The other, a bystander with time preserved like a specimen. Ah, beautiful like a painting..."

I looked at the Head Librarian.

[The Holed-Up Head Librarian is delighted and in despair.]

The Head Librarian wore a strange expression. It seemed sorrowful, yet also joyful. His eyes were melancholic, but his breath was flush with excitement.

"However, King of Death. It's too late for everything. The [Constellation Killer] is beyond redemption."

"....."

“Even if he receives an apology now, it means nothing. He remembers nothing. His appearance and mindset have completely changed from when he was Kim Yul. How can one apologize for what is not remembered? How can one forgive what is not remembered?”

“You.”

I spoke softly.

“You know about my regression, don’t you?”

The Head Librarian smiled.

“Of course.”

“How? Do you experience the same time when I regress?”

“Heh. Things don’t work that way. Especially your [Returner’s Winding Clock] is quite special. Even

Constellations can't easily approach its majesty. Like other Constellations, I simply possess a cute authority.”

The Head Librarian snapped his fingers. Click! A book flew towards us.

+

[Story of the City of Ascension]

+

It was the book that the Constellation showed me when I first set foot in the Great Library.

“Remember? The book containing your world. It's not an Apocalypse since it hasn't perished yet.”

The corners of the Head Librarian's eyes lifted.

“Now guess. Whom do you think I designated as the protagonist of [Story of the City of Ascension]?”

"....."

Indeed.

"It's me."

"Correct! That's it!"

"Is everything I experienced, every skill I have, when and how I regressed, all recorded in that book? Is that why you know everything?"

"Ahh."

The Head Librarian chuckled, flipping through the pages of [Story of the City of Ascension].

"The time and love you shared with Raviel Ivansia... That sweet companionship and romance! The way you solved challenges in unexpected ways. It became one of my favorite scenes."

"....."

"Of course, the 'Trauma' you experienced this time is also written here. That's why, specially, I allowed that human to enter, despite not having an alias."

The human the Head Librarian referred to was the director. Even now, the director was desperately explaining to the Constellation Killer. Who he was, what he had experienced. But Constellation Killer's expressionless face remained unchanged.

"You've done well, King of Death."

The Head Librarian spoke.

"You tried hard. You did your best. But it's too late for Constellation Killer. No matter how hard the characters try, reaching the best ending is difficult. This is the normal ending allowed for the Constellation Killer."

The Head Librarian was sad, yet a little more delighted.

"Excluding the bad ending, it's the best he can achieve."

Regrettably, he himself won't know. Your efforts, the director's regret, all are powerless. Ah, Constellation Killer will remain a killing machine for slaying Constellations. Forever..."

"No matter what I do?"

"That's right. Whatever you do."

The Head Librarian was about to put [Story of the City of Ascension] back in his pocket when I reached out and grabbed his wrist. He flinched.

"If you're so sure."

I looked straight at the Head Librarian.

"Let's make a bet."

"A bet?"

"I will connect Kim Yul's time with Constellation Killer's. Just like Kim Yul became Constellation Killer, I'll make

Constellation Killer become Kim Yul. Then maybe the director's apology can be accepted."

"Ho-ho, bold words. Didn't I tell you? It's simply impossible..."

"That's why."

I gripped the Head Librarian's wrist tighter.

"Let's make a bet."

"....."

"If I succeed in getting one of your favorite characters, Constellation Killer, to recover his memories, you'll help me. You don't have to try too hard. Just help me as much as you did when you sent me to [Leafanta Aegim's Epic]."

"Hmm."

The Constellation's eyes narrowed.

"And if I help and you still fail? What do I get?"

"You can do whatever you want with me for ten years."

The Head Librarian paused.

"You mentioned wanting to keep my eyebrows, right? Do it. Wanted to clip my nails? Go ahead. Whatever you want, I'll oblige, and for ten years, you can play with me as you please."

The Head Librarian's pupils shook.

"Anything?"

"Yes."

"A scary proposition, King of Death. Even I have been quite polite in front of you all. If I were to truly do as I please, it would be quite extraordinary. Just look at the Bookmark Maids..."

"Are you going to take the bet, or not?"

The Head Librarian licked his lips. For a moment, his eyes gleamed with greed. Like Constellation Killer, I too was one of his beloved characters. The Head Librarian looked at me like a snake eyeing its prey.

“I adhere to a principle of non-interference.”

The Head Librarian swallowed.

“But if a character themselves makes a request, it's a different story. Fulfilling the wish of the butler from [Tales of Sormewin Academy] was for the same reason.”

"....."

“Very well. King of Death, I will assist you. However, if you fail to link Constellation Killer to Kim Yul... I will savor your next 10 years.”

Okay.

I walked towards Constellation Killer and the director, still gripping the Head Librarian's wrist. My footsteps echoed in the library's isolated section.

-Hey. Hey! Zombie, are you insane? Why make such a bet?!

Guardian Spirit was in an uproar.

-Do you have 100% confidence in winning? Huh? Just because that silver-haired guy flatters you as his favorite character, you've lost your mind, but remember, he's a Constellation. A high-ranking star! If you entrust your soul to such a creature, you don't know what might happen!

'It's okay. I'm betting because I'm 100% confident.'

I had thought long about why the 'Tower' existed.

There might be no reason for something to exist. But at least to me, the Tower seemed to have a clear reason. Thanks to the Tower, lives that had turned their back on the outside world got a chance to start life anew.

To live life once more.

Some might call it reincarnation, others transmigration.

“Constellation Killer.”

For some, it would mean reunion.

“Director.”

Thus, halted times would regenerate.

“Let's make a youth drama together.”

Constellation Killer and the director looked at me.

First to speak was the Constellation Killer.

“What do you mean?”

“Constellation Killer, you can't accept the director's apology because your memories are gone. You probably think there's no need. But if you could, you'd want to accept it.”

"Hmm."

Constellation Killer nodded while flipping through his diary.

"That's true. Though we've only briefly spoken, the person who knelt before me is very kind-hearted. Upright. She doesn't have qualities because they're innate, but they've been acquired through enduring life. If possible, I'd like to accept the apology."

"Director."

I turned to the director, who was still kneeling on the library floor.

"If you could apologize to Kim Yul..."

"Even my life."

The director answered immediately, not waiting for me to finish.

“I'd willingly offer my soul.”

“.....Thank you.”

I took the director's hand and helped her up. Hands aged with time. Only then did I recall holding her hand a long time ago. I remembered building sandcastles with her at the playground.

‘Thanks to you, this story is possible.’

Because you didn't forget, I was raised in the orphanage.

‘If even you had forgotten Kim Yul, this moment wouldn't be possible.’

Kim Yul's life intersected with the director's. The director's life shaped mine.

Now, my life is gathering the Constellation Killer's, barely bringing the three of us together here.

We three are connected by fate.

‘I will not let it become meaningless.’

It's a bit late.

But the time to repay the kindness of the person who raised me has come.

“Head Librarian.”

Holding the director's hand firmly, I turned to the Constellation. The Head Librarian was grinning, confident of winning the bet.

“Speak, King of Death! The hunter whom I dearly love.”

“Constellation Killer, the director, and I will tackle the next stage together.”

“Oh!”

The Head Librarian's eyes sparkled with intrigue.

“That’s commendable. Although late, you plan to rebuild the bond between the three of you? Ah, what a story! Your tale begins now...”

“No.”

I extended my other hand and snatched a book.

“It's not like that.”

[Story of City of Ascension].

The book where I was the protagonist.

“I choose this book for the next stage.”

“Hmm...?”

The Head Librarian looked puzzled.

“Sorry, I don’t understand. [Story of City of Ascension] is already happening in real-time here? What’s the point of making it a stage?”

“You said it yourself. I was chosen as the protagonist in this book. Everything I experienced is recorded here.”

“That’s true, but...?”

“Send us three to one of the events I’ve experienced.”

“Which event are you referring to?”

“The Trauma.”

Silence.

Thud.

The smile vanished from the Head Librarian's face.

I calmly faced the Constellation.

“You said it just now.”

『Of course, the ‘Trauma’ you experienced this time is also written in this book.』

“That Trauma ended in tragedy. The world was destroyed. Even if it was just an illusion, it swallowed everything into the void, ending all the characters’ stories. Head Librarian. According to your classification, that Trauma is an impeccable [Apocalypse].”

“Ah...”

The Head Librarian opened his mouth.

His eyes, filled with shock, looked up at me.

“King of Death, you...”

“Take us to the Apocalypse of Shinseo High School. Naturally, Constellation Killer as Kim Yul, the director as the class president. Me as the perpetrator.”

If he can't accept or offer forgiveness because he's lost his memory.

“Also, grant us [Immersion].”

Then give him back his memory.

Like Heretic Inquisitor was immersed in Goldencup, becoming the same person.

Like I was immersed in Butler, gradually submerged in his memories.

If Constellation Killer immerses in Kim Yul---

Kim Yul's memories will be transplanted into Constellation Killer.

Constellation Killer will be able to recall Kim Yul's time.

“Head Librarian. Or rather, Holed-Up Head Librarian.”

Yes, we were a little late.

But nothing has ended yet.

“Open the book.”

The Head Librarian held his breath.

Chapter 140:

Latecomer (2)

Silence reigned.

"What in the world....."

There was no one around us. We were near the area of the Forbidden Books as mentioned by the Head Librarian. Only the three of us were present, with no prying eyes upon us. Thus, the Head Librarian's groan resonated more profoundly.

"What a cruel act."

The Head Librarian covered his mouth with his sleeve.

"King of Death. Do you understand what you are saying? Constellation Killer faced death at that school, right? No, that's an understatement. That world abandoned the Constellation Killer to death. It discarded him! To drop him back into that world to regain Kim Yul's memories, how, how much..."

The Head Librarian couldn't finish his sentence, not because his voice drowned in a groan, but because I let go of the director's hand and grabbed the Head Librarian's wrist instead. His sleeve slid down, revealing his face.

"How could this be....."

The Head Librarian grinned.

"Cruel, you say...?"

"Yes. It's cruel."

I looked sternly at the Head Librarian. His cheeks were already flushed, seemingly engrossed in imagining the stage I proposed.

"But that's your bias. Do you know what's truly cruel? The common people living in the world of [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon]. Humans who became corpses without understanding anything, killed by the Constellation Killer. That's what's truly cruel."

"Hmm, well, you have a point there....."

The Head Librarian's eyes narrowed.

“So, you're determined to restore all of Constellation Killer's memories?”

“If it's within my power to do so. Certainly.”

“To make Constellation Killer apologize to the countless victims of [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon]? Do you know how many Constellations he has slaughtered? To those who lived in that world, to those who died, to make him apologize to all of them?”

“Yes. At least to those in the world I have come to shoulder.”

“King of Death...”

The Head Librarian's breath quickened.

“What a beautifully phrased descent into hell...”

The Constellation seemed like he was following the etiquette

of a demon heralding doom.

“Bias is natural. Ah, I know of a human who chose a similar path. It's endlessly tragic. That person... No. Revealing this would violate our agreement.”

“I'm sorry to interrupt your storytelling, but.”

I let go of his wrist and spoke softly.

“Just open the book.”

The Head Librarian chuckled.

“Gladly.”

He opened [Story of the City of Ascension].

“The trauma you dreamed of is merely an illusionary world, artificially created and temporarily maintained. Even if you change its ending, it can't become part of the official history. It's more like a side story. Frankly, I've never had the pleasure

of seeing how a stage like this is handled.”

Black smoke began to rise from the book.

Yes, it was black smoke.

Until now, when opening an Apocalypse, white light seeped out. This time it was different. The smoke, black and ominous, writhing like the tentacles of the void that had swallowed the nightmare, rose up.

“Eh? What?”

The Head Librarian seemed surprised. He seemed to have realized something.

“This is the shadow of a lesser god from Zuraqua... Ah, indeed. Indeed! Even with a golden contract, creating a world through trauma seemed like an overuse of power, but indeed! The esteemed one himself intervened. To favor the King of Death to such an extent. Many will be ensnared by jealousy...”

Someone favored me?

Who?

[The 'Holed-Up Head Librarian' attempts negotiation.]

While I pondered, the Head Librarian muttered as if talking to someone.

“Hmm. Then your involvement in this raid will be... difficult. This world has already become the domain of its master. Hm, well. At least leave a record in the Apocalypse after the raid is over.”

Black smoke writhed.

“Good! You understand well. Our lovely jester...”

The Head Librarian grinned.

Like petting a beloved animal, he stroked the black smoke.

“King of Death. Constellation Killer. King of Death's nurturer. I hereby appoint these three as new characters in

[Story of the City of Ascension Story-Side Story]. When you open your eyes, you'll be in the world of the [Side Story] before its tragic serialization interruption. However, be careful. Especially you, King of Death.”

The Head Librarian twined his long fingers around the black mist.

“You've caught the attention of someone high above.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Tower remembers everything. I just read the book to peek into your past, but the Tower truly remembers you. Naturally, it remembers you bypassed the 50th floor using a loophole.”

“You violated the Tower's strict rules, so you must receive some penalty. The Tower is asking you. Do you really, truly trust your nurturer and Constellation Killer?”

The mist was writhing around the Head Librarian's fingers.

“Do you believe your nurturer won't crumble under the

weight of guilt? Constellation Killer might be consumed by vengeance, unable to forgive even your nurturer. Nobody might be forgiven or able to forgive. Do you really think those two,”

The Head Librarian glanced at Constellation Killer and the director.

“Can reach a different ending than the original history?”

A daunting question.

But the answer was already set.

『I'm sorry. Class president.』

I remember Kim Yul and the class president.

『I didn't mean to hurt someone like you.』

The Kim Yul I saw was a remarkably strong person.

Even in the Hell of Animal Realm, he cared for the children in the barn.

『There was someone. I thought there was no one. Luckily, there was at least one person I could forgive.』

Stronger than the Constellation Killer, who had slain numerous Constellations.

『I'm glad there's at least one person I can forgive.』

Kim Yul, who met the class president, was stronger as a human.

So was the director. She survived in a world without Kim Yul.

“Yes.”

Both just despaired because they met too late.

I believe in the breaths and voices they shared on the rooftop

that day.

It was the truth.

Not all illusions are mere fantasies.

“I trust those two.”

The Head Librarian smiled.

“Poor creatures.”

The mist around his fingers dissolved. Swirling! The mist spread rapidly, engulfing Constellation Killer, the director, and me.

“Then prove it.”

The Head Librarian's smiling face was the last thing I saw before the world darkened.

“But the one who proves it won't be you.”

The world was engulfed in darkness.

[You have been subjected to a high-level penalty.]

[You are placed in the world a year earlier than other participants.]

[From the starting point, you are strongly immersed in the character.]

A voice echoed.

[Your immersion rate is currently 95%.]

The nightmare began.

'Penalty.'

The moment I opened my eyes.

'A whopping 95% immersion rate.'

I sprang into action.

'There's no time to hesitate. None. The immersion rate will hit 100% soon. I must complete all preparations before that.'

It's easy to resent the cruel penalty, to be angry about being dropped a year early.

But what does that change?

I can't waste precious time on resentment or anger.

'The Constellation Killer is being forced to confront the past he discarded. So I must also prepare to receive unwanted memories.'

Even if those memories belong to a nauseating perpetrator.

‘Simply returning Kim Yul's past to Constellation Killer isn't enough. Kim Yul must want to 'live again'. The director will try her best, but---"

I made a cold judgement.

‘The director alone isn't enough. Right. At this time, she's just an ordinary high school student. What a high school student can do is so limited.’

Before I'm completely devoured by the perpetrator's ego.

‘Revenge.’

Do what can be done.

‘Let the director and Kim Yul get revenge on those despicable creatures.’

I took action.

[Your immersion rate is currently 95%.]

When I witnessed the end of the previous trauma.

I regretted being too late.

Lamented.

I could have done better, but didn't.

Perhaps I panicked too much. Even though I was possessed by the perpetrator, I missed what could be done as a perpetrator, what could only be done because I was the perpetrator.

‘Create evidence of violence.’

That's what [only I can do].

I created evidence.

"Everyone, attention."

In the classroom.

“Bow to the teacher.”

It seemed the director was the class president even in her first year. Is the role of the president usually held by the same student? Instead of the Black Dragon Witch's face, the young face of the director was there.

‘Only a year left.’

Unlike me, the director had not yet been possessed.

‘Kim Yul too.’

Kim Yul had been in the same class since the first year. Like before, Kim Yul was exiled to the back row near the window. What should have been the best seat became a kind of forbidden zone, chosen for its convenience to secretly bully.

Thump.

Thump.

When the teacher turned his back to the blackboard, students tightly rolled eraser dust into balls. Into these balls, they inserted finely chopped pencil leads, resembling a curled-up hedgehog. The students stealthily threw these sharp pencil lead balls at Kim Yul.

“Pfft.”

“Kek...”

Each time Kim Yul was hit, he flinched slightly. He tried to ignore it, but his nape reddened from the pencil lead stings. The young brutes had various ways of enjoying their malice.

‘One year.’

I endured.

‘This is decades ago.’

Society was even more challenging than when I was young. Much more.

‘To prove violence, evidence is needed. If it's a one-time act, the punishment is light. It needs to be proven as a long-term, hidden, intentional, and utterly malicious act.’

The only way to beat the brutes is to become just as beastly.

“Hey, you guys. Look here.”

"Huh?"

Click!

I took photos of the scenes of violence. It was a time when the quality of phone photos was terribly poor. I bought a digital camera to take photos and a camcorder to record videos.

“Uh, senior.”

One of my junior high school juniors looked worried.

In the previous trauma, he was one of the Four Demon Lords, the Moon Shadow Demon.

“Is it okay to film this?”

“Don't worry. I'll just show it to a few people and delete it. Hey, let's do some introductions for fun.”

“Me? Oh, my name is.....”

I recorded every single day.

My surroundings and the misdeeds I, and others around me committed. Smoking was considered a harmless prank. I not only bothered Kim Yul but also frequently harassed other students and even enjoyed bullying a junior high student.

‘Madmen.’

Is this normal?

Does this happen in other schools?

If so, in every elementary, junior high, and high school in this land, why does no one intervene? Why does everyone stay silent?

How can they stay silent?

"....."

Kim Yul lay on the ground, looking at me. Behind the school. After attacking Kim Yul, who was caring for rabbits and chickens in the barn, my gang and I ridiculed him by calling him a bumpkin.

"It stinks where you are. Smells like dung."

"Why are you raising chickens? For eggs? Should I buy you some?"

"....."

Kim Yul didn't reply.

He just stared at me, recording with the camcorder.

Kim Yul's dark eyes reflected in the small camcorder screen.

[Your immersion rate is currently 95%.]

One day.

[Your immersion rate is currently 96%.]

Another day.

[Your immersion rate is currently 97%.]

Hellish records accumulated.

'It's dangerous now.'

I felt the limit after 11 months.

‘Any time now, the immersion rate could reach 99%.’

My mind was already a mess.

At some point, I stopped feeling anger or guilt when filming Kim Yul being beaten. Only a sly smirk and spontaneous pleasure remained.

‘My role ends here.’

I lifted a cardboard box.

103 audio recordings.

311 videos.

30,790 photos.

Text messages on mine and Kim Yul's phones. Two phones.

All recordings, videos, and photos were accurately dated and located. No one could deny the timeline. No space for lies like [I feel sorry for my actions] or [I didn't mean it]. Not even a needle's room.

‘Director.’

I placed the box in front of the director's family home. In her childhood, the director lived in a villa. I rang the bell and hid.

The director came out.

".....Huh?"

The young director, not yet possessed, looked around, puzzled.

“Who's there? Who...”

She hesitated upon seeing the box.

On top of the box, I had attached a printed A4 paper.

+

Sending you all the evidence.

It's up to you how to use it.

If you decide to act, please start after 30 days.

+

"....."

The director, always cautious since childhood, didn't immediately bring in the box. Instead, she took a cutter to open the seal and slowly checked the contents.

"....."

Her face hardened.

She looked around again.

And cautiously, quietly, took the box inside.

Thud.

The door closed.

‘Ah.’

I finally relaxed.

‘I endured.’

The first time I could breathe easy since falling into this world.

‘It's done. I made it. I survived. I did it.’

On my way home.

I looked up at the dark night sky.

‘I've done everything I could. Could there have been a better way? Will the days ahead truly be worth more than the violence I prevented over the past 11 months?’

[Your immersion rate is currently 98%.]

‘I don't know.’

I lay in bed.

‘But I didn't give up just because I didn't know. Right. This must be right. If anyone can change the ending of this world, if anyone should, it's Kim Yul. It's the director. I'll leave everything to them. It's not my role...’

I...

[Your immersion rate is currently 99%.]

Clasped my hands.

‘The wicked just disappear.’

As if praying.

‘In this world, my role is merely to wait.’

I closed my eyes.

‘I’ll wait. Kim Yul. Director. Please.’

•

•

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-

-

[Your immersion rate is currently 100%.]

Chapter 141: Latecomer (3)

★.

Therefore,

Let's talk about my defeat.

The role of the protagonist.

For the first time, I, who only played the role of a hero, became a villain who deserves to be overthrown.

Defeat was never an option for me.

Because each defeat was fatal.

If I had been defeated, all of this would have been engulfed in flames and completely burned down. My defeat meant the fall of the Empire. My defeat was the end of the martial world. And my defeat, my defeat.....

For the first time,

My defeat doesn't signify doom.

This is the story where I finally face defeat.

A tale where the human 'I' must sink for the ending to arrive.

[Your immersion rate is currently 100%.]

Ego.

However, 'I' am strong.

'I' am thoroughly cunning.

I don't know how you remember your school days. Were they happy? Joyful? Was the classroom small enough to be embellished with the ignorance and excuses of youth, painted in a pretty sepia panorama?

Not for 'I'.

'I' am more sly than you. More cunning. Perhaps there was no one like me in your school. Or maybe, you just don't remember. But 'I' am definitely here.

The one who framed a classmate.

The one who plotted and fabricated evidence to slander someone.

The one who threatened classmates into silence.

Such memories belong to a person like 'you'. 'You' are my comrade. At least 'you' can guess my existence, and if lucky, understand it.

Right. When other students were naively patching up their youth with so-called [school days], 'you' and I, 'we', easily

hunted those foolish minnows.

Our hunting is secret.

So, people don't remember it.

Our [skillful] hidden hunts are often misunderstood by most people as the opposite. They believe that students are [too immature] to engage in sophisticated hunting.

Too immature? Us? 'We'? What a ludicrous misconception.

They are the ones who can't even remember what happened right before their eyes.

First, I'll confess the secrets of hunting to such people.

This is a story that happened before 'I' was possessed by someone else.

"At school, the student hierarchy is divided into two. First, there are students who study well. But studying well requires

effort. Above all, students hate to make an effort.”

On the other hand,

“It’s easy to look down on and ridicule others.”

It doesn’t require effort.

“Since mockery doesn’t take effort, all students can participate. This is the decisive difference between [studying] and [mockery]. What’s the difference? It’s how easily many students can participate.”

To raise a test score by 1 point, you have to study for at least 10 minutes.

In contrast, it takes less than 10 seconds to mock and ridicule someone.

“[Who studies better] is far less interesting than [who mocks others better]. It’s much easier. Therefore, it’s much more powerful. Unlike studying, anyone can easily join this game. That’s why [mockery] is a standard in every school.”

This is where the dynamics of bullying are created.

“First, the scapegoat must stand out.”

Is someone visibly richer or poorer than others? Does their face look odd to everyone? Do they smell strange when you get close? Is their speech severely impaired? Are they excessively earnest? Any of these will do. It doesn't matter what it is.

Mockery is powerful because it's easy.

The victim of mockery must always be easy to ridicule.

“Kim Yul.”

There's a reason why Kim Yul was chosen as prey.

“He's poor.”

Noticeably.

“He’s distinctly poor. When you get close, there’s a bad smell.”

Poverty can’t be hidden by monochrome school uniforms. It’s outwardly visible, and that’s the terrible thing about poverty. Everyone could see that Kim Yul was poor. Anyone who approached him could smell the bad odor.

Everyone could easily mock him.

“Hey.”

That’s why it’s easy to start.

“It might be a bit harsh to say this, but when you get near that guy...”

“Ah, right. It does smell a bit. Poor thing...”

Level 1.

It starts lightly.

As ‘you’ know,

you mustn’t reveal your true intentions from the start.
That’s foolish.

“He received a scholarship, didn’t he?”

“I’ve known Kim Yul since middle school, and even then...”

Gossip.

It’s appropriate to start with simple gossip.

“Should I tell you a secret? Actually...”

Gradually increase the number of students participating in the gossip.

“He lives there? Wow. That place is like a garbage dump.”

“His dad collects trash.”

“Oh, is the guy who collects our trash the same person?”

“Eh, I doubt it...”

That’s how you slowly raise attention.

At this point, the instigator must be careful not to reveal any malice. Not yet! ‘You’ know it’s not time yet.

Look.

“Don’t you find Kim Yul a bit annoying?”

Rather than saying this,

“Hey. Wow, really. The guy who collects our trash is Kim Yul’s dad!”

This is much wiser.

“What, really?”

Of course, it's a lie.

“How did you know?”

“I wasn't sure at first either. But on Sunday, I saw the guy collecting waste and asked, [Are you Kim Yul's father? I'm Kim Yul's school friend]. He seemed a bit flustered and just asked me to take care of Kim Yul.”

“Wow...”

“Really?”

Lying is a basic skill for 'us'.

Classmates look at me with half-belief but sparkle in their eyes. That attention, that interest is the proof of success. You've successfully drawn people into the story about [Kim

Yul].

“Kim Yul! Is your father’s job really----.”

“Hey, hey. Why say that? Don’t say it.”

“Ah, why? Is it really a lie?”

“It’s not that. Anyway. Sorry, Kim Yul. It’s nothing.”

"....."

Level 2.

Observation phase.

From here, malice naturally takes its course.

“Pfft.”

No one is free from making mistakes, especially students. Now, classmates will pay attention to every move of Kim Yul, scrutinizing his mistakes as if under a magnifying glass.

“Pfft...”

And they laugh.

Dropping a volleyball during gym class and having to run far to fetch it.

Dozing off during the fourth period and still being asleep during lunchtime.

Stuttering a bit when answering a teacher’s question.

“Pfft...”

Even very minor mistakes don’t matter.

It should be easy. It should be noticeable.

Always remember the dynamics of [mockery].

“Hey, Kim Yul always goes behind the school every lunchtime. Is that...”

“Feeding the chickens? Really?”

“Look out the window. I’m telling you it’s true.”

It should be easily observable by everyone.

It should be easily joinable by everyone.

“Kim Yul- Look here-!”

“Ah, he’s really looking.”

“Maybe he’s raising chickens to get eggs for free?”

“Ew.”

Ultimately, create a [game everyone can participate in].

As ‘you’ know.

Most bullying stops at this level.

It can occur naturally up to this point. There’s no need for a distinct perpetrator or accomplice. Just having sympathizers is enough for level 2 bullying to occur.

Level 2 bullying includes the following: light violence once every two weeks, group assaults once every three months, public beatings once every six months, one small, permanent scar that doesn’t fade, lasting from one semester to three years. Occasionally, a student temporarily and momentarily leads the violence, but there’s no long-term instigator...

And as ‘you’ know.

“Hey.”

‘We’ don’t stop there.

“Let’s try something.”

We go a step further.

“What?”

“Watch this. These are my new shoes. Brand new.”

If you’ve successfully led up to this point, you’re surely adept at lying. Now, you have to perform a little magic for your classmates.

“Look, I drew a star under the shoe with a marker. See? You all saw it, right?”

“Yeah. So?”

“I’m going to leave it in front of my house with the trash.”

“...What are you talking about?”

“Stupid. Kim Yul’s dad collects our trash, right?”

It’s a lie. The waste collector passing your house isn’t actually Kim Yul’s father. But it doesn’t matter. You know one route where Kim Yul’s father collects waste.

“If there’s a pair of brand-new shoes with the trash, will his dad give them to Kim Yul as a gift? Yes or no? Watch. If Kim Yul’s dad is really the waste collector, he’ll wear these shoes tomorrow.”

“Uh...”

“Really?”

“I bet Kim Yul will wear these shoes tomorrow.”

There.

You’ve secretly prepared two identical pairs of shoes.

“One pair, I left here. You saw it, right? I won’t touch it.”

One pair was left in front of your house where your friends could see.

"Hmm."

And the other pair was already placed on Kim Yul's father's route a day earlier.

Of course, both pairs have ★ drawn on the soles.

You just wanted to show off some plausible magic to your friends, pretending to draw ★ in real-time. If you're more careful, you'll spend the whole day playing with friends, creating a perfect alibi.

"Hey, hey. Check it out!"

Next day at lunchtime, in the classroom.

"What if you get caught looking at this?"

"Just look at it quickly!"

“Just a quick look...”

While Kim Yul is away at the cafeteria, we all huddle around his desk. On the hook hangs his indoor shoe bag.

The students' eyes sparkle. They lift Kim Yul's indoor shoe bag, pretending it's just a joke. They take out his somewhat cleaner shoes.

"Wow."

Of course.

“It's true?”

Underneath the shoes Kim Yul wore, there is a ★ drawn.

"Wow, so you're saying Kim Yul..."

“You did this with Kim Yul, right?”

“No, he's been with us all yesterday and today.”

“So it really is...”

The students look at you. They have seen a fascinating magic trick. Now, you have many lines to choose from, depending on your personality and taste. You could boast, 'See, I was right,' or slowly reveal your malice, 'It feels a bit bad.'

"Wow."

But I recommend this line.

"Really..."

Just blend in with the crowd.

“What if that man lied about being Kim Yul's dad?”

Pretend you didn't know either.

“So I wasn’t 100% sure it was true either.”

Laugh as if it’s ridiculous. Check the shoes again, act as if you’ve witnessed something unbelievable, and refine your tone as if you just realized the truth.

“But wow, it was really true...”

And then step back.

“Hey, hey. I don’t want to know. Let’s not bet. Just pretend you don’t know. It’s just between us. No, forget it. Anyway, I don’t know.”

Inexperienced instigators always try to create the drama alone. As you know, this is foolish impatience. They become anxious because they feel their fabricated evidence is sloppy, and the magic is unimpressive.

So you must perform perfect magic from the start.

“What’s going on?”

Just in time for lunchtime.

Classmates return to the classroom in pairs and groups.

“Hey, about Kim Yul, actually...”

“Huh? What about him?”

Of course, you deliberately chose lunchtime for your magic show. You can't waste such a trick on mere break time.

During lunchtime, classmates return in pairs and groups. There's plenty of time. It's perfect for whispering and spreading the 'incident' that just happened.

"Wow."

Classmates check Kim Yul's shoes.

“Crazy. It was true?”

‘It was indeed.’

You sit in the back, pretending to sleep with your eyes closed.

You’ve become cautious.

You never spread the story yourself. You don’t overstep. You know the virtue of a lion that shares its prey with the pack.

“What are you all whispering about?”

“Come here quickly.”

“What about Kim Yul's shoes?”

You leave the joy of spreading rumors to others. Let them believe they've discovered the 'truth' themselves. Let them chew and enjoy the blood-dripping meat.

“Ugh. Does he really pick up other stuff too?”

“Recycling, huh? Recycling.”

“Pfft.”

★.

“Poor, but dirty. Really.”

“Ugh, it smells like spoiled milk... hide it under his desk.”

“Quickly! The class is starting!”

I’m not like that.

“...Where’s that weird smell coming from?”

“You too?”

“Yeah. It was hard to bear during math class.”

“Wait. I'll check. Sniff, sniff.”

“It seems to be coming from the back row.”

I'm more sly than you.

“Yul, why are you washing the rag? It's still a rag even if you wash it.”

“Poor thing. He must feel sorry for the rag...”

Perhaps there was no one like me in your school.

Or maybe, you just don't remember.

[Your immersion rate is currently 100%.]

But I am definitely here.

"....."

In this city.

In this school.

Sitting in this classroom, holding a pencil.

“Class president, what are you looking at?”

The class president looks at me strangely.

“...Eun-Seo.”

"Huh?"

"....."

The class president trembles slightly. It's a small vibration. It seems like she's disgusted about something, or maybe lamenting. But her strange behavior ends quickly. She clears her throat and speaks.

“No. It’s nothing. I just suddenly couldn’t remember your name. What was it again?”

“What? Are you already getting senile, class president? It’s Hwang Eun-Seo, Hwang Eun-Seo.”

“Ah, right.”

She murmurs, recalling the name.

She doesn’t usually interact much with our group.

“Your girlfriend is running for the student council election, right?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“I think I’ll run too. Please tell her I said good luck.”

“You’re running for student council president? You only study, class president.”

“To get into Seoul National University, I need a recommendation. It's easier if you're the student council president.”

Is that so? It makes sense.

It's a bit funny to openly aim for Seoul National University by becoming the student council president. Well, it's like her. She's an honest kid. I decided to take it lightly.

“That's cool. Good luck, class president. I'll vote for my girlfriend, but still, do your best.”

The class president nods expressionlessly.

“Yeah. Thanks.”

I am strong.

I am thoroughly cunning.

Therefore,

“---I need to try my best too.”

Let's talk about my defeat.

Chapter 142: The Rooftop (1)

One day.

“Recently, there haven't been many videos.”

My girlfriend mentioned.

"Huh?"

“Kim Yul videos. You usually release one every week at the latest. Are you taking longer because you're being selective about your [artwork]? Quite a few in our group are eagerly waiting for the next episode. The last video, the one where you cut nails, that got a good response.”

My girlfriend's expression was neutral. I frowned slightly upon hearing her words.

‘Videos. Right. I recorded all of Kim Yul’s bullying with the camcorder.’

But why did I do that?

『I will wait. Kim Yul. Director.』

Why did I...

[Your immersion rate is currently 100%.]

.....

Ah. That's right. I remember now.

That was it.

‘I recorded it to give the kids something to watch.’

Shinseo High School is filled with children from the local

elite. It's a prestigious school. As such, children from noble families are forced to maintain proper behavior, causing them immense stress.

Some lead bullying to relieve this stress, but it's risky. Most don't want to take such risks. I provide them with the [Kim Yul videos] for this purpose.

Quite professionally.

[Producer sir, I want a concept of cutting nails with scissors!]
-J

[Dress him in yellow rubber bands and let his hair grow out.]
-7

[The kids in the last video only hit too much. It lacks flavor...] -11

The school has something called the Student Council Suggestion Box. It's used for notes or letters to the council, but I use it differently with the help of my girlfriend.

It's the [Kim Yul Request Box].

Teachers don't touch this box, and no one finds it strange. Even if someone is caught putting a note in the box, it's not a problem. My girlfriend has been active in the student council since her freshman year, so she can periodically manage the [Request Box].

A simple idea, but...

'I must say, I am quite clever.'

It was a hit.

Children of the elite were hooked on the charm of participating in bullying without any risk. The Request Box guarantees anonymity. They use Trump card initials like A, K, Q, J for their submissions.

[Please make a concept of slapping cheeks for 20 minutes.] -Q

Q is my girlfriend's initial.

[I like shabby clothes, but sometimes I want to see different outfits!] -7

7 is the head of the broadcasting club.

[Producer, I enjoyed the last video. Making Kim Yul use honorifics was an ingenious idea. I believe Kim Yul is popular because of his strong pride. Thus, unlike some sponsors who enjoy physical humiliation, I am confident that a mental approach is more appropriate. Producer, the body should only be a symbol or metaphor for a mental approach...] -2

This lunatic, who always writes long critiques and puts them in the suggestion box, is a kid in a middle school band. Crazy. He uses 2 because of his second-year syndrome.

Of course, even if he's a lunatic with second-year syndrome, it's a different story if he's the son of a prominent company in the region. He's a valuable customer.

The so-called [Trump Card Meeting] only has such clients.

Satisfaction of secret sadism. Vicarious pleasure.

By providing entertainment to these clients, I maintain my current status. Since I started filming these works, many 'friends' have started to look after me unknowingly. Yes, that's how I met my girlfriend too.

Without such a thing, how could I date a rich girl?

I don't have a history of winning awards in essay contests since middle school like my parents. I don't have a half-and-half face like my brother to be a singer.

To climb up the pyramid, I need tribute for those above.

“Sorry.”

I apologized for the delay in the tribute. I, too, was puzzled why I hadn't filmed any Kim Yul videos recently. There was no reason to stop. But soon, a plausible excuse came to mind. I'm really good at coming up with reasons.

“You're a candidate for student council president. I thought I'd take it easy during the election.”

“Really? You considered me?”

“We need to be careful. You never know if someone will submit something weird....”

"Our producer is actually quite cute."

My girlfriend raised her eyes and stroked my head.

"I like a quick-witted puppy."

Although she blatantly treated me like a dog, I didn't mind. Instead, I played along.

"Woof, woof! Wooooof!"

"Pfft."

Finally, my girlfriend laughed. I am the only one in this school who can make her laugh. I bent my legs like a dog and jumped around playfully.

"Do you know this? Hwang Eun-Seo, you're really funny."

A funny guy. That was a statement affirming my value.

Someone fun to be around. Always flipping the atmosphere with laughter. An insider among insiders.

Indeed, there are limits to dating just based on looks, like my brother. True dating depends on how well you can entertain....

『I have been waiting, Gong-ja.』

.....

I furrowed my brows.

What's this?

[Your immersion rate is currently 100%.]

For a moment, my mind went blank again.

Is it just my imagination? Lately, I seem to be losing focus more often.

“Anyway,”

I swallowed.

“For a while, I'll take a break from filming. It won't do to stir up trouble. If any friends are discontent, tell them I'm adjusting the pace because if Kim Yul is bullied more, he might not even come to school...”

That's when it happened.

-The is an announcement from the Broadcasting Club.

A voice flowed from the school speaker. A familiar voice. Member number 7 of the Trump Card Meeting, the head of the broadcasting club. But somehow, it lacked energy? The tone seemed uneasy.

-Hwang Eun-Seo, student of class 2-5. Hwang Eun-Seo, student of class 2-5, please come to the broadcasting club room immediately. Once again, Hwang Eun-Seo, student of class 2-5, please come to the broadcasting club room right now... That is all.

And the speaker went silent.

My girlfriend looked at me.

“What's going on?”

I shrugged, not knowing the reason myself.

“There's no reason for me to be called to the broadcasting room... maybe the staff room.”

“The broadcasting head might have called you for personal reasons. Maybe asking why there's no new work lately.”

He's a bit crazy, she muttered.

“Go check it out. I'll head somewhere else.”

“Got it. Thanks.”

I hesitated slightly before kissing her on the cheek.

I did pretty well today. Even the lie about considering my girlfriend seemed to work. She might allow a kiss on the cheek. Above all, I have a duty to provide her and those around her with the illusion of [the school couple].

Realizing my calculations, my girlfriend snorted.

“Cute.”

Celebrate. The princess has smiled again.

“I’m off. I’ll text you later about what it is.”

So, I am much smarter than other students.

Walking through the corridors, I rated my day. Did I make any mistakes in human relations? Did I say anything strange? Did I make the kids laugh enough, and did I laugh enough myself?

The score for the day.

‘Another perfect day.’

Full marks.

‘As expected of me.’

I have talent. Not just in ostracizing someone, but in turning that ostracism into a game. Those who have tasted this fun, even after entering university, might seek me out. They might invite me to their exclusive league.

‘Even if I'm not invited, it's fine.’

They will remember having played some naughty tricks with me during our school days. My girlfriend might break up with me when she goes to college, but she will still remember me as an old lover who once made her happy. Hwang Eun-Seo remains as a memory of youth, forever to be recalled with a smile. This alone is a great gain.

Unlike the vague students, I have a roadmap for life.

‘First, I will become a film director.’

I don't need to be hugely successful. Just shoot a few indie films, build a moderate career and network. Then, that becomes my calling card. No one dislikes a young director in agony.

‘And then?’

I'll introduce new actors to the upper class. Become a sort of party designer, satisfying young lords and ladies with ingenious methods like now. My brother works in the entertainment industry, so I can extend my reach there too.

‘Good.’

A golden life.

Far different from those who vaguely study and worry about their career path only after entering university.

A different dimension.

“I’m coming.”

Squeak.

I opened the door to the broadcasting room.

As soon as I stepped in, I paused.

“S-stop.”

"....."

There was only one person in the broadcasting room, the head of the club. That wasn’t strange. The room had soundproof walls and thick curtains. That wasn’t strange either.

“H-Hwang Eun-Seo.”

But if the broadcasting head was holding a camcorder, filming me, then something was definitely off.

“Close the door.”

"....."

“Hurry up. Close the door. If you don’t, you’ll be in b-big trouble.”

The broadcasting head was shivering like a cornered mouse. I didn't understand why he was like this, but provoking someone in such a state would do no good. I quietly closed the door.

“Draw the curtains.”

I drew the curtains.

“T-turn around and look at me.”

I turned.

“Hwang Eun-Seo, class 2-5, you, you blackmailed me... to forcibly join in ostracizing Kim Yul. Right? Say it’s t-true.”

“Is this some kind of hidden camera?”

“Shut up and say it’s true!”

The broadcasting head was genuinely trembling. A foreboding feeling crept over me. Usually, I would have joked about how to shut up and talk, but I was too bewildered.

“I can’t understand the situation. You need to explain.”

“Y-you approached me first. I didn’t want to, but... you enticed me, saying there was something fun to see. Right? You did. So it’s all your fault!”

This isn’t normal.

“What are you talking about? You came to me after hearing rumors about the videos in the group. You asked me to get you in, saying you’d even connect me with middle schoolers... why are you changing your story now?”

“No! It’s not true!”

The broadcasting head's face turned pale.

“It's your fault, Hwang Eun-Seo. You said no one would find out. You promised anonymity. You said you'd take responsibility. Bu, but why is there a video of me out there!”

“No. So, what are you talking about since earlier?”

“I only appeared once!”

Appeared.

Some clients occasionally want to participate directly in the events. They prefer to enjoy it live on the spot rather than just watching videos. If I remember correctly, the broadcasting head indeed appeared once.

“Wait. Are you acting like this because you think the video might have leaked? Don't worry. I destroyed all the videos after viewing them...”

“Don't lie!!”

The broadcasting head's expression turned fierce.

“You bastard, crazy thug. You, you tricked me into joining. Say it! Or I'll tell everyone what you guys did!”

"....."

“I'm telling you! I have to record and send it!”

He's gone mad.

I realized I shouldn't stay here any longer.

“Sorry. But I can't admit to something I didn't do. That would be against my conscience. I definitely showed you because you asked, and though I don't have the videos anymore, I have all the notes you put in the suggestion box. I don't know why you're doing this, but let's talk when you've calmed down.”

I turned my back.

“Oh,” the broadcasting head moaned.

“S-stop! Don’t go. Don’t go, Hwang Eun-Seo! If you leave, it’s over for you! Really over! I’ll tell the other kids and ruin your life! Don’t you understand?! Hey, Hwang Eun-Seo! You bastard! Your life is over! Just wait, I’ll tell your parents and ruin your life...!!”

Squeak.

The door closed, cutting off the broadcasting head’s voice. Absorbed by the soundproof walls and hidden by the curtains, his screaming became nothing more than a muted vibration. There was no one in the second-floor hallway.

“Damn. What’s this?”

I cursed.

“There must be a reason for this freak out.”

Maybe the videos really leaked. There’s no guarantee that a client didn’t make a copy for themselves. They could be using it to blackmail the broadcasting head.

“Damn.”

It's harder to manage customers than to make them. That saying was right. I pulled out my phone and started calling the ‘clients’ one by one.

Beeeeep—

The call rang long. After a while, it ended.

“What?”

Frustrated, I called the next client. I planned to ask if they knew anything about the broadcasting head's commotion.

Beeeeep—

The next client also didn't answer. It was time to go home from school, so they might not be able to answer. Trying to control my temper, I called the next client.

Beeeeep—...

But.

The next client also didn't answer.

"....."

Neither did the next.

"....."

Excluding my girlfriend, all 12 members.

None of the Trump Card Meeting clients answered my calls.

‘What?’

I felt a chill.

It was like an unseen hand was gripping my neck.

‘What’s happening?’

Without any thought, I called a classmate, not a client. He was my secretary. He handled the delivery and retrieval of the videos to and from the clients on my behalf.

Beeeeep—...

He didn’t answer my call either.

"....."

That’s when I realized.

Someone is hunting me.

Chapter 143: The Rooftop (2)

‘Who is it?’

I couldn’t comprehend.

‘Who’s clinging onto the Kim Yul problem!’

Kim Yul has no relatives, or might as well not have any. The ostracism of Kim Yul happened before he could even make friends, leaving him with no one to turn to. Why else would I have chosen him as the scapegoat!

‘Anyway, I have to confront Kim Yul. He must know something. Anything.’

I hurriedly ran to the back of the school. At this time, Kim Yul would be tending to the animals in the barn. I knew Kim Yul's schedule by the hour. And sure enough, there he was, distributing feed to the chickens in the barn.

‘Right. You should be there.’

Feeding weaker creatures to barely maintain his dignity. That’s how I understood Kim Yul’s attachment to the barn. Ultimately, humans are animals, and the weaker ones can only serve the stronger.

[Your immersion rate is currently 100%.]

The school is just like that barn. A slightly larger animal pen. And here, I am a stronger beast than Kim Yul.

“Hey! Kim Yul!”

I growled.

“What the hell have you done!”

Kim Yul did not turn around, nor did he react. It was as if he couldn’t hear my voice, continuing to distribute the feed.

‘Ha. Are you ignoring me now?’

I was infuriated. I walked over and grabbed Kim Yul's shoulder roughly.

“Hey, you bastard. When someone calls you...”

The moment Kim Yul turned around, something fell. It was an earphone. I belatedly realized Kim Yul had been wearing earphones. From the dangling earphones, classical music loudly played.

"....."

Our eyes met.

I flinched.

Tears were welling up in Kim Yul's dark eyes.

“What.....”

For a moment, I was at a loss for words.

I couldn't quite understand why I was speechless. Was it because it was the first time I saw tears in Kim Yul's eyes? Maybe. No matter how relentlessly he was tormented, Kim Yul never shed tears. That very fact must have further provoked the 'clients'.

But it wasn't just for that reason.

'Who are you?'

He seemed unfamiliar.

'Who are you? This guy?'

Kim Yul's eyes felt strangely alien. His gaze was distant. As if he was looking past me, at something beyond. Kim Yul, with his shoulder in my grasp, silently cried. Those tears seemed as if they would fall not here but somewhere else entirely.

"You....."

"Beautiful."

Kim Yul spoke.

“What?”

“The song. The music I’m listening to. It’s composed by a deaf person.”

Dadadum, Bam-

Music flowed from the earphones. A rhythm I had heard somewhere. But I was only suspicious of how this beggar managed to get an MP3.

“I think about the humiliation and curses this deaf person must have endured in his life. Someone must have cursed him as a deaf idiot. Laughed at him, saying look at that deaf idiot.”

“What the hell are you babbling about, you...?”

“It’s sad. The wound is eternal, going back hundreds of years when someone else must have endured a life of humiliation. A thousand years ago, and a thousand years in the future.”

This kid, has he lost his mind?

“There is nothing beautiful in this world by itself. Only those who are wounded can see beauty. Only those whose lives have been ruined can look at an unruined life and feel relief. To those who endure even when broken, tears are shed.”

Kim Yul's gaze was still hanging in the air.

“If someone finds the whole world beautiful, they must be someone who has been broken by everything in it. Only those living in hell praise the world. I think of the dishonored life of the deaf composer from his music.”

“Where did you pick up such nonsense... Hey, you. What have you done?”

I grabbed Kim Yul's collar. Grab! Kim Yul's body shook, and he dropped the feed bag. The yellowish grains spilled out from the bag that fell to the ground.

“What have you done to my clients, you recycling bastard!”

"....."

Kim Yul finally looked at me.

“I haven’t done anything, King of Death.”

“Death..., what?”

“I’m just observing what I have discarded.”

Kim Yul arrogantly grabbed my wrist. I was dumbfounded and tried to shake off his grip.

It didn’t budge.

‘What?’

And Kim Yul easily let go of my collar.

It happened in an instant.

Startled, I reached out again, but Snap! Kim Yul struck my

wrist. The path was diverted. My hand embarrassingly flailed in the air. In the blink of an eye, my hand missed its mark.

“...What?”

I stared at Kim Yul in a daze.

“How regrettable.”

Kim Yul calmly picked up the feed bag.

“[Kim Yul] is furious. What he wants is not physical violence. More precisely, he desires revenge far deeper than physical violence. And [I]... think that I want to fulfill Kim Yul's heart.”

Kim Yul.

No,

“I, too, agree with that sentiment.”

Someone unknown to me watched me intently.

“Wait, Kim Yul's killer. The day is ending, and the journey is long. So long. Let's meet again after that.”

Kim Yul walked away leisurely with the feed bag.

“Hey! Hey! You stop right there! Stop.....!”

At that moment, my phone vibrated in my pocket. A text message had arrived, probably from a client who saw the missed call and responded. I glanced in the direction Kim Yul was walking and quickly checked my phone.

+

Never contact me again.

If you do, I'll kill you.

+

I was dumbfounded. In confusion, I called the client who sent the message. But they didn't answer, no matter how many times I tried.

My body shivered uncontrollably.

‘What’s going on...’

The situation didn’t change the next day.

‘What’s happening?’

It got worse.

“Uh, Eun-Seo.”

As soon as I entered the classroom, a friend hesitantly approached me. He had appeared in the [Kim Yul Game] dozens of times. He was popular among the clients for his knack for hitting people. He seemed to enjoy it, basking in his popularity.

“What?”

“I-I have a message for you. To pass on.”

He was visibly terrified.

“What’s with you?”

“This... I’m sorry.”

He put the note on my desk and scurried away. I furrowed my brows and unfolded the note.

There, the note was scribbled in a messy handwriting.

[Hwang Eun-Seo lives in a garbage dump. His indoor shoes, even his uniform, all recycled. The only thing that can't be recycled is Hwang Eun-Seo himself.]

"....."

My delay in reacting was simply because it was too absurd.

“Ha.”

I let out a hollow laugh, looking at the friend.

“What’s this.... Are you kidding me right now?”

The friend flinched and retreated behind other students, cowering.

Already stressed from the clients treating me like crap all night, and now this bastard of a friend is doing this, my rage boiled over.

“Did that trash tell you to do this? Hey. Hey. Look at me. Look. Even if we are friends, there are things we should and shouldn't do. Huh? Did Kim Yul tell you to send this note?”

The friend couldn't say a word. He just looked terrified. I was about to confront him when another classmate approached my desk.

“Hwang Eun-Seo.....”

“What?”

“Sorry. This.”

The classmate almost threw another note on my desk. Reflexively, I snatched it and read.

[I feel so sorry for our juniors. They have to call you a senior, Hwang Eun-Seo. Ever thought about how they feel? Doesn't your conscience bother you?]

I felt dazed.

Taking advantage of the moment, three more classmates dropped notes and left. Just like the first two, these guys had also actively participated in the ‘Kim Yul Game’.

[Hwang Eun-Seo, you're really disgusting. Even more disgusting than our math teacher.]

What is this?

[I'm shocked! There's a student who doesn't wash his uniform!]

I couldn't understand why they were doing this to me.

[You really stink. Seriously disgusting.]

Something happened yesterday.

It happened, and I'm the only one who doesn't know.

Something made all the clients turn their backs on me. Not only that, but they also coerced my friends into staging this farce.

‘Stay calm.’

My heart was pounding furiously.

‘Calm down. Think calmly. Did Kim Yul do this? No, he couldn't have. He was a bit weird yesterday, but no. Who did this then?’

That's when it happened.

“Hwang Eun-Seo!”

The homeroom teacher poked his head in through the classroom door. The students all looked at him at once. The teacher scanned the classroom atmosphere, spotted me, and gestured.

“Come with me for a sec.”

“Me...?”

“Gosh, isn't there only one Hwang Eun-Seo in our class, not two? It's nothing serious, so come on. Oh! Class president! Bring the collected phones here.”

I hesitantly followed the teacher out of the classroom. As I left, the surroundings were eerily quiet.

It felt ominous.

It seemed like the classmates knew why I was being called out. They showed no wonder at the fact that the teacher had called me. Only the studious nerds, busy with their morning prep, glanced at their notes.

“Hwang Eun-Seo.”

In the staff room.

“Yes...”

“Have you been up to any bad stuff lately? Anything come to mind?”

The teacher asked casually as if it was nothing serious. In the staff room, students in uniforms were moving around, collecting scrap paper from the printers. Teachers were organizing printouts for the first period.

“Huh?”

My heart raced.

“Nothing?”

"Hmm."

The teacher scratched his head.

"Hey. Hwang Eun-Seo. Don't go around talking about what I just asked you. Got it?"

“Yes...”

“Listen to this.”

The teacher handed me earphones. I took them. They were connected to the teacher's computer. Click, the teacher pressed the mouse, and recorded voices started playing through the earphones.

-Hey, hey. Don't hit yet! Just make him kneel!

-Eh. We received many submissions this time. Among the five requests we received, we will draw lots to decide today's concept.

My nape felt cold.

-Ah, today's chosen one is Queen. Congratulations, Queen. What are you doing? Clap, everyone, clap.

-Wooooo!

My voice.

And the voices of the friends who just threw notes at me.

-Queen's request is, let me see. Ah, you even gave a budget, 100,000 won. Saying, don't go hungry, here's money for food. And for our star, mix Jajangmyeon and Jjamppong....

Click.

The teacher stopped the recording.

“Did you hear? The voices just now, you heard them, right?”

“Yes.”

“Yesterday, this recording file came to my email. The sound quality isn't that great, but it sounded like your voice and others'. Just checking in case you guys are pulling some prank. Hwang Eun-Seo. Is this you?”

“No, it's not.”

I pretended to be confused.

“What's this ‘Queen’? Is it a play or something?”

“Not sure. I listened to the whole thing and it's odd. Anyway, it's bothering me. The email said [To be played for 2nd year, Class 5, Hwang Eun-Seo], so I thought maybe it's some prank you guys played....”

Crazy. This is it. They're blackmailing kids with this method.

Fortunately, this teacher was a fool. Even after hearing the recording, he suspected it was just a kids' prank. Well, he is such a fool that he didn't even realize what was happening in his own class. For me, it was a stroke of luck.

‘This recording can’t do anything. It’s just a scare tactic.’

Probably some kid, or one of the clients, copied the recording file. They’re playing around with it. If they had more incriminating evidence than the recording, there’s no reason they wouldn’t have sent that to the teacher instead....

‘Problem is, the kids are scared of the scare tactic. Damn it.’

The teacher looked up at me.

“This isn’t really your prank, right?”

“No, it’s not. Uh, but am I not supposed to tell the others about this?”

“No, don’t talk about it. Anyway, it’s not you, so it’s fine. Go back to class.”

“Okay.”

I quietly left the teacher's place.

‘Damn. Damn, damn!’

Click.

The moment I opened the staff room door, I bumped into someone standing opposite.

"....."

It was the class president. He was holding a blue plastic collection bin, having collected the phones from the classroom.

“Oh. Sorry.”

The class president, with her usual expression, a typical nerd's face, said and then slightly stepped aside to give way. Normally, I would have thanked her, but now I didn't have the

luxury. I just briefly made eye contact and stepped into the hallway.

‘Which bastard swiped it, I don’t know, but I’ll make sure to get back at them today! Damn dog. Taking people for fools. This has gone beyond a prank. How could they do this to a classmate!’

Click.

The door closed softly behind me.

Chapter 144: The Rooftop (3)

‘First, I need to take care of my friends.’

Someone unknown is trying to dismantle our group.

‘As if I’d let that happen!’

I have to skillfully manage these cowards who are terrified by the blackmail email. It’s okay. I can do this.

As soon as I returned to the classroom, I spoke to the group.

“Hey. I know why you guys are acting like this, but stop it. Why are we making each other feel bad like this? Huh? If you have something to say, say it. If you need to listen, then listen. Isn’t that what friends do? Right?”

But their response was odd. They just kept glancing at my desk without saying anything.

I went to check.

In the desk drawer, dozens of notes were crumpled up and thrown in.

"....."

Each note was filled with insults demeaning me. 'You were so happy when greeted in the hallway yesterday.' Obviously, lies. 'I only lost a rock-paper-scissors bet. Don't get the wrong idea lol.' Texts full of malice and ridicule were scattered about.

While I was at the staff room.

In just that short time, the notes had piled up like a mountain.

"These... these bastards....."

“Kek.”

I heard someone stifling a laugh. Swish. I immediately looked in the direction of the laughter. But I couldn't tell who it was. There were too many students in the classroom.

“Who is it! Who did this to my desk, huh?!”

“We... we didn't do it.”

One of my friends spoke cautiously.

“Just a while ago, a kid from another class came and stuffed all the notes at once....”

“Another class?”

“Yes. They said to tell you not to contact them again.”

"....."

It's a client. One of the clients must have dumped the notes and left. I felt like going crazy. An unknown [culprit] was playing with not only my classmates but also my clients.

“Eun-Seo, and....”

“And? What?”

“Your back....”

My back?

“What about it?”

“That, well...”

I turned around, trying to see my back, but couldn't quite manage it. Laughter rippled across the classroom.

“Pfft...!”

"Snickер."

I reached behind my back and felt something. Crinkle. It was paper. Someone had used tape to stick a note on my back.

I hurriedly peeled off the paper, eager to see what was written.

+

Shinseo High's Official Trash!!

+

Written in a round, cute font.

"....."

When? Who did it? Was it already there when I was called by the teacher? Or did someone sneak it on just after I entered the classroom?

But there was no time to figure that out.

“S-start the class...”

The first period started. The school's most lenient math teacher. Unlike usual, the students, as if deciding to behave, all promptly took their seats. Every single student.

‘Damn it.’

I gritted my teeth inwardly.

‘Making a scene now will only make me look more ridiculous. Should I just leave the classroom? No, that’s not it. I can imagine what these kids would say behind my back. Damn, damn...!’

I had no choice but to sit down quietly.

Looking around, there were students silently snickering, ‘hehe’. Kim Yul, staring expressionlessly at his notebook. The class president, who came into the classroom late, apologized to the math teacher and returned to her seat. Everyone was going about their normal day as if nothing was unusual.

‘Damn.’

I was seething inside.

Anger towards the culprit was natural. Of course, I was furious. But, besides the culprit, my friends. My classmates in this class – my anger towards them suddenly surged.

‘You guys did it too, didn’t you?’

I felt wronged.

‘Are you trying to back out now? You also teased and hit Kim Yul. Did I command you to bully Kim Yul? You did it on your own, didn’t you?’

I felt wronged.

‘Who among these seated bastards has never laughed at Kim Yul? Many of you begged to see the videos. Why are you pretending not to know now?’

I was too aggrieved.

‘No, they’re not pretending. They genuinely don’t know.’

They're just dumb. Stupid. They don't even remember what they say or do. If it's not an intelligence issue, then what is it? They're just mindless followers. And yet they act as if they're human, as if they've done nothing wrong...

‘I feel wronged.’

I feel wronged.

‘Why do I have to suffer because of these inferior bastards? Why only me?’

I feel wronged!

If there was a hero in some story, truly righteous, who had lived uprightly from birth until now, and he was the one to point at me, I might understand.

But that's not the case.

'No one has apologized to Kim Yul for feeling sorry, right?'

No.

There won't be any.

That's why I feel wronged. These people are just being manipulated by the [culprit], seduced without much thought, and stabbing me without any deep intentions.

I don't want to be killed by [that kind of knife]! By these inferior bastards!

I am greater than that!

Buzzzzzzz...

A vibration in my pocket. It was my phone.

The text was from my girlfriend.

+

Hwang Eun-Seo, what did you do?

Don't come near me anymore.

It's over.

+

"....."

Time passed mercilessly.

There was no opportunity to react. No solutions came to mind. The [culprit] relentlessly pressured me without giving me any respite. I contacted my girlfriend, but she didn't respond. Even when I approached her during breaks, she just glared coldly.

The same girl who laughed happily with me just yesterday.

‘Why are you doing this... I was just a funny guy...’

After that, I couldn’t even properly go to the bathroom during breaks. I was afraid. What if someone came and put notes in my desk drawer while I was away!

‘Damn it.’

Even during lunchtime, I just lay on my desk pretending to sleep. I’m not a fool. In this atmosphere, there’s no way my classmates would have lunch with me.

Rather than going to the cafeteria alone, it was better to pretend to be asleep.

‘But someone should ask me to eat together, right?’

I thought, lying on the desk.

‘Then I’ll immediately say I don’t feel well today. That way,

everyone will know. That Hwang Eun-Seo is fine. Completely fine. In fact, maybe even sulking a bit. That they should comfort me.'

That's what will happen.

'After all, I've taken care of you guys. I paid for meals, let you appear in videos, helped you reconcile after fights... and... and...'

No one invited me to lunch.

"....."

The classroom was silent during the empty lunch hour. An eerie quietness at 12:45 PM. No one was wandering in the corridors. The wind blew through the window, making the white curtains flutter.

"Damn them..."

I muttered as I stood up.

“I could at least get a word. Right? Just a word...”

Suddenly, I felt an unfathomable sense of shame. Walking around without knowing a note was stuck on my back. Being mocked by these leech-like kids. Being dumped via text. Everything was humiliating.

“Wretched beings. Not even human...”

I rummaged through my classmates' desk drawers one by one.

Scouring.

There might be evidence about the culprit. Maybe specific instructions, like when to send me a note or what the content should be.

‘Please let there be something. Please!’

That’s when it happened.

“.....Hwang Eun-Seo, what are you doing?”

Startled, I turned around. I was caught searching through the drawers, my posture awkward. Behind me, four classmates stood at the classroom's back door.

“Uh,”

I stammered.

“Just a moment.”

“A moment? What for?”

“Just checking something...”

“Why are you rummaging through others' desks? Are you crazy?”

No.

“Hey, Hwang Eun-Seo rummaged through our desks!”

“What?”

It's not like that.

“Why are you searching through others' desks...?”

“Didn't you do this before?”

Listen to me.

“Wow. That's disgusting...”

It's not like that.

Please listen to me.

You are being manipulated right now. Don't you see? You're being used without knowing it. You need to realize that. You,

too, are guilty of what I did. I'm on your side!

We're on the same team!

One team!

One team!

Attacking me will be your downfall. Seriously. Who else will stand up for you if not me? I made the [Kim Yul Game] for you guys. I entertained you. I provided amusement. Who did? I did!

Defend me, idiots!

Don't be mindlessly manipulated. Understand who's on your side! This is a conspiracy. A slander. I am wronged. You trash! Even if you're dumb, can't you discern who's a friend and who's a foe?

Don't you have any loyalty!

We've had fun together until now. You also enjoyed bullying Kim Yul. Mocking him living in a garbage dump, collecting trash with his homeless father! You trash! Why are you attacking your 'leader' now!

'I feel wronged...'

Word spread quickly among the students that I had rummaged through the drawers during lunch. Sure, I searched them. So what? But my classmates seemed to think that [Hwang Eun-Seo rummaging through the classroom desks] was a far more serious offense than [they had also bullied Kim Yul].

'I am wronged...'

The ones who always smiled and called me [Director, Director]. Betraying me just because the culprit slightly threatened them. How much I've served for the joy of the classroom.

'I feel like I'm going to die of injustice...'

Nothing changed even after school.

In the morning, at least my friends pretended to feel sorry. They pretended. But after what happened at lunchtime, their eyes changed. They looked at me coldly as if I was some murderer.

‘Crazy bastards.’

What crime have I committed?

I feel wronged.

So wronged.

.....

“Hwang Eun-Seo.”

In the empty classroom, after all the students had left.

“Sorry, but can I talk to you for a moment?”

The class president spoke.

Today, the president was the only one who maintained a stoic expression throughout.

“What is it...?”

“I would have preferred not to get involved, but the homeroom teacher and other students have been talking to me about it. As the class president, I feel like I should at least pretend to care.”

“Ha.....”

I couldn't even sarcastically retort, as the president was the first classmate to speak to me after lunch. The president was, if spoken kindly, a model student, and if not, a voluntary loner. Maybe that's why he could perceive the atmosphere around.

“Is something wrong?”

“.....”

Suddenly, I saw an escape from this hellish situation.

‘Right. The class president.’

The president has good grades. He’s somewhat favored by the teachers. The students don’t bother him much either. He naturally exudes an air of aloofness, making it hard to approach him.

Let’s start by persuading the president and gradually turn the situation around.

“Well. Actually.....”

And then I shared how wronged I felt.

Maybe I slightly ignored Kim Yul all this time. But someone jealous of me dating a rich girl spread absurd rumors. I feel so wronged. But the classmates won’t even listen to me.

Please help.

"....."

For about 30 minutes, the president listened to my complaints with an indifferent attitude. She didn't interrupt or argue. Just listened with the same attitude as always, which I appreciated.

"That's tough. I understand why you feel wronged. Really wronged. It's true that kids can be cold about things that don't concern them."

"Exactly."

"But I'm not sure how I can help. What to do..."

The president pondered. The contemplation lasted a long time. Even someone like me, not close to her, could tell she was deeply thinking. We both stayed silent. After a while, the president raised her head.

"Ah."

The president tapped the desk.

“Eun-Seo, how about this? From what I see, the only way to solve this problem is for you to get forgiveness from Kim Yul.”

“From Kim Yul...?”

“Yes. Frankly, all other kids are irrelevant. If Kim Yul, the victim, forgives you, the others can't say anything.”

"....."

I hadn't thought of this solution. But it made sense. No matter what the other kids say, if Kim Yul just says one thing, [I now forgive Hwang Eun-Seo], the classmates will have nothing to say.

“But...”

There's a problem.

“Will Kim Yul accept my apology? I don't think he will...”

“Don't worry. I'll talk to him.”

The president smiled gently.

“I’ll help you out, Hwang Eun-Seo.”

It was a very kind smile.

Chapter 145: Friend (1)

“Are you saying you’ll help?”

“Yes. Well, I shouldn’t sound too generous, but...”

The class president chuckled wryly.

‘Was she always this expressive?’

It felt slightly unfamiliar. Even though we had been in the same class since the first year, I hardly ever talked to her.

“I’m running for student council president, you know. I’m aiming for a university recommendation... Anyway, as a president-to-be, I should try to solve problems in our class. I’m not sure how yet, but I’ll ask Kim Yul. Do you know his phone number?”

“Uh... just a moment.”

While searching for the number, I realized something. The class president didn't know Kim Yul's number. All my classmates who shared videos with me knew it. This meant:

‘The class president isn't the culprit.’

It could all be an act, but.

‘That's unlikely. She's just a regular student. She wouldn't have access to the recording.’

The class president was a safe bet. Definitely.

As I nodded in agreement, the president suddenly said, “Ah.”

“No, wait. This kind of thing shouldn't be discussed over the phone. I'll just ask Kim Yul in person tomorrow after school. That okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. Calling might not be a good idea. Thanks for

offering to help.”

“If you’re grateful, vote for me instead of your girlfriend.”

“.....Sure.”

It was over with my girlfriend anyway. The president seemed unaware of my breakup, which also cleared her from suspicion.

‘Right.’

I felt hopeful.

‘It’s not over yet. Nothing is over! If there's one person who supports me, I can use them to devise a plan. This mood will lighten with time... My friends will return to normal soon.’

From that day on, the class president really began to act. I couldn’t tell exactly what she was doing, but she seemed to be actively using her [model student] image.

“Good. I talked to Kim Yul.”

The next day at lunch, the president spoke. I hadn't gone down to the cafeteria again. The students continued to subtly ostracize me, and I didn't want to get involved in that. In the empty classroom, just the two of us, we held a secret meeting.

“Really? What did he say?”

“Kim Yul says you need to apologize formally in front of everyone. He absolutely refuses a one-on-one apology. He says if you sincerely apologize, showing what you did wrong and how much you regret it, in front of everyone, then he will forgive you.”

This crazy guy.

‘What kind of apology and forgiveness is that?’

It's just about humiliating me. Not just the classmates, but Kim Yul too. He's just trying to taste a bit of power, creating this drama.

“If your apology lacks ‘sincerity’, he won't forgive you, he

said that three times. Hmm. He seemed really angry, even though his face was expressionless.”

‘I’m going crazy.’

Can't I just give him 1 million won and end this?

He's a pauper, he'll take it.

“What’s ‘sincerity’? How do you show that?”

“I don’t know. But it seems important to apologize in front of others. Why don’t you write a draft of your apology?”

The president suggested with a slightly bothered tone. Maybe she was realizing the situation was more complicated than she thought.

Damn it. My entire school life and even my future are at stake. My life is on the line. If you’ve decided to act kindly, then take responsibility till the end!

“Right. I should write an apology. Sigh...”

I made the most pitiable face I could.

Hwang Eun-Seo. Time for a god-like performance.

“Really, why did I stupidly bully Kim Yul? Just because others did it, I mindlessly joined in. Damn. I shouldn’t have.”

There. Now, sympathize with me. Pity me. I’m a humane person. I can regret and repent. But I haven’t committed a mortal sin! Hurry up and feel sorry for me!

“Kim Yul has every right to be angry at me. I could have stopped the others anytime, but I didn’t... Now I feel sorry. If I could, I’d apologize in front of the whole school. Seriously.”

"....."

The president stared at me intently. Deep, well-like eyes. A face difficult to read. But it was clear she was listening to my words.

“I got an idea.”

The president suddenly stood up.

“What?”

“I’ve thought of a way for you to get Kim Yul’s forgiveness. Just wait a moment. I’ll be back from the staff room.”

She dashed out of the classroom. I was dumbfounded. What is she doing? I mindlessly nibbled on a half-eaten piece of bread, lost in thought. The president returned when I was halfway through the bread.

“Great! I got confirmation from the teacher.”

“About what?”

“About the student council president speech. I asked if a non-candidate can speak at the podium. There’s no rule against it, they said.”

The president smiled confidently.

“You said you’d apologize in front of the whole school if you could. I was wondering how to structure my speech to beat your girlfriend, and this works out.”

“Uh...”

“Listen.”

The president sat down and pulled out his notebook. Scribble, scribble! Her old-fashioned handwriting danced across the page.

“Hwang Eun-Seo, you apologize to Kim Yul, stressing how sorry you are. Then I’ll take the mic and say, [The school I want to create as the student council president is one where we acknowledge our mistakes and forgive each other]. Get it?”

I didn’t quite follow.

“It’s about creating a story, not just listing promises!”

"....."

“Not sure about your girlfriend’s speech, but she’s rich, right? Obviously. She’ll probably use her own money to install perfume dispensers in school bathrooms or promise to never run out of toilet paper. If it’s about campaign promises, I have zero chance... So, let’s fight with a story.”

The president scribbled on her notebook.

+

A student council that solves problems!

A student council that connects!

We will be your emergency communication channel, students!

+

“Uhuhuh...”

The president's eyes sparkled.

"How about that!"

It felt incredibly cheesy.

"The era now is all about storytelling! I'm tired of hearing about toilet perfumes and paper. These have been promises since elementary school. This will work. Let's go with a story!"

"Hmm."

Well, student council elections are always filled with cheesy speeches. Any plausible-sounding rhetoric is attached. The idea presented by the class president didn't seem bad.

'But this guy...'

I looked at the president with newfound interest.

'He's completely disinterested in anything other than his election.'

Despite being the class president, why was she so keen on helping me? Selfish girl. From start to finish, her focus was only on using me for the election.

The president was indifferent to the ongoing class issues. She didn't care what happened to Kim Yul or why I was being ostracized. She only got involved thinking it could benefit her election. Even his motive for running was solely to get into a good university!

‘That’s right.’

But looking at the president, I completely cleared my doubts.

‘This kind of girl is easier to deal with.’

The president was like me. She was looking towards the future. Concerned about what lies ahead. How many would earnestly aim for the student council presidency for a university recommendation?

‘We’re similar.’

I felt more trust and even a sense of camaraderie. This

thought made me feel closer to her.

“But the election is just a few days away, right? Is it really okay to change your speech because of me?”

“It's fine. Winning is what matters.”

The president smiled.

“I've already invested about 20 hours in the election. I gave up that time of studying. I can't afford to lose.”

‘This girl. She really thinks like me, doesn't she?’

My trust in her grew even stronger.

“We're of the same kind.”

The idea that she was my kind made me feel even more comfortable.

“Okay, president. I’ll help you as much as I can. In return, you need to help me too, alright? Tell the others I want to reconcile. I regret what happened and I want to get along again if possible.”

“Yeah. Let’s both win-win.”

We shook hands.

“Thanks in advance.”

“Likewise!”

I helped the president with her election. Although I couldn’t openly support her in front, I revised her speech and worked on campaign slogans.

Despite the ongoing ostracism from classmates.

Somehow, just knowing that [I had something to do at school] provided a lot of psychological stability.

“Wow, you write well?”

The president was pleased with my apology and her speech. After school, in the sunset-soaked classroom of 2nd year, class 5, it was just the two of us.

“If you act well, we will definitely win.”

“Act?”

I was puzzled.

“What acting?”

“Huh? Hwang Eun-Seo, you aren’t really sorry towards Kim Yul.”

“Oh, it’s okay. I don’t care about the blame. I believe the attitude in apologizing matters more than the feeling of apology. To begin with, what even is a feeling of apology?”

The president flipped through my apology.

“Being embarrassed but still apologizing in front of the whole school counts as sincere, right? No matter how much you say sorry, what's the use if you don't act on it? In that sense, you, Hwang Eun-Seo, are a hundred times better than the others.”

Hmm.

Hmm...

“I asked Kim Yul yesterday. Has anyone ever apologized properly? He said not a single one. Even those who asked how they could be forgiven, you were the only one. Man, our classmates really lack shame.”

“President... you...”

She really understood.

I was slightly moved.

“Oh, of course, I'm happy about it. If you had gone around saying [Vote for my girlfriend! Only my girlfriend!], I'd have lost dozens of votes. I feel sorry for you being ostracized, but

honestly, I'm happy.”

“Wow, such a garbage girl...”

“Yes. Thanks. Aren't all people garbage anyway?”

I ended up laughing. It's true. After being dumped by my girlfriend, this was the first time I laughed in a while.

‘She really knows a thing or two.’

Humans are garbage. Beasts. If they seem tame, it's only because they've been domesticated from beasts to livestock. Those who realize this early are the ones who survive.

[Your immersion rate is currently 100%.]

Then, instead of being a goat, you could become a hyena. With luck, even a lion.

I can succeed.

People who complain about difficult human relationships are just trying to see people as people. It's effortless when you view them as livestock.

No friends? They see no benefit in being with you. Even playing together should at least relieve stress. Many friends? They're with you because there are benefits.

That's all there is to it.

True friendship comes only from true benefit.

'At least I won't lose anything being with this person.'

I grinned.

"President. Want to be friends?"

The president snorted.

"After I get elected as the student council president. Your speech is good, but needs a bit more refining. I'm working

hard to get the others to accept your apology. If I don't get elected, it's all for nothing."

"Got it! Okay. I'll write an amazing speech! I'll cry and snot while apologizing! I, Hwang Eun-Seo, will burn myself to make you, our president, the pride of Shinseo High!"

"Yes, understood. I'm counting on you, Mr. Eun-Seo."

We chuckled together.

Chapter 146: Friend (2)

"Wow, there's no rule that says you have to just sit around and die!"

Turning misfortune into a blessing.

Entering high school, this might be the first time I've truly felt what friendship is.

"They say a real friend is one who extends a hand in tough times."

Right. Let's reflect. I've been too arrogant.

People make mistakes in life. I trusted the kids too much! I never considered the possibility that one of my friends could leak the recording to get back at me.

"It's okay. There are still many days left to live."

I'm just a second-year high school student. I have more than 60 years ahead of me. There will be mistakes in the future, and times of despair with each mistake.

"But there's always a chance for a turnaround."

So let's not be easily disappointed. Don't give up too soon. Believe in myself. Believe in my friends! Unlike those livestock-like trash, I am strong! A strong human being.

"Life is about experiences."

Let's consider this a "good experience."

"It's better to experience this before entering society. Yes, let's think of it that way. It's not like I've failed in business or been caught by the police. It's just a bit of ostracism from the kids, right? And that will be resolved after the election anyway."

It's really a good experience.

"I'll also sneak in an apology to my girlfriend in the apology letter. Mentioning it directly would upset her, so I'll make it subtle so only those who know will understand."

Hmm. I should also apologize to the clients for the trouble I've caused.

"The ones I truly need to apologize to are actually the clients, not Kim Yul. Whether Kim Yul accepts my apology or not, it ends there, but the clients could become my clients again anytime. I should apologize sincerely."

On the day of the student council election—

I finally completed a masterpiece.

+

Hello, everyone.

I am Hwang Eun-Seo from Class 2-5.

(Bows in greeting.)

The reason I'm standing here today, even though I'm not running in the election, is that I have something to confess to all of you.

Students of Shinseo High School!

I have made a terrifying mistake.

I, Hwang Eun-Seo, participated in ostracizing a classmate.

(Pauses for 2 seconds.)

I did nothing when I saw a classmate being bullied. Not only did I not intervene, but I also joined in the bullying, claiming it was just 'playful teasing.' I hit him, cursed at him, and laughed at him, calling it 'just a joke.'

(Pause.)

Students of Shinseo High School.

Until now, I didn't realize that was wrong. I thought it was just playful teasing and jokes among friends. But one should never hurt someone under the guise of 'teasing,' nor laugh at someone under the guise of 'jokes.'

Not knowing it was wrong.

Causing hurt and laughter, unknowingly.

That is my greatest mistake.

A candidate in this student council election made me realize my mistake. I kept asking, 'What did I do wrong? It's just a joke, just some teasing,' and didn't listen to the candidate. But the candidate stayed after school for two weeks to talk to me.

'You need to apologize.'

'You can apologize.'

'If you sincerely apologize, you can be forgiven by your friend....'

Thank you.

(Bows towards the president.)

Thanks to the candidate's efforts and encouragement, today I am able to confess my mistakes in front of all the students, in front of my classmate.

Of course, the hurt my classmate received won't disappear just because I apologize today.

(Looks around the auditorium.)

Not only did I hurt my classmate, but I also caused trouble for other friends and many people in the school. I spoke and acted thoughtlessly. I believe many of you were disappointed in me.

(Bows to the audience.)

I was wrong.

(Bows and speaks.)

I'm sorry.

(From here, the speech goes off-script.)

(Speak with genuine emotion! Don't read the speech!)

(Memorize every line! Important!!)

From now on, I won't 'tease' or 'joke' lightly.

I will always think and rethink.

Not from my perspective, but from my friends', from others' perspectives.

(Enhance storytelling. Bring attention to surroundings.)

The friend I ostracized went to the school's animal pen early

every morning. He cared for the neglected chicks and rabbits there.

He is a diligent and really good friend.

I deeply regret bullying such a diligent and kind friend.

(Make a tangible promise that feels realistic.)

Starting today, I will take care of the animal pen, not just in his stead, but with him.

Every morning at 6:30, I will go to school to take care of the pen. I won't miss a single day until graduation, not even on weekends or holidays.

(Why? A plausible reason.)

This is not only to apologize to my friend, but to remind myself every day of the grave mistake I made.

(Chuckle.)

A single apology here doesn't erase the wrong. Nor should it. Students of Shinseo High School! If I miss even a day, please criticize me.

I haven't changed yet. But I want to change. I thank Candidate No. 2, who helped me change myself.

(It might be better to mention the number rather than the name??)

Students of Shinseo High School.

Candidate No. 2 made it possible for me to stand here today. Persuaded me. Spent two weeks just to convince one student.

(Emphasize No. 2.)

I believe this isn't just 'talking' communication, but true 'communication.' Communication is effort. It takes time. It changes the people around you.

(Absolutely don't read the speech. Speak naturally.)

(Look each person in the eye.)

Candidate No. 2 is a candidate who makes efforts.

A candidate who spends time on you.

A candidate who changes the friends around you.

(Conclude.)

I don't know how you will remember your school days.

But I hope you remember them happily and joyfully.
However, for all of us to be happy and joyful, none of us should suffer, even a little.

For a slightly better school life.

For a slightly more joyful school experience.

I ask for your vote for Candidate No. 2.

(Steps away from the microphone.)

(Shouts in a loud, clear voice.)

Kim Yul!

I'm really sorry for everything!

I truly regret it!

I hope we can be good to each other from now on!

(Bows in apology and greeting.)

(Exits.)

+

Perfect.

"Hmm. Good..."

The president read my apology letter and commented. Good? Is this just good? Are you blind? Thoroughly blind. This isn't just good, it's a masterpiece. Do you have any idea how much psychological technique is in here and you can't recognize it!

I need to be forgiving. Phew.

"Can you remember all the parts you need to say by heart?"

"Of course. I stayed up all night memorizing it. I can do it with my eyes closed."

"Reliable, Hwang Eun-Seo. I'm glad I chose you as a friend."

The president patted my shoulder. Brat.

"Let's check the rehearsal first..."

The president planned to use a PPT for his manifesto and vision. For that, the hall had to be darkened. Luckily, just pressing a button and waiting a bit would automatically move the curtains, darkening the hall quite a bit.

During the rehearsal, I accidentally made eye contact with my girlfriend.

".....Hmm."

My girlfriend pretended not to know me. But I deliberately bowed my head. I assumed an apologetic posture toward her. Then, unexpectedly, she looked surprised.

'Wait.'

I smiled inwardly.

'Today is Hwang Eun-Seo's comeback day.'

The time for the election speech approached.

The entire school gathered in the hall. It was bustling. My girlfriend seemed anxious, walking back and forth in the back of the hall.

In contrast, the president was calm. She sat upright in her chair, seemingly unaffected by nerves. Even I was a bit nervous, but what's with her iron heart?

"Hey. Aren't you nervous?"

"Not at all."

The president murmured softly.

"Nerves are for those who are unprepared. How much have I... How much have I prepared for today? How many times have I imagined this stage, this day? There's no way I'd let nerves ruin it."

Her voice was cold.

"....."

For a moment, I felt a chill down my spine. Her voice was so rational. Though we spent after-school hours together for the past few days, this was the first time I heard such a tone from her.

‘What? You’re acting differently too.’

Feeling somewhat rebuked, I stood awkwardly when someone approached us.

"Uh, excuse me."

A familiar face.

"It's time to start... Could you submit your USB...?"

The broadcast head, who had tried to blackmail me not long ago, approached timidly. As our eyes met, the director shrank back. Ha. He probably feels too guilty for being harsh on me.

"Sure, here."

The president handed the USB to the broadcast head.

The broadcast head's hands trembled as he received the USB.

"Is t-this the file I should display...?"

"Yes. Just do it like the [rehearsal]."

"Like the rehearsal... T-Then..."

"Then your job is done."

The president stared sharply at the broadcast head.

"Why? Do you think there's more to see?"

"No! Uh, no! I was just asking. Sorry! Thanks for your effort!"

The broadcast head scurried down to the podium, clutching

the USB. Below the podium was a collection of broadcasting equipment, including laptops and projectors, a dizzying array to behold.

‘...What's this?’

The broadcast head's behavior seemed very suspicious. He was always a bit strange, but he wasn't usually this stuttering.

"Now, we will have a speech from the principal."

But there was no time now to delve into the odd behavior. The principal and the chairman of the election committee (last year's student council president) successively unrolled their speeches. The hall, initially noisy with the entire school gathered, soon quietened.

"Would candidate number 1 please come forward."

My girlfriend spoke first.

As the president predicted, she bombarded with promises. Each pledge required money. However, she was rich enough to keep these extravagant promises, and most students were well

aware of it.

'Simple, yet powerful.'

She exited to thunderous applause.

'It's okay. As long as I act well, we will win. No, the president doesn't even need to win. I just have to do well. The important thing is to apologize to Kim Yul in front of the whole school. Then, [that's enough] will be what everyone thinks...'

I took a deep breath.

"Would candidate number 2 please come forward."

"....."

I looked back.

The president was watching me.

She nodded at me.

'Good.'

Let's go.

'Give it everything in the performance.'

I ascended the podium. With each step, the weight of gazes clinging to my body increased. Thump. Thump. I desperately suppressed the pounding of my heart.

Whoosh-

Thick curtains moved to block the sunlight. The hall was enveloped in dark shadows. The broadcast head adjusted the projector, and clear light shone on the stage. Dust particles twinkled in the light passing through the air.

Hundreds of gazes.

Hundreds of breaths.

"Hello, everyone."

I.

Slowly opened my mouth.

"I am Hwang Eun-Seo from Class 2-5."

And then.

"The reason I'm standing here today, even though I'm not running in the election, is that I have something to confess to all of you."

A truly memorable speech followed.

'Oh.'

Once I caught the rhythm, the tension washed away. No. The tension was still there, but the thrill of performing overwhelmed it, freely guiding my tongue.

'It's working.'

My voice naturally rose and fell.

'It's working!'

The expressions weren't awkward.

I could feel my facial muscles moving naturally.

'Damn! It's actually working!'

Thinking about it, I had filmed countless videos. Pretending to be a producer, I orchestrated Kim Yul's play. That was also a stage, a production. I had become the most skilled in acting in Shinseo Middle and High School.

"Students of Shinseo High School! Until now, I didn't realize that was wrong....!"

The provocative topic of bullying, coupled with my acting skills, even attracted the attention of disinterested third-year

students.

"I was wrong."

All the students were looking at me.

"I'm sorry."

Their breaths felt like a tangible flow in my hand.

"I haven't changed yet. But I want to change!"

Look at me. Look at Hwang Eun-Seo. He's not dead yet. He won't die.

Silly as it was to leak the recording, it was a mistake. Such mistakes can be covered up in this splendid way. I'm a great human being. Turning my head, even my girlfriend was staring at me in shock!

"I ask for your vote for Candidate No. 2."

I stepped back from the microphone and shouted.

"Kim Yul!"

Confident of victory.

"I'm really sorry for everything!"

I bowed towards where the students of Class 2-5 were gathered.

"I hope we can be good to each other from now on!"

Silence.

What broke the silence in the hall was a faint sound.

Clap,

From the direction I bowed, applause started.

Clap clap, clap, clap.

Kim Yul stood up, clapping his hands. Yes, it was Kim Yul. The very person I apologized to, the one who should forgive me, was giving a standing ovation. Although Kim Yul's expression was cold, and the applause wasn't enthusiastic, a standing ovation had only one meaning.

Forgiveness!

Following Kim Yul's lead, other students also started clapping. Applause easily spread. As if they had seen a great show, as if saying, "That's enough," the students clapped. Even the teachers joined in.

‘Sob...!’

Tears welled up in my eyes.

‘Thank you!’

Not because Kim Yul forgave me. What use is it if recycled trash forgives me or not? It's because I did it. I fell into hell but managed to recover on my own. That's what makes me proud.

‘Thank you, me! Thank you for not giving up! Well done!’

Clap clap clap clap-

‘Thank you all!’

Clap clap, clap, clap clap-.

‘Thank you for being swept away by the mood! Thank you! Keep being livestock! Even after I graduate, go into society, become an adult, forever remain as livestock!’

I was grateful for everything in this world.

-Hey.

A sound flowed from the speakers installed in the hall.

-Senior.

The sound of applause did not subside easily. At first, the sound from the speakers was drowned out by the noise. But as the broadcast head adjusted the volume, the sound gained strength.

-Is it okay to film this?

I wiped away tears. Uncertain, but it seemed the broadcast head had played some video. Turning around, a video was projected on the dark wall of the hall.

-Don't worry.

A familiar face appeared in the video.

-I'll just share it with a few people and then delete it.

It was me.

"....."

Huh?

-Hello, clients. Kim Yul TV is back again today. Ah, I received many notes saying Kim Yul TV sounds cheesy. I agree!

An unrealistic scene flowed.

In the video, I was holding a camcorder, filming my face and Kim Yul. It was before the [game] had officially started. The kids were casually poking Kim Yul as a joke.

-But I have no sense of naming. Haha. If you, clients! Could name the series through notes, I would appreciate it!

Wait, what?

-So, let's keep the introduction short. Today, how will we play with Kim Yul! Many of you have participated. Among those who participated today, the lucky winner is... Ta, ta, ta, ta-ra.

The entire school gathered in the hall buzzed.

-Queen!

The teachers looked at the video.

-Congratulations! Ah, let's quickly announce Queen's request. Speed up. Quickly. Ah, prepare two banana milks. In one, blend a centipede, and in the other...

My mind went blank.

“Hwang Eun-Seo, you crazy bastard!”

Someone shouted.

My girlfriend's voice.

Having finished the speech and returned to my place, my girlfriend stood, shouting.

“You crazy bastard! Psychopath! You, you damn dog----”

I couldn't hear my girlfriend's voice clearly.

I was just dazed.

I instinctively turned my head to look at the broadcast head.

"....."

The broadcast head was slumped, clutching the mouse connected to the laptop.

I turned my gaze again.

This time towards the president.

"....."

The president was smiling.

"....."

A very kind smile.

Chapter 147: Friend (3)

The president's smile was perfect.

The corners of her mouth lifted just the right amount. Her lips were neatly curved. Her eyes gently drooped, without any exaggeration. Thus, when the corners of his mouth dropped and her eyes lifted, returning to her usual expressionless face, I felt almost enchanted.

The president ascended the podium.

Leaving me standing there, dazed and confused, he grabbed the microphone.

"Students of Shinseo High School."

His voice spread through the buzzing hall.

"The video you are now seeing shows Hwang Eun-Seo, a student of Class 2-5, collectively bullying fellow student Kim Yul. This is not a staged scene. It's an actual act of violence."

The president didn't hold a speech in his hand. It was a completely different speech from the rehearsal, one I had never heard before.

"Thanks to an anonymous informant, I have obtained such materials. Yes, materials. The criminal acts committed by Hwang Eun-Seo of Class 2-5 are documented in 103 audio files, 311 videos, and 30,790 photos."

Criminal acts?

Videos?

Photos?

"Broadcast head, please switch to the PPT."

"Yes, y-yes..."

The projector shone on the hall's wall, displaying the photos. Although the quality wasn't great, it was evident that everyone was wearing our school uniform.

"Today, after this announcement, we will formally report Hwang Eun-Seo, a student of Class 2-5. Of course, the victim, Kim Yul from the same class, will also sue Hwang Eun-Seo."

Report? Sue?

"I want to ask the teachers working at Shinseo High School: did anyone know about such violence? ...No one, I see. Yes, that's right. Despite the repetitive criminal acts over the past year, the teachers responsible for school life have taken no action. This is the reality of Shinseo High School."

The teachers' reactions weren't much different from mine. Everyone was stunned. A few teachers whispered urgently to their colleagues, and one of the head teachers stood up.

"Wait a minute. Wait! Hey, come down! What are you doing now...!"

"I believe the teachers will also promptly join in the report. I am informing you of the actual situation of school violence."

"No, if we handle it this way..."

"Everyone. Please note that my presentation is currently being recorded as video footage. The materials have already been sent to some media outlets this morning. Please be aware of this."

"....."

The head teacher, in the midst of standing up, looked at the principal. All the teachers were looking at the principal. The principal glanced at his phone, mumbling, 'Just a moment, please. Wait a moment.' Whether he was making or receiving a call, he started talking to someone, head bowed.

This attitude temporarily paralyzed the faculty.

"It's a lie!"

I yelled into the microphone I held.

"These are all fabricated photos! They're fake!"

But my voice didn't carry through the speakers. I realized too late that the broadcast head had turned off my mic.

"Please look at the student Hwang Eun-Seo standing here."

Only the president's voice resounded in the hall.

"Do you remember what Hwang Eun-Seo just said in his apology? He said, [I saw a classmate being bullied and did nothing]. [I even joined in with the others and participated in the bullying]. Do you remember?"

The students murmured.

"He tried to excuse himself by saying he was just 'involved' in the violence. That he wasn't the main culprit. Despite organizing the violent group himself, filming, and distributing the videos, Hwang Eun-Seo never admitted his wrongdoing until the end. He feigned sincerity in his apology to all of you."

All the students stared at me.

"Look at Hwang Eun-Seo's face. Remember his expression."

Yes.

It was the president.

"Remember Hwang Eun-Seo's logic. Remember his methods. Witness exactly how this person led the violence and tried to escape."

He was the one who plotted to hunt me down.

"....."

The president lowered the microphone. Wrapping his right hand around the mic, he turned to me and spoke in a voice only I could hear.

"Ah. That was exhausting."

His voice was so calm that I almost lost touch with reality.

"Anyway, Hwang Eun-Seo, your life is over. You'd be surprised at how many charges you've committed. Though you

can't be locked up for your entire life since you're a minor, it's okay. We'll just socially annihilate you."

"You, you....."

"I had a hard time pretending to be your friend."

The president sighed.

"Really. I was too emotional in my younger days. Talking to you made me feel nauseous. It's good that my back doesn't hurt, but still, the world is too soft... Well, that's why I ended up in that college."

The president grumbled.

"Do you know? To serve society, you need a lot of money. Whatever you do, it's money, money. Planting trees or going to disaster areas, even caring for teachers, it all costs money. If I had known this during my school days, I would have..."

"You fucking bitch! What nonsense are you spouting!!"

I screamed, furious. Immediately after, I realized my shout echoed too loudly in the hall. I hesitated. Unlike the president's whispered nonsense, my outcry resonated powerfully.

"Yeah."

The president smiled.

"I said that nonsense so you would shout. Kid, you really took the bait."

Seeing him smile again, my head went blank once more.

"Probably right now, you think your connections... Hah."

The president covered her mouth with her left hand and chuckled.

"Ah, sorry. It's just funny."

This guy.

“Anyway, your connections won’t help you. Your girlfriend, was it? We negotiated various things in exchange for deleting videos involving her. Your ‘clients’ are all negotiating. Remember this. Those from well-off families don’t care about you. Their only concern is [not being mentioned in the case].”

Meanwhile, the broadcast head continued flipping through the PPT. The photos continued. The students went from murmuring to buzzing, and reactions like ‘fuck’ and ‘is he crazy?’ emerged from all over the hall.

“I’m sorry to Kim Yul, but... with my current status, this is my limit. It can’t be helped. Haven’t I always told you, Gong-Ja?”

The president smiled politely with his lips.

"People should do what they can."

At that smile, I snapped.

"Ah. If I leave this guy alone, the world will become dirtier. There will come a time when you meet such a person. If you meet such a person, don't regret it later, get rid of them quickly. It's better to act when you can, without regrets."

I screamed and rushed at the president. She didn't resist, instead slightly chuckling.

“Anyway. This is why you should raise children well, so your later years are comfortable...”

I swung my fist. I knocked down the president and pinned her. Screams came from behind, but I didn't stop. Bitch. You bitch! Because of you! How dare you do this to me! My life!

“Hey, Hwang Eun-Seo! Calm down! Teachers! Stop him!”

“Broadcast head! Stop it! Can't you stop filming right now?!”

“But, but yelling at me... I have to do this...”

My life!

[Clear conditions met.]

[Considering the peculiarities of this stage, a judgment is requested.]

I did my best... I may not have lived the best life, but I really did my best! Who here has worked harder than me! Who has tried to live life as earnestly as me!

[Judgment complete.]

[The Master of All Lives acknowledges 'Stage Clear'.]

No!

[However, 'Story of the City of Ascension - Side Story' will not be incorporated into the original history.]

No!

[Stage Clear.]

I can't accept it! I won't accept it! This is fraud! It's unjust! It's not right! Yes, it's wrong! It's about human rights! Everyone has the right to a fair trial... I'm a human too! This is wrong!

[Today, the 29th floor has been cleared.]

I feel wronged.

Pity me... Quick. Pity me, quick.

[The Master of All Lives announces on behalf of the tower.]

I...

[You've worked hard, everyone.]

I did nothing wrong.

[Although I may have been a bit biased towards you, it's nothing that other children wouldn't overlook. I'm more lenient with those who struggle.]

No wrongdoing at all.

[May fortune be with you.]

.

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.

That was my first defeat.

".....!"

I quickly inhaled and sat up abruptly with a "huff!" My heart pounded furiously. Although this wasn't the first time I had completely immersed myself in a character, it was still hard to get used to the pain in my heart when returning to my senses.

Looking around, I found myself in a corner of the Great Library.

"Uhhh...."

"Ughh....."

The Constellation Killer and the Director also slowly sat up. For a while, the three of us just caught our breath. We didn't have the energy to do anything else. My mind was a tangled mess.

“Gong-Ja....”

It was only after more than 10 minutes that the Director murmured.

“Yes?”

“Come here for a moment....”

The Director weakly beckoned me with her finger. Something felt ominous. It reminded me of the fierce look in her eyes when we kids used to fight at the orphanage. I obediently went to the Director and knelt before him.

“Here I am....”

“In the ancient Spring and Autumn Period, there lived a man called Renzi Gu.”

I grew even more anxious.

The Director has a habit of beating around the bush when scolding us. She always gives us time to think after asking a question and takes her time to start when she's angry. As far as I remember, the story of 'Renzi Gu' was considered an S-tier warning among us.

“Yes....”

“You must remember the story I told you many times. He was the man who dug up the corpse of his family's murderer

and whipped the bones until they turned to dust. But think about it.”

“Yes....”

“What if Renzi Gu was about to dig up the grave for revenge, and suddenly someone comes along and digs the grave for him, leaving the coffin outside? Would Renzi Gu be thankful for someone digging the grave for him, or would he be angry for someone touching the tomb he was planning to avenge?”

“Um....”

“Half of his revenge remained missing*, didn’t it?”

*The director says that half of the characters of the 4-character idiom, also known as a Chengyu, are missing (Chunmyo missing from Chunmyomun). This one in particular means to exhume a body for public flogging.

I stammered, confused.

“D-Director.”

“Go ahead, speak.”

“Am I in trouble because I tried too hard? Did I choose a method that was too self-sacrificing? Like, why don’t you take care of your own body...?”

“Gong-Ja, you’re an adult now. You should manage your own body, why should I interfere? Wasn’t it hard enough raising you? Do I have to worry about your upbringing too?”

The Director spoke harshly. It was remarkable. Remarkable in that the Director nonchalantly spoke like this, and my memory was remarkable for momentarily forgetting that she was always like this.

“I raised you to grow up strong. Pity is like a gift that feels good occasionally, but if you keep receiving it without discretion, it drains your energy and makes you weak. Gong-Ja, I don’t pity your life at all. Live as you wish to.”

-Indeed...

The Guardian Spirit muttered from the side.

-Seeing how this zombie brat turned out, he's been well trained right from the sapling...

Suddenly, I became curious about the current status of my orphanage mates. Han Feizi became a congressman, right? If I search online, will I find some dog videos?

“Gong-Ja.”

“Yes, yes.”

“If you hadn't given me the audio files or videos, I would have worked hard to... sorry, no need to apologize. You're an adult now. Right. I would have worked hard to screw over Hwang Eunseo. Why are you meddling with the revenge? Want to be scolded?”

No, I couldn't be scolded at this age! Especially not in front of the Guardian Spirit and Shiny!

“No. But I had to do something... I entered the stage a year earlier than you, Director. And, I was at 95% immersion. Doesn't that make a person a bit hasty and desperate?”

"....."

Hesitation.

The Director hesitated for a moment after hearing the words 'one year' and '95%'. Yes! As expected of the Director! He pretends not to, but he really considers others. I've grown up too!

"That's right, Director. You told us, you told me, to live as we want. When I fell into the stage, I did what I wanted. I followed your teachings."

-Indeed...

The Guardian Spirit muttered again.

-This kid's tongue must have been trained well. He's been trained to be shameless right from the sapling...

Then,

“Hm.”

The Constellation Killer stood up. Like someone who had a nightmare and shed tears, his eyes were moist.

"King of Death. You have made me understand and feel [Kim Yul]. I remember now. I learned a lot, but there's one thing I want to ask you."

The Constellation Killer looked directly at me, not wiping away the tears.

"What do you wish for me to do now?"

"....."

I opened my mouth.

"Kim Yul was a victim. He was murdered. And in his final moments, he left a will."

The one responsible for my death is you.

Don't forget.

You killed me.

+

Three sentences forming a grudge.

It was a scream left behind so that the murderers, the beasts, would never forget what they did. To suffer endlessly, forever.

"But."

I took a handkerchief out of my pocket and clenched it.

"You forgot."

The Constellation Killer tilted his head.

"What do you mean?"

"The lives sacrificed because you killed the Constellations. Countless humans from numerous worlds."

"You forgot."

The 50th floor achieved through a loophole.

There, the Constellation Killer had said,

『I suffer from amnesia, stranger.』

Not remembering the deeds committed.

『My mistake lies in two things. First, I didn't consider the possibility of new constellations being born in worlds where constellations disappeared. Second, I underestimated the fact that a dead constellation could curse the world.』

『The same error won't happen again.』

『I expressed my gratitude for this advice by offering a compensation.』

I clenched the handkerchief again.

"A crime committed unknowingly. Not intentional. Then you forget it, live on as if nothing happened. Did [Kim Yul] think the beasts who mauled him should forget him?"

"....."

"Those who tore Kim Yul apart are the worst scumbags. Constellation Killer. But your sins don't change because of that."

What I want is.

"Don't make the same excuses as those beasts."

For you to change.

To return from being a puppet.

To become a human, if possible.

"Look at those who wronged you. And those whose lives you wronged. Face them directly."

"....."

"Make your decision here. If you don't want to, I will never summon you again through Ghoul Reincarnation. And someday, I will find and destroy all your puppets. But if..."

"If..."

The Constellation Killer looked at me.

His blue eyes trembled.

"If I decide to face it, what happens?"

Whether it was traces left by someone who had been in class 2-5 at Shinseo High School or the Constellation Killer's own emotions, I couldn't tell.

So I asked.

"What would Kim Yul have done?"

"What do you want to do?"

The Constellation Killer opened his mouth.

"I want..."

Chapter 148:

Prologue (1)

Great Library of All Knowledge.

The shadows cast by the bookshelves intertwined, forming a complex web.

"I do not know."

The Constellation Killer's voice wandered through them.

"It's difficult. Hard to comprehend. Did I really kill that many lives? Are there really that many lives lost because of me? It's impossible to be responsible even for a single death, yet alone the people living in so many worlds..."

The Constellation Killer fumbled to pull out an old diary.

Like Kim Yul became a trace of the Constellation Killer, the Constellation Killer kept a diary even as his memories faded.

"Goddess of Protection, The Old Man from the Deep, The Follower of the Distant Eyes."

These were the Constellations the Constellation Killer had slain.

He softly recited the names, marked in red and lined across the pages.

"The Great Serpent Nurtured in the Seven Sounds, The Stork Roaming the Universe, The Witch who Perished in the Frosty Dawn, The Lion Dreaming of Annihilation, The Corpse Poison Flower, The Moon Engulfed in the Last Quarter, The Golden Dragon of the Great River..."

Names flowed on. The recitation seemed endless.

After naming hundreds of Constellations, the Constellation Killer slowly turned to face me.

".....I do not know. I cannot understand. But entering Kim

Yul's body, feeling his resentment and curses upon the world, I empathized with Kim Yul. I agreed. Kim Yul wanted revenge on those who pushed him to this end."

The Constellation Killer paused for a moment.

"So it is."

He muttered.

"I, too, must be subject to the vengeance of those worlds."

Thud.

He closed the diary.

"Even if I end my life, it wouldn't be sufficient atonement. Eternal suffering. The worlds would only wish for me to suffer eternally. But suffering alone lacks meaning... How can I apologize to the lives already lost through mere suffering?"

I nodded.

"Librarian."

At my call, the Holed-Up Head Librarian peeked out from the bookshelf, his cheeks flushed red.

"Welcome! Unlike the previous Apocalypses, I couldn't directly observe your journey this time. I've just rushed through the newly added side story of [City of Ascension]. Ah, really..."

"Enough of that. Come here."

"King of Death, you grow stricter with me each day..."

The Head Librarian fluttered over.

"Here I am. What would you have me do? If you wish, I can..."

"Hand me the [Leafanta Aegim's Epic]."

"Ah... even though I said I would, do you know? The books

in my possession are all my sacred relics. Only I can create such precious works in this world of All Knowledge. Treating these priceless books as if they are simply there for the taking is problematic..."

"Of course, I'll give it to you", he said, handing me the book.

"Constellation Killer."

"Hmm."

"This book contains your story. From when you first fell into another world, met the Goddess of Protection, became Leafanta Aegim, and then the Constellation Killer. Your entire life is recorded here."

"....."

"You may have lost your memories, but they aren't gone forever. Again. Regain them."

Silence fell in the library. The Constellation Killer wordlessly looked at [Leafanta Aegim's Epic]. The Head Librarian let out a small sigh, observing us both.

He immediately understood the meaning of my words.

The Constellation Killer did not.

"Again, you say."

"Yes. Just like we glimpsed into Kim Yul's past."

".....From the beginning?"

"From the beginning."

"To peer again into my life, spanning hundreds of years, from the very start."

"What you did, what you thought, the worlds you trampled, and the lives that existed in those worlds."

"....."

"The first step to everything is remembering. 'Do not forget.' That's what Kim Yul insisted with his life. You too, should stake your life on it."

Silence.

"I understand."

Silence.

"I judge it to be the right thing to do."

And more silence.

"....."

The Constellation Killer took [Leafanta Aegim's Epic] from me. To receive it, he had to put back his diary. Instead of the diary, filled with pages of day-by-day life, he now held the book that detailed his entire existence from start to finish.

"Indeed."

The Constellation Killer muttered, holding the book.

"Just repeating one's life is enough to turn the world into a simple hell. Does each person carry their own hell?"

He turned his head. There sat the director.

"Class President."

The director, called by this name, couldn't immediately respond. She just couldn't. In that silence lay decades of separation.

".....Yes. Kim Yul."

The Constellation Killer, called as Kim Yul, also couldn't immediately respond. He just couldn't. In that silence lay centuries of distance.

Decades endured by one, and centuries discarded by another, settled in the quiet air of the library.

"Kim Yul thought he wanted to forgive you."

The Constellation Killer spoke.

"And I, too, share the same thought as Kim Yul."

"I want you to be forgiven."

The director closed her lips.

The director closed her eyes. But can it be said 'the director closed her eyes'? Perhaps not. By then, the director could no longer control her body. It wasn't that she closed her lips, but her lips closed themselves; it wasn't that she closed her eyes, but her eyes closed on their own.

".....,"

A sigh close to a breath slipped through the director's lips. 'Thank you.' She could've said that. 'I'm sorry.' She must've wanted to say that. But the director held back all words. The unheld words flowed out as sighs.

".....I..."

The sigh was not words but fragments.

But somehow, I knew what picture those fragments wished to paint.

"I... just a little more..."

If I had lived just a little better.

If I had just a little more power.

If I was just a little smarter in my childhood.

".....!"

At that moment, I realized. A lightning-like tremor pierced through my entire body. The director's tightly closed lips, closed eyes, and the backs of her hands resting on the floor. The aged skin on her arms. The trembling of her whole stooped body. Seeing all this, I realized something.

'Ah.'

The director was screaming in agony.

'What I must prove.'

There are people in this world screaming in pain.

'What I want to prove.'

Among the chaos of beasts and humans, there are people, like isolated islands, whose screams occasionally reach my ears, whose suffering catches my eyes.

I just want to prove these screams.

'There are people here.'

My Demonic Heaven.

'There are people living here.'

The one who first wove the pattern of Demonic Heavenly God Art, the one who first preached the doctrine of shadows, must have felt the emotion I'm feeling now.

He was angry. He was sad. Seeing the starving, the thirsty, observing the nine paths of life and nine types of death, he must have felt the need to 'prove it.'

"....."

I want to prove it.

I want to tell everyone.

I want to etch into the world the existence of these people, that they cannot be erased.

'Do not forget.'

I want to encapsulate the director's current state in my

Demonic Heaven.

But not just that.

The dance of the children who laughed at me in the Hellfire Mansion, the wails of the Preta embracing the corpses of a mother and children in the center of the village, the figure of the master slashing away in the snow-wiped plain. Raviel. Raviel as well.

'Do not forget.'

The first form of Demonic Heavenly God Art encapsulated hunger.

'Now, it's time to encapsulate my Demonic Heaven.'

The first form with the children's dance.

The second form with Preta's lament.

The third form with the master's sword.

The fourth form with Raviel's sacrifice.

The fifth form with the director's silence.

'I want to encapsulate it.'

Can I do it? Can I encapsulate not just one person's life, but many?

'Even if it takes my entire life.'

Determination.

A purpose has been established in my life.

'Let's prove that people lived here. That people died here. Let's prove how they lived and how they died. Let's encapsulate the noise of the beasts and the screams of the people. Even if he laughed, let's capture the vibration of that laughter.'

But.

'Not yet.'

I still have things to finish here. Many things. Redefining the forms of Demonic Heavenly God Art from scratch is not fitting for my level, and it would take an enormous amount of mental strength and effort to possibly achieve it.

'...Yes. Let's not rush. Let's do what I can for now.'

I turned my head.

And looked at our observer.

"Librarian. No, Hamusutra."

The Head Librarian shivered, making noises and looking at the Constellation Killer and the director. Startled by my call, he flinched.

"Calling me by my real name. How embarrassing! Please call me by my alias."

"Allow the Constellation Killer to read [Leafanta Aegim's Epic] whenever he wishes. It doesn't need to be in the form of a stage strategy. Just like you observe the world, let the Constellation Killer do the same."

"Ah. Um. Hmm."

The Head Librarian panted heavily and pondered laboriously.

"For that, I'd have to share my authority... Perhaps appoint him as an Apostle. Hmm. While some Constellations create Apostles without hesitation, for me, it's... not really my style or preference..."

Of course, a character like the Head Librarian, known as the Holed-Up Head Librarian, wouldn't have followers or friends. Only strange servants like the Bookmark Maid.

"Don't you want to?"

"It's not that I don't want to..."

"Even though I gathered him as a ghoul, the other

Constellation Killer is just a copy of the puppets from [Puppeteer's Parade]. What's the difference?"

"Hmm, well. There's no difference, but..."

"You decide."

"Decide, you say...?"

"You've loved the story of the Constellation Killer until now. But following your own words, there's now a fork in the road for the Constellation Killer. Two paths have emerged."

"A fork."

"Yes."

I met the Head Librarian's eyes.

"Route 1. In this route, the Constellation Killer never met me. There's no memory of it. He stays on the 50th floor as usual. Every week, when his memories accumulate, he goes

out to hunt Constellations."

The Puppet Route.

The route where the Constellation Killer forever stages [Puppeteer's Parade].

"Route 2."

And the Constellation Killer who met me is here.

"Now, the Constellation Killer knows about Kim Yul. He has remembered. Starting from Kim Yul, he will slowly retrace the life of Leafanta Aegim."

It will be hard.

"He will reincarnate into the book, walking the path he has walked over hundreds of years, once again."

It will be painful.

"But in that route, I will be there, and the director will be there too. He doesn't need to swallow his entire life from the beginning. Slowly. Just as much as he can digest, one bite at a time. It's okay to rest along the way."

But that's the Constellation Killer's life.

Eventually something that will become Kim Yul's life.

"You choose the route for the Constellation Killer."

"....."

The Head Librarian looked at the Constellation Killer.

The silence of the Constellation didn't last long.

"Constellation Killer. And the nurturer of the King of Death."

The Head Librarian smiled and stretched his arms towards the Constellation Killer and the director.

That day, someone's epilogue might have ended.

"Would you be interested in working as a librarian?"

And someone's prologue began.

Chapter 149:

Prologue (2)

Now, let's talk about someone's prologue.

"Ah! It was a joyous and happy time."

In the Forbidden Book section of the Great Library of All Knowledge. After the other hunters had left, it was just me and the Head Librarian.

It seemed the Head Librarian wanted to bid me a personal farewell. Standing beneath the bookshelves that built walls like bricks of old hardcover books, he looked infinitely small.

"Do you know, King of Death?"

"What?"

"Happiness evaporates quickly."

The Head Librarian smiled.

"Happiness is loving this moment. Being helpless against the charm of the moment. Oh, the great nature of it. Moments are like a continuously flowing stream, floating my happiness like a fallen leaf on the water, bound to drift away."

The Head Librarian leisurely swirled his left arm.

Several volumes of Apocalypses flew together and gathered in one place.

Among them were Apocalypses I had conquered and others conquered by different hunters.

+

22nd Floor: The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon
(Genre: Martial Arts, Fusion)

23rd Floor: Chronicles of the Space Iron Knight (Genre: SF)

24th Floor: Daybreak Mountain Hut Diary (Genre: Mystery, History)

25th Floor: Tales of the Sormewin Academy (Genre: Romance, Fantasy)

26th Floor: Festival City Apocalypse (Genre: Sports)

27th Floor: Epic of Bakery Street (Genre: Cooking, Management)

28th Floor: Me and Our Scapegoat (Genre: Fairy Tale)

29th Floor: City of Ascension - Side Story (Genre: School)

+

“Wow, how beautiful... Not a bad [Book List] at all. Though not without its faults, compared to the book lists completed by warriors from other worlds. No, incomparably excellent.

Almost too precious to give as a gift.”

The Head Librarian's eyes sparkled like a child's.

Everyone seeks their own treasure in childhood. A fake gem made of transparent plastic, a red or black BB pellet among the white ones, or a crude but delicately fingered doll.

We always needed our secret treasures. The Head Librarian was admiring his own treasure.

"How were the hunters from other worlds?"

"Well, they usually picked one of two paths. Either choosing Apocalypses that were easy to conquer or those that would benefit the tower."

"Technically, we belong to the latter."

"Hehe."

The Head Librarian covered his mouth with his sleeve.

"You're being too modest. If it was just about clearing the floor, there was no need to solve the grudge of the Heavenly Demon. Do you know the simplest strategy?"

"What was it?"

"Hiding in a remote cave."

The Head Librarian lightly touched the Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon.

Suddenly, the surroundings changed. Whoosh! Light enveloped us. I closed my eyes briefly and when I opened them, the library had vanished. Instead, we were floating amidst a snowstorm on a snowy mountain.

-Just wait until those creatures die.

Unknown hunters were hiding in a cave on the snowy mountain. Wearing entirely different attire, I realized they were hunters from another world.

-It's not that hard. Just be careful of the zombies roaming around.

-Great! Let's all hang in there!

The Head Librarian looked down at them and said:

"A record from the distant past. Hunters who once challenged the Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon. They were from a tower in a world different from yours. They chose to hide until the Heavenly Demon and the Head of the Martial Alliance died."

"....."

"After 10 days from the start, the Head of the Martial Alliance dies. The Heavenly Demon goes mad. In her madness, she scatters her vital energy until she dies. Ta-da! Cleared!"

The Head Librarian playfully moved his fingers.

"Well, they had a bad location and got attacked by zombies and died. But the strategy itself wasn't wrong. Just waiting was enough to clear the Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon. The only things to prepare for were countermeasures against the cold, food supply, and the ability to stealthily avoid zombies and the Heavenly Demon. A suitable B-grade difficulty, isn't it?"

"....."

"But, King of Death, you didn't do that."

The Head Librarian looked at me.

Beyond his shoulder, a blizzard from the old days shimmered like a hologram.

"You always treated the characters as human beings. You did your best. You were angry and also saddened. You took the story of the Apocalypses as your own."

The Head Librarian moved his left hand and touched the Tales of the Sormewin Academy. Whoosh! The snowy scene vanished.

Now we were in the basement of the residence where Raviel stayed.

Raviel was standing there, and an unnamed man was kneeling, chained.

-This is a scam! It's a fraud!

The man was bloody, seemingly tortured.

-According to the strategy guide, you like white flowers! Why doesn't your favorability increase when I give you flowers every day, make your favorite food, and have pleasant conversations?! It's a scam! This ending makes no sense!

-Tsk.

Raviel clicked her tongue in disgust.

-Pathetic. Are all the apostles of the Constellations like this?

-Just fall for me! You're just a petty Constellation! Fall for me!

-...Is my world considered the universe's trash can by the Constellations? Throwing their garbage here one by one. Oh dear. It's hard enough to care for my people, and life is getting harder as days go by.

Raviel lightly poured poison on the man's head. His scalp began to dissolve.

-Aaaaahhh! Ahhhhh!

The man writhed in agony from the deadly poison. Raviel sighed deeply and left the basement. Boom. The door closed, and the scream stopped.

“This is also one of the things that happened in the past.”

The Head Librarian shrugged.

“It's difficult for a human to treat another human as a human. You accomplished that difficult task. I salute you for that. Although we might never meet again... always remember that I support you.”

“Won't we meet again?”

"Ah! I must now welcome warriors from other worlds."

The Head Librarian giggled.

"I can't always look after just you. The world is infinite, and towers are countless. Just like you, numerous warriors are climbing the tower right now! I must welcome them as agreed with the Master of All Lives... Ah, sorry. I can't say any more."

The Head Librarian extended his right hand.

"Well done."

He smiled gently.

"Now that I've shaken hands with my favorite character and recruited another as a librarian... oh?"

His words trailed off for a reason.

Squeeze.

The Head Librarian tried to release the handshake, but I didn't let go.

"King of Death?"

The Head Librarian tilted his head.

"Regretting parting with me? I'm flattered, but you've already conquered from the 21st to the 30th floors. Ah, a rest area will also be created on the 30th floor. There's a Revelation called [Resort City Story]. A paradise-like resort will be there, and I'll provide it as a service..."

I looked expressionlessly down at the Constellation.

"....."

The Head Librarian grew quieter.

"King of Death...?"

According to the Head Librarian's favorite expression.

"Why? I'm a bit scared..."

Today was the day Kim Yul and the director ended their long prologue and finally started the main story.

"Head Librarian."

But that's not all.

"There's something I want to ask before we part."

"What is it...?"

"You."

Since conquering the Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon.

"Do you have no meaning in life anymore?"

I've been waiting for this moment.

"Why do you favor the Constellation Killer? Leafanta Aegim is a human who goes around killing Constellations. If anything, I would think you would dislike him, not understand why you would like him."

We landed on a snowy mountain the day we finished the Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon. Facing the dead, blackened corpse of a dragon, the Head Librarian and I had our first candid conversation about our true feelings.

"Since you asked, I'll tell you. I have a very old dream."

"A dream?"

"Yes."

The Head Librarian's eyes sparkled innocently.

"It's to appear directly in the novels I love!"

The Head Librarian explained. There's a difference between 'intervening' in a story and 'appearing' in it. He confessed he wanted to naturally appear in the story, becoming an equal character among the others.

"To avoid meddling, there's only one way to become a character in the story."

"Instead of me going to the characters in the novel, the characters in the novel come to me."

The Head Librarian whispered like a boy in love.

"Leafanta Aegim, the Constellation Killer, keeps moving between worlds, killing Constellations. Someday, he will visit the Great Library of All Knowledge in my world. To kill me."

That was why the Head Librarian loved Constellation Killer.

"I'm waiting for the day the Constellation Killer visits the Great Library."

His only way to become a character in the story.

"I look forward to the day he, of his own accord and following his story, stands before me. That day, I will finally appear in the story of Leafanta Aegim!"

The Head Librarian declared.

"Being killed by the protagonist, what a perfect epilogue, right?"

And then.

I speak up.

"Now, that's gone. Your reason for living."

"....."

The Head Librarian's expression hardened.

"...What do you mean?"

"You said it. Your dream was to become a character in a story. Not to forcefully intervene but to appear naturally. And Constellation Killer was the only one who could fulfill that dream. But now..."

I smiled.

"Do you still wait for the Constellation Killer to kill you?"

"....."

"Do you think Constellation Killer, who met the director, will kill you?"

The Head Librarian swallowed.

"No. What are you talking about... I don't understand. The Constellation Killer that was taken in as a ghoul is just one of many. There's still a Constellation Killer on the 50th floor. He will come to me someday and kill me, right...?"

"True, but."

I gripped the Head Librarian's right hand tighter.

"That Constellation Killer is not the one you chose. I asked you earlier."

Route 1.

Constellation Killer on the 50th floor, who neither met me nor forgave the director.

Route 2.

Constellation Killer who met me and finally forgave the director.

I asked which of these two would be recognized as "Constellation Killer's story."

"And you chose the second route."

And the Head Librarian acknowledged the latter as the official history. The story of Constellation Killer being possessed by Kim Yul, receiving an apology from the director, all of it was accepted as Constellation Killer's life.

Meaning.

"Even if Constellation Killer from the 50th floor comes to you one day, could you truly be happy in that moment?"

"Could you wholeheartedly accept the Constellation Killer, who hasn't experienced anger, sorrow, revenge, or forgiveness, as the real Constellation Killer? Could you accept being killed by such an ending?"

The Head Librarian might not have realized it, but he had essentially shattered his own 'dream.'

"It's impossible to accept. You are a person who follows stories more than anything. You wouldn't want to be killed by someone you don't acknowledge, by an [extra]."

"And just so you know, denying it is useless."

Because I can see it clearly.

'Character Window.'

Who the Constellation in front of me loves.

+

Name: Holed-Up Head Librarian

Favorability: 95

Preferred Genres: [Fusion], [Romance], [Mystery], [Adventure], [Horror], [History], [War], [Sports], [SF], [Mythology], [Fairy Tale]...

Disliked Genres: None

Preferred Characters: [Fictional Characters], [King of Death], [Kim Yul]

Disliked Characters: None

Preferred Plots: [Story]

Disliked Plots: [Serialization Cancellation]

+

Constellation Killer's name changed to Kim Yul.

The order changed too. Originally, my name was after Constellation Killer, but now it's in the front. As Constellation Killer's story came to an end, he grew to love my story more.

"....."

Silence.

The Head Librarian looked stunned.

He looked up at me with an incredulous expression.

"King of Death, what have you...? Since when have you been planning this...?"

"That day. On the snowy mountain, when I heard your dream, I started planning. Not every detail, but the big picture."

But the big picture was already drawn back then. The project to make him love me more than Constellation Killer. That's why I obsessively, almost to the point of fixation, relentlessly pursued Constellation Killer.

To hunt down one Constellation.

"Hamusutra."

The Head Librarian flinched at his true name.

"There are two paths left for you now."

"Two paths...?"

"Live here forever, never fulfilling your dream. That means parting with me. Giving up hope that the Constellation Killer will fulfill your dream, only serving and welcoming warriors who treat characters like trash, just as you've done, cooped up in this library."

"Eek..."

The Head Librarian trembled slightly. Instinctively, he struggled to shake off my handshake, but his own strength was negligible. My right hand was firm.

"Or give it to me."

"What... what do you mean...?"

"The book containing your story."

The prey I've long sought.

"Give me the book that records your life."

Not a Revelation of another world's apocalypse, or a book depicting other worlds' landscapes, but specifically here. A book encompassing the Holed-Up Head Librarian in the Great Library of All Knowledge.

"I will make it the 30th floor of this tower."

"....."

"Then you will naturally become a part of our tower. Do you understand? You'll become a character in our story. Become our comrade."

The Head Librarian opened his mouth.

"Climb the tower with me. Hamusutra."

Volume 7 – Chapters 150-174

Chapter 150:

Prologue (3)

-Hey, what a magnificent library.

There once existed a being named 'The Pond Where Memories Gather'. Humans couldn't pronounce its name properly. 'The Pond Where Memories Gather' was merely a name cobbled together by humans.

Its actual pronunciation is ■■■■■. Just as humans don't consider naming something for a cricket to call out, ■■■■■ felt no need to be named for humans to call upon. The closest approximation to this pronunciation would be 'Hamusutra'.

-The atmosphere is nice too. The collection of books is impressive.

Hamusutra.

That's how humans called 'The Pond Where Memories Gather'.

-I'll gladly admit that. ■■■■■.

But the human in front of it was different.

-Of all the libraries I've visited, this one is definitely the best.

This human freely used the Dragon Tongue. That alone was already remarkable. 'The Pond Where Memories Gather', inherently curious, saw enough probability in showing a bit of kindness and curiosity towards this odd creature.

Provided, of course, we ignore the fact that this human was the very first visitor to this library.

-Who are you?

The human reeked of too many mundane scents. It was peculiar. There was the stench of a dragon, but it wasn't a dragon. A hint of a god's scent, but not a god either.

'The Pond Where Memories Gather' had never encountered a being like the one before it.

-How did you come to be here?

A natural wariness tinged its voice.

-I never permitted entry. This is my world. State your purpose, stranger.

-I'm not a book thief. Please don't be too wary.

The human chuckled.

-I'm sort of a salesperson for insurance. I'm in the process of convincing beings like you, one by one.

-I asked you about your purpose.

-I'm building a house. Or should I call it a villa*? If I am the landlord, then I'm trying to persuade you to become a tenant.

*The first character of villa in korean is the same character as “stars”.

Again, the human chuckled.

-.....

'The Pond Where Memories Gather' was annoyed. For the first time in thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of years, it felt 'annoyance'. It had loved characters in books, be they villains or heroes, and had equally shown kindness to both unlucky and lucky humans, but reality often differed from stories.

'The Pond Where Memories Gather' was a great being. What defined greatness might vary, but as far as the 'Pond' interpreted it, true greatness hinged on whether one could kill annoying things or not.

-How annoying. Begone.

Today, the 'Pond' chose to be great again. It exerted its power lightly.

In the library, the 'Pond's power was absolute. Ordinary humans, and even lawless beings who claimed transcendence, would be shredded to dust. The 'Pond' was confident. Before it became as greatly great as it was now, it had turned quite a lot into dust, long ago.

-Ah. My apologies.

But the human before it wasn't affected.

Completely unharmed.

-I guess I misread the mood. But could we talk just a bit more? It was somewhat a hassle to get here. Ugh, traffic was bad and the road conditions weren't great...

'The Pond Where Memories Gather' was shocked to realize its greatness had no effect.

It was a tremendous shock.

Such a tremendous shock that the 'Pond' escaped reality. The attack just now hadn't used full power. Nullified. It should be treated as if it never happened. The 'Pond' fully justified itself and attacked the human again.

-Now that you mention it, I must say. Doesn't this library have any doors? Is this a library or a tomb? At least put in some windows. It's suffocating. I can hardly breathe.

The human was still completely fine.

-Should I open some for you?

In fact, the human even made a hole in the library's wall. Smiling broadly.

-Ah. Now it's a bit more ventilated.

'The Pond Where Memories Gather' was dumbfounded.

-Is this insane?

It was the first curse the 'Pond' had uttered in thousands upon thousands of years.

This library was not a mere space. It was the 'Pond's body and soul. Thus, being able to make a hole in the library's wall meant it was possible to stab oneself in the stomach. The 'Pond' was smart enough to deduce this and didn't like the idea of being stabbed.

-Alright! I surrender. What do you want from me?

-I want everything about you...

-I'd rather die!

-Ah. Should I? Is it okay to kill you?

-.....

The 'Pond' was quite smart. Smart enough to realize the human before it was insane.

-You don't want to die, do you? Of course not. Life is precious. Well then, I'd like to help you. Please sign here to protect your precious life.

It was unfortunate for the 'Pond' that the madman before it possessed power beyond imagination.

-What is this...?

-It's a contract.

-May I ask what kind of contract it is?

-Oh, of course. I'm not some thug.

Even though he wasn't a thug, he was very similar to one, but the 'Pond' didn't point it out. In other words, the 'Pond' was smart. It knew what could be said and what couldn't.

-I'm building a tower.

Tower.

-I'm going to invite beings like you. I'll even allow those creatures you call lowly to enter.

The 'Pond' carefully read the contract. Its expression changed as it read.

At first, it thought the human before it was a lawless madman who had come to seize the library. The human was

indeed lawless. Mad, too.

But not a plunderer.

The contract was filled with enticing offers.

-You'll grant me the right to observe all worlds? Really?

-All worlds would be too much. Only the worlds I can intervene in.

---And these secret clauses?

-Those you must strictly adhere to.

The decision wasn't difficult.

Instead, curiosity deepened.

-Why start such a venture?

It wondered.

-For what purpose? What benefit is there for you?

-No being is born of their own will.

The human smiled.

-Everyone should have a chance to live one more life. They might not live as they wished, but they should live because they wish to.

The 'Pond' couldn't easily understand the human's smile.

-Someday, you too will live once again. Mr. Holed-Up Head Librarian.

That statement too.

"....."

The Head Librarian stared up at me, lost in thought.

Did he not understand my words? Or did he understand but his mind was overwhelmed? Either way was fine. I didn't rush the Head Librarian and waited for him.

"Let's climb the tower together, shall we."

After a long while, the Head Librarian murmured.

"G-Gong-Ja, I am not an ordinary Constellation. Unlike the ghost that haunts you, or the Holy Sword bound to you, I am a Constellation who actually oversees a stage. I am quite high-ranking, you see... To belong to a specific tower. That would mean..."

"What would happen then?"

".....I do not know. I have no idea. There's no precedent in the history of the tower."

The Head Librarian trembled.

"There have been cases where a Constellation was charmed by a warrior and volunteered to serve them. Quite a few, actually. Like how you swallowed the [Demon King of the Autumn Rain] with [Ghoul Reincarnation], there have been cases where a warrior absorbed a Constellation. But... But for a Constellation to completely become a hunter, I've never heard of such a thing..."

"It'll be the first case on record, then."

"....."

"Hamusutra. Don't live in a place like this."

I looked around.

The graveyard of books.

Traces of worlds gone by accumulate here. That's all there is. In this place, time does not flow; only the breaths of others and stories born from different worlds are sealed here.

'It's familiar.'

A place that merely longs for or envies the worlds of others.

'It's a place I'm familiar with. This place.'

I thought of the room I lived in before regression.

My room too was plastered with pictures and interviews of the Flame Emperor.

Although incomparable in scale to the Grand Library.

'The essence is the same.'

That's why I can say it.

"Come up to the ring directly now."

You must come out from here.

"By staying only in such places, people start becoming

strange."

"S-strange..."

"The Revelations record the lifetimes of people. Reading it, one might feel like they understand people, but no, Hamusutra. Do you know what [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon] described the world's end as?"

The Revelations described Master's death like this:

「 Suddenly a mysterious illness spread, and the Heavenly Demon died 」 .

"What's that?"

"....."

"It's meaningless. Utterly meaningless."

How the Master looked in her final moments, how the disciples screamed, how hard the children by the river worked

to dig up the soft mud - none of this can be known just by reading the Revelations.

Unknown.

"But, but!"

Hamusutra countered.

"This lord can see it. Spectate it. Behold it!"

"Yes."

I readily agreed.

"You can enter the worlds directly and observe. When Master passed away, you must have felt sorrow, just like I did. I don't doubt that."

"Then, there shouldn't be any problem.....!"

"But you weren't as sad as I was."

"....."

"When the Master executed the last technique of the Heavenly Demon Martial Art, you must have held your breath too. When the Sword Emperor countered and split the moment, you must have felt awe. But what you felt, all of it, was just 'appreciation'."

Firmly.

I held Hamusutra's hand, pulling him closer.

"You must love Raviel too. You must like her. But you know, you can never love her as much as I love Raviel."

"....."

"You're just tasting it. Sitting in the world of this library. Never having stepped onto the stage of your own life, just being an audience. If you like the show, you clap; if not, you yawn. That's all."

"King of Death, I....."

"Live with us."

Hamusutra flinched.

"I'm, uh... bound by strict contracts. If I affiliate with a specific tower, or violate such regulations, 'The Tower' will surely sanction me. Perhaps all the constellation authorities will be lost.... Then, this constellation, being of no use, will be of no help to you."

"It's not about that."

"....."

"You know."

"....."

"Hamusutra."

I looked straight at the person before me.

"You once dreamed of dying by the hands of Constellation Killer. Now abandon that dream. I will give you a new dream. It won't always be pleasant, often more like a nightmare. You'll want to erase it many times. But if you wish. If you want, I will be in that dream."

I said.

"Live a life with me."

"....."

"Let's be part of each other's stories so that we can call each other ours."

Hamusutra's lips trembled. More trembling than that, he put his hand into his pocket. In his hand was a book older than [Leafanta Aegim's Epic].

+



+

I couldn't read the title.

A language from another world, beyond our reading.

The Holed-Up Head Librarian, now Hamusutra, slowly handed me the book containing his life.

"King of Death..."

"Yes."

"I, as a reader, will give you my final advice. I am your biggest fan. There is and will be no reader who loves you more than me. So, please remember."

"I'll listen."

"If you keep flirting like that, people might misunderstand, so please only use your tongue with Duke Raviel. Otherwise, King of Death, you might get your heart pierced by Duke Raviel someday..."

"I've already died like that once. But, alright. I'll keep it in mind."

"King of Death..."

"Yes."

"Is living as a human... enjoyable?"

Hamusutra was afraid.

I smiled.

"It sucks."

I grabbed [■■■■■].

"But even sucky things can taste good when chewed. Sometimes it breaks your teeth, but I'll help you."

"Damn it..."

Hamusutra sobbed.

"To think this would be the last line in this my revelation..."

Hamusutra grabbed the spine of the book, and I grasped the cover.

"Life isn't easy like a story. Deal with it."

We opened the final revelation.

Hamusutra spoke with a voice mixed with fear and sobbing, bravely.

"King of Death. Holed-Up Head Librarian. I hereby designate these two individuals as characters in [■■■■■]. The difficulty of this Apocalypse is undecided. When our eyes open, there we

will be, in a world being currently serialized..."

"When we open our eyes, it will be just like here."

".....That's right."

Hamusutra looked up at me.

At that moment.

"I declare, stage clear."

Paah!

A white light enveloped us.

Chapter 151:

Prologue (4)

The library was instantly illuminated.

The light was like a cascade of white water, alive and moving. [■■■■■]. From Hamusutra's revelation, a ceaseless flow of light gushed out. The waves of light engulfed us and poured between the bookshelves.

The light overflowed.

[Stage Clear.]

The revelations continued to spew light. Chwaaak! Whoosh! The light surged instantly, submerging the towering bookshelves of the Great Library, tall as buildings. Even the Forbidden Books areas, untouched by light for thousands of years, were illuminated.

A white flood.

A pristine pond.

[Today.]

We stood amidst the deluge of light that submerged the world.

[The 30th floor has been cleared.]

Screams of hunters echoed from afar.

"Aaaaah!"

"What, what is this?!"

Was it the sudden inundation of light that startled them? Fortunately, there were reliable companions in the library. Many of them. While some hunters were shocked and dismayed, others were there to soothe them.

Though their faces were hidden by bookshelves.

I recognized every one of their voices.

"Aigoo! I'm gonna die! My vision's already dim, and now it's going to complete darkness! Egu, egu. Hey! You youngsters should at least make some tonics for us elders!"

Medicine King.

"Eh. Ha, but the medicine should be given first to those in need. Sorry, but you, Medicine King, don't seem to need it much... Maybe you should just get new glasses...?"

Apothecary.

"Aha, this is the 'Stage Clear' thing. Just simple light. You guys might not have experienced this much, but I've seen it several times already. Mystery becomes mundane with familiarity. Don't overreact."

"Wow! Master!"

"I was counting on you, damn it.....!"

Viper and his minions.

"Huh? Ah? Was the 30th floor meant to be cleared automatically? Ahah. It's good we saved some time. All members of the Temple of the Omnipotent God, prepare for transfer! As soon as we return to Babylon, we'll start catching up on our backlog!"

Heretic Inquisitor.

"This is troublesome. I have no experience in librarian work."

"I have a general understanding, Mr. Kim Yul. I'll assist you."

".....Thanks."

Constellation Killer and the Director.

And there were more. The voices of the Black Dragon Witch, Countess, and Paladin were heard. Sometimes from afar, sometimes quite near. From beyond the heavily stocked bookshelves, human voices drifted.

Yes. In the library, I could hear every whisper and murmur of the people. It was as if the light's current absorbed their voices.

Next to me, the tiny Head Librarian was trembling.

[Announcing once again to everyone.]

[Today, the 30th floor has been cleared...]

Czzzzzzzt-

Noise intermingled with the Tower's voice.

The already trembling Head Librarian flinched, shrinking his shoulders.

[Warning!]

[Abnormal clearing detected.]

[A warning has been issued to the 'Holed-Up Head Librarian.']

"Uh."

The Head Librarian grabbed my sleeve.

"I-It's fine. The 30th floor is determined by ■■■■■. As the administrator overseeing stages from the 21st to the 30th floor, I vouch for this. As a Constellation ruling over ■■■■■, I acknowledge the stage clear..."

[Warning once again.]

[If the stage clear is declared, the 'Holed-Up Head Librarian' will receive significant penalties.]

[Confirming whether to proceed with stage clear.]

The grip on my sleeve tightened a bit more.

"....."

The Head Librarian was hunched over. Normally, his generously sized clothes made him appear larger than he was. Not now. He seemed small. In this world, the space the Head Librarian occupied was insignificant.

Leaning against me, the Head Librarian looked up at me.

".....It doesn't matter."

That was a message for the Tower, as well as for me.

"I, as the..."

Hamusutra spoke.

"I will live in this Tower. I ask for your favor.....
Acknowledge my descent, Master of All Lives."

Silence.

[Announcing once again to everyone.]

The noise cleared from the Tower's voice.

[Today, the 30th floor has been cleared.]

Cheers erupted. Although the library was still submerged in a swirl of light, the hunters heard the declaration of stage clear. Realizing their success, they rejoiced.

There was a voice that only Hamusutra and I could hear.

[The 'Holed-Up Head Librarian' can no longer maintain his authority.]

[Initiating rank adjustment.]

It was a phrase I had heard once before.

When Preta lost the shell of the 'Demon King of Autumn Rain,' I heard the same words.

[The alias of the 'Holed-Up Head Librarian' has been revoked.]

Preta had screamed then. "No!" She was horrified at losing her status as a Constellation. She desperately resisted descending.

Hamusutra's reaction now was different.

Silently, he closed his eyes tightly.

[Announcing once again.]

[The alias of the 'Holed-Up Head Librarian' has been revoked.]

[The authority of the 'Holed-Up Head Librarian' is revoked.]

The revelation in our hands trickled down. Perhaps 'melted down' would be more accurate. Plop, plop. The book cover turned into a slime-like substance and flowed down, and the pages dripped down like candle wax.

[May fortune be with you.]

And then the revelations turned into light and vanished.

"....."

For a while...

Hamusutra didn't speak. He just quietly exhaled and calmly inhaled. His small upper body rose and fell, and the once trembling Hamusutra in fear gradually calmed down.

"Ah..."

Hamusutra sprang up in place.

"Look at this, King of Death."

His long sleeves fluttered. They were so long they couldn't fall to the ground. Every time Hamusutra hopped in place, the sleeves lifted slightly before falling back down.

"I can't fly anymore."

Hamusutra turned to me, smiling.

"I can no longer soar through the skies. I used to enjoy watching the worlds from high above. All day long. Sometimes for tens of days, I enjoyed simply gazing at the horizon. My hobby is gone..."

"Yes."

"So much has disappeared."

"Yes."

"I've achieved my dream. The dream of appearing in a story, but it's bittersweet. I'm scared. Afraid. I love you all. I cherish you. I'm scared you won't love me back. I want to be loved by everyone..."

"Hamusutra."

I placed my hand on Hamusutra's shoulder.

"Forget about that. It's impossible."

"....."

"Let's take it step by step. If your hobby is gone, let's find a new one. How about it? Want to do something to commemorate your descent from a Constellation?"

"In fact, I have two wishes."

"Tell me. If I can, I'll grant them."

"Firstly, stop speaking formally to me..."

That was a wish I could grant.

"Okay. I will. What's the other wish?"

"My second wish is a bit extravagant... It's such an incredible luxury that you, King of Death, will shudder in astonishment..."

"What is it?"

Hamusutra wiped his eyes with his sleeve. Sniffles were heard. After a while, when the sleeve dropped, Hamusutra's face was smiling.

"I want to try a Venti White Mocha Frappuccino Quad Shot with Java Chips and extra Drizzle Chocolate..."

It was indeed a tremendous luxury.

And fortunately, also a wish I could grant.

There's a story to tell later.

"Indeed. So that's why my consort died."

Raviel, dressed in a school uniform, said while drinking cider.

See.

In that one sentence, an incredible collaboration took place.

Look. Raviel, [in a school uniform], drank [cider].

Not even the epic of the universe's creation and destruction could match the sublimity of this sentence. With the emotion of a believer witnessing the creation of heaven and earth, I share this moment with you...

"My Gong-Ja is trembling."

"I'm n-not trembling."

"Is that so?"

Cradled in my arms like a princess, Raviel tilted her head in puzzlement. By the way, I've been holding this pose for over three hours now. No aura allowed. No skills allowed. Purely relying on muscle and posture.

"It definitely looks like you're trembling."

Raviel smiled slightly.

"Ah. Is my body too heavy?"

"Not at all. Raviel, you're light as a feather!"

"Which feather? A dinosaur's? An archaeopteryx's?"

"You're lighter than a freshly hatched chick's feather!"

"Then I'm relieved. I was about to get down from my love's embrace worrying I was too heavy. Since there's no problem, I'll continue to enjoy the excellent ride."

Raviel touched her lips to the cider can. A drop of the clear cider lingered on her lips. Ah, I envy that drop of cider. Evaporate already. Evaporate and return to nature...

Let me explain the situation. We're on the 29th floor, in the world of [City of Ascension - Side Story].

As Hamusutra predicted, the [Side Story] didn't alter the real

world's history. It wasn't incorporated into the official record. Only this city, centered around Shinseo High, got detached like an isolated island, becoming a standalone stage.

'Strangely, the residents of this world don't seem to notice anything odd.'

When hunters like us enter the 29th floor, we're automatically registered as middle or high school students. As if we've always lived in this world, we experience school life. There's a university too, but that's all.

A literal school city.

So, apart from the chance to attend school, it's a completely useless stage, but...

"Public education is beautiful."

It turns out to be surprisingly helpful.

"A place where even the less fortunate can learn to their heart's content. Isn't it like a dream? From now on, our empire plans to send talents here to study. Indeed, my love is worthy

of calling himself the Moon of the Ivansia Ducal Family."

"Uh. You might not learn much good here...?"

"It doesn't matter. The purpose of education is to share common sense. A nation is an abstraction that can degenerate into delusion with just one misstep, so it's necessary to ensure that its citizens always dream the same dream."

"The same dream..."

"Hmm. I was pondering how to naturally integrate the people of the Tower and the empire's citizens. The empire's citizens educated here will eventually bridge the two forces."

Raviel occasionally speaks about difficult things. So cool.

So why have I been holding Raviel for over three hours?

"Let's set aside political talk for now. Right now, I want to savor the sight of you being punished."

Right. I'm currently being punished...

The reason for the punishment is quite clear.

"I was truly surprised, Gong-Ja. I was working in the office, and suddenly, I returned 24 hours back in time. I hesitated for a moment but soon realized the situation. Ah, indeed. My consort must have died somewhere again," she said.

Raviel took out a golden card.

+

[A Certain Returner's Love]

Rank: EX

Effect: For a returner, love is like poison. No matter how much they struggle, they can't share time with the one they love. Thus, a certain returner had a burning desire, 'Let my beloved keep her memories.' This desire reached the tower and was granted.

You share a timeline with your beloved. If your lover goes back a day, you go back a day. If you go back a day, so does your lover. This is the vow of a ring. This is a marriage of time.

May fortune be with both of you.

*However, it only activates when you and your lover mutually love each other.

+

Indeed.

Because of [A Certain Returner's Love], when I die, Raviel also returns 24 hours back in time. Raviel experienced this return when I was killed by the Constellation Killer.

Naturally, Raviel could only be aware that 'I had died'.

According to Goldencup, who serves in the Ivansia Ducal Family, Raviel immediately murmured, "Some bastard, wherever he lives, touched my consort," as soon as she returned.

With an expressionless face.

Goldencup reportedly felt cosmic horror that day.

"I'm sorry..."

"No need to apologize."

Raviel spoke calmly.

"From what I heard, didn't you make enough effort? Didn't you desperately try not to die? If you still died despite that, it can't be helped."

"Right?"

"Yes. Even if you rashly jumped from the 29th to the 50th floor, challenged one of the strongest there, and finally attracted the aggro of an entire floor, it's unavoidable. My love, what you did was perfectly rational. There's no recklessness to be found. I understand."

"I'm really sorry..."

"Do you truly regret it? Do you realize your mistake?"

Raviel pinched my cheek. Jwoooook. My cheek stretched like freshly made glutinous rice cake.

I was moved.

'Ah, Raviel is pinching my cheek.'

Raviel is wearing a school uniform before me. Raviel in a school uniform is in my arms. Is this really a punishment? Rather, a reward? Perhaps Raviel, my goddess, is disguisedly praising me under the guise of punishment...?

"This man is hopeless..."

Raviel sighed.

"His eyes have gone crazy. His slightly crazy eyes were charming, but this is too much."

"I love you. Raviel."

"I love you, Gong-Ja."

Ah. The scent of cider.

Nice...

Happy...

-Damn it.

An uninvited guest grumbled from behind.

-Seriously? Do I have to see this crap every time I meet these two? Huh? This isn't right, is it? Have they totally lost their minds with hormone levels? What did I do in my past life to deserve this hell!

[Shiny points out that you probably committed many sins in your past life.]

-Sh-, damn...

One must never underestimate local broadcasting as a hero.

While I was explaining my story, Raviel looked around Shinseo High. Who killed me, what past did they have, what did they lose, what did they regain. Guided by me, Raviel memorized every classroom and rooftop.

"Hmm."

Raviel nodded.

"Well done, Gong-Ja. It was worth the time you spent."

She was convinced. Although I had to endure the hell of my arms and the heaven of my brain for a full 3 hours, considering what's more important between arms and brain, it seems like I came out ahead. A total win.

"Now, I must see the scum who killed you for myself."

"Raviel. As I mentioned earlier, that person is probably also one of your ancestors..."

"Even more despicable. An ancestor should entrust work to their descendants gracefully, not dare to touch the moon of the family. Today's Ivansia is mine. I'll punish him according to family law."

Sorry, Constellation Killer.

Sorry, Kim Yul.

You're done for.

"And also."

Raviel smiled. On the rooftop of Shinseo High, the setting sun tinted her lips red.

"I'd like to greet the person who raised you."

"....."

"Will you guide me, Gong-Ja?"

I nodded.

"Yes."

And whispered while holding Raviel.

"Transfer."

Light enveloped us.

The next moment, we were in the 30th-floor library.

In just a few days, the library had changed somewhat. First, there were strict divisions between accessible and restricted areas. Ordinary books adorned the shelves in the accessible area, and hunters leisurely enjoyed reading at tables.

A peaceful scene.

On the tables where hunters sat, there were coffee cups and beverage cups.

"Ah."

Hamusutra, wandering between the tables, spotted us and hurried over. Instead of his usual loose-fitting clothes, Hamusutra was now dressed in a neat employee uniform.

"Welcome, King of Death. Oh? The Silver-Clad Heart also came along. What an honor to have such esteemed guests visit us together!"

The library café.

For now, Hamusutra decided to work here. He wasn't yet ready to live in the 1st-floor city, but he was slowly mingling with hunters and getting used to life as a human.

"Hmm. Is Kim Yul around? Raviel wants to see his face..."

"Mug, my consort."

".....Raviel wants to see Kim Yul's mug."

Hamusutra grinned widely.

"Kim Yul's face is worth coming a long way to see. Got it. He might be organizing children's books now, but I'll call him."

There's still much to tell.

Who took over the Great Library after Hamusutra's descent. Why Medicine King almost single-handedly funded the café's creation. Hence, even now, Medicine King is behind the café counter in bartender attire, brewing coffee, and so on.

There's much to talk about.

But there will be a time for that story.

"Then I'll guide both of you to your seats!"

As always.

That story will continue on a higher stage than ever before.

Chapter 152:

Surging to the Top

(1)

Human connections are truly mysterious.

From the trivial ones like discovering a friend is actually the grandson of the old man who runs the supermarket in our neighborhood, to the more extreme ones like being obsessed with a hunter for ten years only to find out they're a deranged psychopath, whom I killed and now share a life of cohabitation with...

No, let's stop there. That's an exceptional case.

Anyway, my point is simple: human connections are unpredictable. I've met all sorts of bizarre and fascinating people, yet I still marvel at the mysteriousness of these connections.

"Hey, Kim Gong-Ja. You look even more radiant than before!"

Specifically, I'm marveling at the person I'm video chatting with right now.

"You look even better than when you were younger, your face has become so strikingly handsome. I'm jealous! Really, I should have followed you into the Tower when I left the orphanage. This place, Kim Gong-Ja, the air is bad, the people are bad, it's just not a good place to live."

A man in a neat suit, with his hair neatly parted 9:1, kept talking non-stop. I murmured his name.

"Kim Han-Bi-Ja..."

"No, no. It's Kim Han-Bi now. Okay? I've changed my name."

"I heard about the parliamentary badge from the director. Congratulations, friend."

Among our orphanage alumni, he's probably the most successful. A proportional representation member of the parliament, they say.

The director mentioned in passing that 'he just rode the

right coattails and was at the right place at the right time,' but it's not easy to grab onto the right coattails at our young age.

"Compared to you, Gong-Ja, I'm just a small fry. Haven't you seen the internet? You're incredibly popular. You've greatly contributed to raising our country's prestige."

"Sorry, I've been off the internet recently, so I don't know much."

"Oh, really? That's unexpected. Anyway, friend. Can you do me a favor?"

Kim Han-Bi smiled warmly.

"I'm planning to run for a district seat in the next general election. But apart from being young and fresh, I don't have much to appeal to the people. So, how about promoting the fact that you and I were close friends at the orphanage?"

"Yeah, that's not possible."

I nodded politely.

"Best of luck, congressman. Please, do good politics. Politics that prioritize the citizens. Honest and clean politics."

"What? Oh, hey! Hey!"

Han-Bi's expression turned desperate.

"Gong-Ja! Please, I beg you! Help me out! Sorry for not contacting you before! Who would have thought you'd rise so high in the Tower! Just, one photo! I'll use it only for one poster! Please help me get re-elected as a congressman..."

Click.

I cut off the call without hesitation. The last image on the screen was the face of my childhood friend, crying and begging. It made me realize something anew.

'I really made it big in the Tower.'

An old friend who never contacted me before is calling. And even receiving petty requests from a congressman. It's something I could never have dreamed of before my 4000 returns.

Buzz, buzz...

The phone rang again immediately after hanging up. It was Han-Bi. I answered, clearly annoyed.

"Hello?"

"Gong-Ja, I'm sorry. I got ahead of myself just because we played together as kids."

This guy...

He's become quite something since becoming a politician.

There's something to learn from his shamelessness.

"I know you must be busy, but could you just listen to me for a moment?"

"Listening is the least I can do."

"Gong-Ja. I know nationality is meaningless in the Tower. But aren't we both Koreans? This is also a connection. Our parliament, our party, there are many who are favorable towards you, Gong-Ja."

"I'd rather not be a fool who gets happy over favor and ends up being used."

"Tell us what you want..."

"How about clean politics? Working for the peace of humanity?"

"Something possible, you idiot!"

Really. Was it an impossible request?

If it's impossible, what can be done...

"Ah."

An idea flashed through my mind.

"I do have a favor to ask."

"Finally! People always have favors to ask. What is it? Tell me anything. I'll push it through at the party level. I called you with a blank check in hand."

"Trustworthy, indeed."

I smiled.

"Do you know a person named Hwang Eun-Seo?"

Gong-Ja says, human connections are indeed mysterious.

Sometimes, it's about getting revenge on someone you thought was dead.

"That happened."

"It's a natural and expected process."

The Sword Saint responded after hearing my story.

"When I reached the number one rank, I received countless requests. Not only from people in the same faction but also from politicians and businessmen calling hundreds and thousands of times."

"Really? Even the Swedes do that?"

"People are similar everywhere."

Chaaaang!

Our swords crossed as Sword Saint and I conversed leisurely while our hands and feet moved busily. We were sparring to improve our skills, and simultaneously, I was seeking advice on life.

"By now, you're a powerholder, a special one at that. You didn't gain power through politics, but purely through skill and achievements, didn't you? People in the outside world like you. Hunters in the Tower admire you."

"You're gilding my face too much, elder."

"The more reason to be careful, young man."

Sword Saint swung his sword. Whiiiiik! The sharp attack targeted my wrist. I tilted Shiny slightly to deflect Sword Saint's strike.

An attack I couldn't follow with my eyes before.

"Don't I live cautiously enough?"

But now, I could parry while chatting. I've reached that level. Whoosh! I channeled aura into Shiny, firmly grabbing Sword Saint's sword.

"Hmm."

Sword Saint frowned.

"Your use of aura is impressive."

"I guess I have more talent in aura than in swordsmanship."

"Whoever said that was accurate. Aura is mental. It varies greatly depending on how strongly you can visualize in your mind. What were you thinking about just now?"

A mansion engulfed in flames.

In it, children were tied up. Desperately struggling but trapped in unyielding restraints.

『It hurts...』

『Please forgive me...』

I thought of the children's hands and feet and moved my aura. Handcuffs and chains. Struggle and thrashing. With the aura shaped like that, I grabbed Sword Saint's sword firmly.

"I don't know."

I smiled.

"Trade secret. I can't share that for free."

"....."

A gleam flickered in Sword Saint's blue eyes.

".....I deeply regret one thing. I should've insisted on going to [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon] with the Celestial Martial Guild Master. The you before and after visiting [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon] are completely different martial artists. I should've gone, even if I had to force it."

"Isn't it tiring to regret past decisions?"

"How cheeky!"

Sword Saint laughed.

"I have no intention of giving up the number one rank!"

The Sword Saint's sword erupted with blue aura. Kwaang! The pressure felt like the sudden burst of compressed air. I quickly erected a barrier of aura to cut off the explosion.

"Haha!"

The laughter of youth came from the elderly man's mouth.

"Wonderful!"

Sword Saint didn't stop at the explosion. Whoosh! Whoosh! Like a typhoon wielding wind pressure, he continuously poured out blue aura. I cautiously backed away, severing each of his sword strikes one by one.

"The existence of a rival is such a joy!"

Sword Saint was purely delighted.

"When we were racing through the Aegim Empire, I had no idea you'd grow so much! Human affairs are unpredictable. I'm endlessly grateful for a young man like you!"

Sword winds stormed in. The blade split every second, rushing towards me. Chaaang! I managed to counter it, combining sword and aura, but my movements started to become slightly hasty.

"Aren't you, enjoying this, a bit too much?"

"Enjoyment is not to be refused! The Celestial Martial Guild Master is progressing day by day, and you're rising at a terrifying speed. This is what makes life worth living!"

The old man's laughter filled the plains.

The Tower's 1st Floor, City of Ascension, Babylon outskirts. Many hunters gathered to watch our duel. They watched our battle with wide eyes, recorded it, and even took notes in their notebooks, marveling.

"That's incredible..."

"Can you fight like that if you master aura?"

"That's not possible! It's because they are who they are..."

"The Sword Saint is still a step ahead of the King of Death."

Hmm.

'That seems to be the general opinion, isn't it?'

My pride began to boil.

'Fine. I'll show them.'

I still personally consider Sword Saint to be better than me. But what I think and what others think are two different matters. Very different.

"Sword Saint sir."

"What is it!"

"I personally don't like to show off an 'unfinished technique'. I think it's inconsiderate to my sparring partner."

After severing Sword Saint's sword, I leaped back, creating a distance between us.

"But you and I aren't just ordinary sparring partners, are we?"

"Oho?"

Sword Saint didn't chase me but lowered his sword instead, interested in what I was about to say.

"Don't you think so? Aren't we, after all, disciples of the same master?"

"....."

The old gentleman's face stiffened.

The master I was referring to wasn't the Demonic Cult but the Guardian Spirit. I meant the Sword Emperor.

Like me, the Sword Saint also has the same Guardian Spirit.

‘[The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon] showed the Sword Emperor sparring against the master.’

The Guardian Spirit's sparring session was broadcast to the Tower. It was aired. If one wanted, every hunter could watch

it, and of course, the Sword Saint was among them.

‘He couldn’t have missed it.’

Most hunters wouldn’t understand that sparring session.

But Sword Saint, at least his Guardian Spirit, would have known.

‘Of course.’

It’s his own martial art.

How could he not recognize it?

‘Both of us are under the same Guardian Spirit.’

Now, both [my Guardian Spirit] and [Sword Saint’s Guardian Spirit] know each other’s existence.

Recognizing each other.

‘Yet the Sword Saint didn’t ask me anything, meaning... He waited for me to speak first. He was considerate.’

But he probably never imagined I’d bring it up at this timing. He must have thought I would confess in a quiet place like a secret conversation.

As proof, Sword Saint was quite embarrassed, looking around nervously.

"No, young man. King of Death. You shouldn’t say such things here...!"

"Are you flustered?"

I smiled broadly.

"Great! Elder, please be more flustered!"

"What, what...?"

"I haven't finished my technique yet! Please, take this!"

I rushed towards the old man.

Yes.

I brought up the Guardian Spirit topic purely to fluster Sword Saint!

"Wow. That's sly. There's no mercy in a fight, but this is something else..."

The notoriously vicious Guardian Spirit admired me. Ignoring its praise, I raised my holy sword high and brought it down.

'The visualization is the flames engulfing that mansion.'

The fire that raged there.

'The suffocating smoke.'

Aura exploded from my body. Red tentacles enveloped the surroundings. The aura turned into blazing flames, engulfing the plains, suffocating everything alive within it.

The field instantly transformed into a hell of fire.

".....!"

Only then did Sword Saint react. He quickly raised his blue aura to counter.

Sorry, but my technique isn't finished yet.

『I don't want to die.』

Resentment.

『I'm hungry.』

Desire.

『I want to live...』

Hope.

I filled my aura with all these yearnings.

Each strand of the rising aura carried the voice of a different child, burning with different paths and intensities.

The flames, now a living swarm, swarmed Sword Saint.

"Hmm?!"

Sword Saint hurriedly defended against the flames. He had to sever each wave of fire attacking from all sides.

Naturally, gaps appeared in Sword Saint's stance.

I pounced on those gaps like a beast.

Demonic Heavenly God Art - Reformation.

The First form.

Sword of Burning Youth.

My own version of Demonic Heavenly God Art that I decided to create.

The old man, witnessing this technique, widened his eyes.

"I'm sorry, elder. I'll take this fight!"

I swung my sword down towards Sword Saint's head.

Chapter 153:

Surging to the Top

(2)

"Huh?!"

Sword Saint was indeed Sword Saint. Despite being flustered, he swung his sword to the end. Had I not shaken his mind, even my first debut technique would have been blocked.

But this time, my move narrowly succeeded.

".....!"

My holy sword pointed at the old man's throat. Hesitation. Glancing at the blade just 5cm from his neck, the old man froze. The sword he swung in a final struggle was still over 15cm away from my neck.

"Huh."

I smirked slightly.

"I've won, elder."

"....."

Sword Saint's face soured rapidly.

"How can this be! Invalid! It's invalid!"

"Aaah, I don't understand what you mean. A match is a match. Are you planning to cry invalid even after being defeated in battle? Huh? I never thought the Sword Saint would be such a person."

"There's a limit to everything! This is... this is..."

"This is? What?"

"This is excessively sly!"

Sly?

That's a fantastic compliment!

"Puhahaha! Thank you, elder. To be called sly by the Sword Saint! It's like I'm living the dream. Please stay healthy and strong."

"This....."

Sword Saint trembled. His face screamed how annoyed he was with me. The more he was, the sweeter it was for me.

"I too held back talking about 'the master' for your sake! I've been considerate, waiting until now. Is it right to trample an old man's heart so pettily!"

"Sure, loser."

"L-Loser? Ha. We've fought 53 times, and I've won 52 times! If it's 53 battles with 52 wins and 1 loss, I'm obviously the winner!"

"The last one is always the most important. Haven't you heard of Xiang Yu, the Hemeon-King of Western Chu? You can win 100 times, but it's all for nothing if you lose once. If Sword Saint is Xiang Yu, then I am Liu Bang. The master of the world is me."

"So you're saying we should have another round!"

"Nope. I'm not fighting for the next six months. For six months, I'll spread the news everywhere that I've beaten the Sword Saint. After that, maybe I'll consider fighting again."

"H... Huh...!!"

Sword Saint seemed on the verge of fainting. Oh, the misery. Maybe his Ki was blocked and meridians twisted leading to delirium. I should pray for the Sword Saint's soul.

That's when a voice came from not too far away.

"...You two seem close."

Pop!

Someone appeared out of thin air and landed lightly. It was the Black Dragon Witch. Using a teleportation skill, her appearance made the spectators in the outfield murmur. The top three hunters, from ranking 1 to 3, were gathered in one place.

"Hmm."

Black Dragon Witch also noticed people's gaze. She slightly smiled and waved her hand.

Click! Click!

Hunters busily clicked on their smartphones to capture the scene of us three together. Only then did Black Dragon Witch turn to look at us, wearing an incredulous expression.

"It's usual for the King of Death to be childish, but why are you like this too, Sword Saint? Hanging out with him, did your mental age drop as well? Without your noble image, you're just a corpse."

"Don't want to hear that from a witch who's as good at faking innocence as breathing!"

"Ah. Yeah. Now that I think about it, you did have a hot-blooded vibe in the early days of entering the tower. I vaguely remember... not that I miss it."

Black Dragon Witch seemed to recall the past, her gaze softening for a moment. But soon enough, she composed herself and stated her business to us.

"It's good to play like kids, but today, show the demeanor of the top two rankers. Everyone else is already gathered at the Great Library."

"Eh?"

I sheathed my holy sword, asking,

"What happened?"

"Stuff happens every day without getting boring... Yeah. Today is a bit of a big deal."

Black Dragon Witch spoke softly.

"Let's open the 31st floor."

It's been 56 days since we cleared the Great Library.

For the past two months, we've had a hectic time.

What? We should rest after struggling from the 21st to the 30th floors? That's for ordinary hunters. Top rankers like Black Dragon Witch and I have been even busier. To put it exaggeratedly, we nearly died.

A month ago, a powerful warlord in Africa completely collapsed, and about 1,300 of his remnant soldiers fled to the tower. It was maddening, but such things happen quite often. The tower is already overflowing with entrants, and dealing with those warlords kept us incredibly busy.

"Welcome! We've been waiting for you, everyone!"

Upon arriving at the Great Library, the Heretic Inquisitor greeted us with a bright smile.

Adorable as an angel, but when I recall that he wore the

same smile while personally interrogating 33 of those warlords, his cuteness level drops a bit.

"You heard? We're going to open the 31st floor?"

"Yes! The urgent tasks are mostly finished. There's still a lot to solve, but it's manageable at the executive level. Ah, our duties must be fulfilled!"

"Hmm."

I nodded.

The purpose of top rankers is to conquer the tower. We move upwards, raising our flags, showing those who follow that there's still a 'place we must go'. We show the direction. When the direction is clear, hope naturally arises.

In return, we hold power.

And with that responsibility, we stake our lives.

"King of Death. But what happened in this morning's sparring? Sword Saint is making a face like he ate something terrible!"

"He's probably just uncomfortable. Let's end the meeting quickly for the elder's sake."

"Poor Sword Saint, you can go to the bathroom if you need. We can wait a few more minutes, the 31st floor isn't going anywhere! Oh. Is it constipation? That's a bit troublesome."

"You lot....."

"Hmm."

Paladin cleared her throat.

"Everyone's here, so let's proceed."

Paladin turned her head to look at Hamusutra.

Hamusutra, dressed as a cafe worker, silently stood by the

table. He was no longer the librarian of the Great Library but now an employee of the Library Cafe Planetarium.

"Then, call the [Head Librarian]."

"Um. Understood."

Hamusutra smiled and walked out, not through the main entrance but the back door marked 'No Entry Except for Authorized Personnel'.

Shortly after.

A plumply dressed child followed Hamusutra in.

"Did you call me...?"

The child yawned heavily.

"Ah, it's the King of Death. Long time no see."

Seemingly just woken up, the child even clutched a pillow. It was adorned with colorful peaches.

Though looking completely like a young child.

[The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages greets you.]

This child is the new librarian of the 30th floor, replacing Hamusutra. Not just any constellation, but one of the so-called 'Pillars'.

I bowed slightly.

"Yes, long time no see, Princess."

I'll have the chance to talk about this constellation later.

What's important now is that [The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages] is in charge of the library and the revelations. She plays the role of a guide and helper in our tower conquest.

"Hmm."

The Princess sleepily looked around the cafe table.

"All the top rankers are here... Ah. Are we starting today?"

"That's right."

Black Dragon Witch answered on our behalf.

"Two months ago, you said you'd open the next stage whenever we wanted. We've tidied up things, so we're starting the conquest again today."

"Huh. You guys are really fast..."

The Princess rubbed her eyes.

"Just in case you're mistaken, there's no time limit to conquering the tower. It's fine whether it's cleared in 600 or 1200 years, or even not at all. Are you really unlocking the 31st floor today?"

"Yes, we are..."

"Ah, sorry. Black Dragon. I wasn't asking you."

The Princess dismissed Black Dragon Witch.

"This is a decision for the number 1 in the rankings. It's a rule. Same for any tower. You're number 3, so you don't have a say."

"....."

Black Dragon Witch fell silent.

"Sorry, it's a bit autocratic, isn't it? The tower has its reasons. Who takes the number 1 spot affects a lot, though 'now' you're lucky. In the past..."

"Princess."

Hamusutra spoke quietly.

"I'm not in a position to criticize, but you're talking too much."

"Ah. Sorry. I've been sleepy since I descended here... Anyway, Swordy boy. Are you really unlocking the 31st floor?"

The person the Princess looked at was our tower's number 1, Sword Saint.

"....."

Sword Saint slowly looked around. Hunters meeting his gaze nodded one after another. Even Paladin nodded, and only then Sword Saint spoke.

"Unlock it."

"Okay. Got it."

The Princess spread her arms.

The pillow in her embrace dropped to the floor with a thud.

"I, [The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages], as the temporary guide of this tower, acknowledge your ascension."

At that moment, a voice resounded.

[Announcing to everyone.]

[As of today, the next stage has been unlocked.]

It was the voice of the tower.

"Alright. Let's skip the welcome speech since I'm here..."

The Princess waved her hand.

Then, a list appeared in front of us.

+

1. Pure Humans Race

2. Ghost Tribe

3. Mountain Calamity Tribe

4. Gill Fishes Tribe

5. Ancient Orchid Clan

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No matter how much I scrolled, the list seemed endless. Dozens, maybe hundreds of races were listed in succession.

'Finally, it's here.'

My heart raced with excitement as I steadied myself.

But my companions seemed more curious than excited. They furrowed their brows as they looked over the list.

Naturally, the first to ask a question was the Heretic Inquisitor.

"What is this?"

"You asked well."

The Princess chuckled.

It seemed she took pleasure in answering questions.

"Try clicking on any of them. Then you'll understand."

Following the Princess's suggestion, the Heretic Inquisitor clicked on 'Shuninjong'.

Pop! A hologram appeared.

+

[Pure Humans Race]

Extinction Grade: F (No danger)

Maxim: 'We decide the world.'

Description: A race with average abilities across the board.

Depending on the world, the Pure are enslaved by other races or rule as masters of the world. 'We represent all intelligent beings.' The Pure claim themselves as pure humans, promoting average as normal, and establishing it as the standard.

Traits: [Fast Stance Change], [Legacy of Records], [Square Enthusiast]

Evolution: None

Alias: Human, Hume, Homo Sapiens, etc.

+

An image was displayed next to the description.

It depicted humans, just like us.

"....."

My excitement intensified.

If I remembered correctly, the stages to come were...

"Race Wars!"

The Race War.

"From now on, you must choose one race! That race will worship you like gods, and as you command, prophesy, and divine, they will cultivate a 'civilization'."

We had to choose one from hundreds of races.

In the past, Flame Emperor, the former number 1, chose the Fairy Race, commonly known as 'Elves'. What he did with them was too dreadful to describe.

I learned then that Elves could become so brutal and ferocious.

'For the Fire God!'

Elves, shouting this as they mercilessly slaughtered other

ances, showed what disaster befalls when the number 1 ranker is misguided.

"Hmm."

The Heretic Inquisitor tilted his head.

"What does it mean to cultivate a civilization?"

"Exactly as it says. Cultivate a civilization as you wish. It could be a civilization of war-crazed plunderers or of scholars who worship knowledge. It's up to you. Maybe this will make it clearer?"

The Princess bent down, picking up the peach pillow again.

"This time, you'll be..."

Cradling the peach pillow, she smiled.

"Experiencing the role of a Constellation!"

Murmurs spread among my companions.

Meanwhile, I was swiftly scrolling through the list.

Calculating which race would yield the best outcome.

'Dragonkin. Sounds intimidating with 'dragon' in it, but they were just Wyvern-like creatures, right? Fairies... I was drawn to them before the regression, but no. The image of fairies tarnished by the Flame Emperor has left a deep wound in my tender heart...'

-You madman.

The Guardian Spirit clicked his tongue.

-Just pick the Pure Humans Race normally. You're a human. I am too. Humans. Those who have tasted meat know it best, same with races.

'No.'

The choice of race was clear.

+

103. Earth Spirit Tribe

+

I silently touched the hologram of that race.

+

[Earth Spirit Tribe]

Extinction Grade: A (High Danger)

Alias: Goblin, etc.

+

Goblin.

The sight of the three-syllable word sent an electric tremor through me.

How could I describe this lightning-like sensation?

Love?

Destiny?

No.

'I am a returner who has traveled back in time by 11 years.'

Thus, this is-

'Inevitability.'

I pulled out a card from my pocket.

My ace in the hole, cherished and reserved for this moment.

An undisclosed secret technique that no one could have imagined.

'The time has come.'

On the brown card, words were densely written.

+

[Goblin High Society]

Rank: F

Effect: The Great Goblin pondered deeply. 'Our goblin culture is too lowly. Every language ending in Kerk or Keruk. How can I, the boss, shine with such a language!' Then, a stroke of genius hit him. 'That's it! From now on, I will not say Keruk, but Gorr. Gorr! A pronunciation befitting my refined sensibilities.'

*However, this causes internal conflict within the tribe.

*Skill copied from the monster Great Goblin King.

+

-Wait a minute.

Guardian Spirit sensed something amiss and changed color.

-You're not serious, right? You, as mad as you are, wouldn't do that. Right?

I made a solemn face.

'Goblin.'

With an unwavering voice, I declared.

'I choose Goblin.'

The Guardian Spirit was silent for a moment.

Then, he exploded.

-You crazy lunatic!!

Now.

It's time to soar.

Chapter 154:

Surging to the Top

(3)

Naturally, I was the only one eyeing the Earth Spirit Tribe, the Goblins. The other companions reacted diversely as they browsed through the list.

"The pinnacle of all races is surely the dragon. This race marked as 'Dragonkin' must be the most superior."

"Look at the illustration. They just look like wyverns. Can they even speak?"

"There are so many intelligent races..."

"Oh, indeed. Oh ho."

The Countess was fervently searching through the list, reminiscent of someone determined to pick the freshest apple

at an open market. On the other hand, the Black Dragon Witch slightly frowned in distaste, while the Heretic Inquisitor's eyes sparkled.

"Princess! I have a question!"

"Ah, I like students who ask questions. It gives me a chance to show off for free. Go ahead, Heretic. I'll gladly let you assist in my bragging."

"Are we choosing only one race for our tower?"

"Good question."

The Princess buried her face in her pillow, chuckling.

"It's your choice."

"Our choice, you say?"

"Now, I'm going to give a gift to the top seven in the ranking."

Swoosh.

A hologram window appeared in front of us.

[The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages sponsors startup funds.]

[You have received 700 race points!]

[Your total race points are now 700.]

It was a reward I had never received before regression.

As the Princess said, this privilege was given only to the top seven rankers. In my past life, where I was nameless, such a thing was beyond my wildest dreams.

"Now, as the first in ranking, our Swordy boy must choose!"

Technically, it wasn't given to us yet, but we could potentially receive this bonus.

"From the 31st to the 40th floors, a total of ten calamities will strike you. Each one is a terrifying disaster! Your primary goal is to survive these and lead your civilization to prosperity. Now, Swordy, will you put all your points in one race or distribute them?"

"Put all my points?"

The term was unfamiliar, and the Sword Emperor, our tower's number one ranker, furrowed his brows.

"What does that mean?"

"It's literal. You can choose one race and put all 700 points into it. Or, each of the top seven rankers can pick one race, starting with 100 points each."

The Princess grinned broadly.

"Putting all 700 points in one race obviously has its benefits. You can get a head start. But the risk is also greater. If that race goes extinct, you all go down with it. On the other hand-"

"If we each choose a race, the risk is distributed. Even if one

race goes extinct, the others can still survive."

"Right! You catch on quickly."

"....."

The Sword Saint stroked his chin, his eyes becoming more contemplative.

In the past, the Flame Emperor, the former number one ranker, didn't hesitate and chose 'all in.' He manipulated the elf race as he pleased, disregarding the opinions of other rankers and guild leaders.

But the Sword Emperor was different.

".....Evolution is an art of diversity and chance."

He was a wise elder.

"The environmental changes a single race has to endure are infinite. To survive in a cruel world, diversity of species must

be ensured first. I don't know how significant these 700 points are, but it's hard to see them equaling the value of seven races."

"Ah."

"We choose 'distribution,' Princess."

The Princess looked at us amusedly.

"Really? If you choose seven races, they will compete against each other. Someone might even stab another in the back."

"Conflict is also a form of competition."

The Sword Emperor spoke calmly.

"Those without rivals are usually eliminated."

The old man glanced at me briefly. Without a word, the gaze conveyed his intention. Recalling our recent sword fight, I nodded.

"Hmm."

The Sword Emperor also nodded.

"I'll say it again. Our tower chooses distribution."

"Great!"

[The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages welcomes your choice.]

"Now, from the first to the seventh in ranking, choose the race you'll rule! Oh, and guys, remember, no duplicates. If someone else has already chosen a race, the next person can't select it."

The Princess sat down in the cafe chair. Hamusutra had already served her a coffee. Sipping a smoothie loaded with chocolate chips, she winked at us.

"Take about 120 years to think about it if you want! There's no time limit on choosing your race."

Of course, there was no need for such lengthy deliberation.

The Sword Emperor, the number one ranker, was the first to choose a race.

"I choose the Shuninjong."

"

Ah..."

Disappointment echoed around. The Shuninjong (Obedient Human Race) resembled us humans. Lacking distinct traits but familiar to us. It seemed there were quite a few hunters eyeing this race.

"Well, a safe choice. What will you choose, King of Death?"

The Princess turned to me.

The eyes of my comrades also converged on me.

Everyone was curious about my choice.

-Choose zombies...

Preta was internally agonizing.

-Or elves. They're potent. Good-looking, long-lived, and high in magic. Let's go with elves, huh?

I spoke solemnly.

"I'll choose the Earth Spirit Tribe."

-Ahhhhh! Insane! Lunatic! Insane lunatic!!

Preta tumbled around in the air.

Below him, my fellow hunters displayed a collective '?' on their faces.

"The Earth Spirit Tribe?"

The Black Dragon Witch asked on behalf of everyone.

"What is that?"

"It's number 103 on the list."

"Oh. 103? That means..."

My comrades each scrolled through their lists. After a long scroll,

"....."

Silence fell.

"Uh...?"

The Black Dragon Witch rubbed her eyes.

Did she see or hear something wrong?

But it's okay. We are of one mind. What I see, she also sees, and what she sees, I too am seeing.

+

[Earth Spirit Tribe]

Extinction Grade: A (High Danger)

Maxim: 'Keruk! Goruk!'

Description: A race with all abilities in the lower tier. In other words, an inferior race. Their intelligence is less than that of the Pure Humans, their combat power falls short of the Ghost Tribe, and their magic is weaker than the Vampiric Race. Amazing! No matter which aspect you consider, there's always a superior counterpart to the Earth Spirit Tribe!

From the perspective of any race, the Earth Spirit Tribe is not admirable. A race devoid of beauty. That's the Earth Spirit Tribe. From the Pure Humans to the Earth Spirit Tribe themselves, all races consider the Earth Spirit Tribe as 'ugly.'

So ugly!

This is a bit too much!

Traits: [Victim of Racial Discrimination], [Kinship], [Greed]

Evolution: Unknown. Two evolutions exist. 10,000 racial points are needed for the next evolution.

Alias: Goblin, etc.

+

An illustration stood alone next to the description.

A creature, unmistakably a goblin, was depicted.

"Uh, uh...."

The Black Dragon Witch stumbled over her words.

"King of Death?"

"Yes."

"That's a goblin, right? It says so in the alias."

"Yes, it's a goblin."

".....Are you insane?"

"Huh."

I smiled triumphantly. The Black Dragon Witch looked at me as if I had lost my mind. Not just her, but all my comrades did. Ah, but how could sparrows understand the intentions of a phoenix?

"Everyone."

I clasped my hands together like a solitary sage.

"Goblins, the Earth Spirit Tribe, are the greatest race in this world."

The Black Dragon Witch's gaze turned slightly pitiful.

"King of Death... you poor thing... I'm sorry. You've been too busy lately, right? I'll be more considerate from now on. Let's cancel all the interviews scheduled for this month."

"Please listen to me devoutly, everyone."

I preached about the greatness of goblins.

"Look at the description. It says, 'In any field you choose, you can find a superior counterpart to the Earth Spirit Tribe.' Right?"

"Uh-huh."

"In other words, they can exhibit inferior abilities in any field. Whether it's intelligence, magic power, or combat, they might not be the best, but they can be the next best or at least the least worst."

"Uh..."

My fellow hunters looked confused.

'He's interpreting it that way?'

"Above all, they're pitiful. Look, every race considers goblins ugly. Even the description mocks them. I... feel a kinship with them..."

I gave a sorrowful smile.

"They're persecuted and ignored, thus exiled. Doesn't it remind you of us in our tower?"

"....."

"Yes. Goblins are in fact a reflection of ourselves. What's truly ugly is not the goblins, but our hearts that scorn them... Ah, everyone. I am saddened. We all have a 'goblin heart' within us..."

My comrades' faces were baffled.

'Has he finally lost his mind?'

I firmly continued my speech.

"Goblins will rise."

"....."

"They will surely rise."

"....."

"Trust me, I'm a prophet. Don't you believe me?"

"Alright, alright. Have it your way."

Overwhelmed by my unwavering determination, the Black Dragon Witch gave in. She seemed to want to avoid me as

much as possible, but that must be my imagination. Our friendship is solid. Right.

"Ahahaha!"

The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages was rolling with laughter.

"Alright. The King of Death chooses goblins, right?"

"Yes. My heart is clear and free of doubt."

"Ah, as expected. That's why I... No, never mind. Let's continue."

The racial selection for the top seven rankers was completed.

The races chosen by each were as follows:

+

1st Place, Sword Emperor: Pure Humans Race

- Alias: Human.

2nd Place, King of Death: Earth Spirit Tribe.

- Alias: Goblin.

3rd Place, Black Dragon Witch: Vampiric Tribe.

- Alias: Vampire.

4th Place, Heretic Inquisitor: Mountain Calamity Tribe.

- Alias: Snail.

5th Place, Countess: Fairy Tribe.

- Alias: Elf.

6th Place, Viper: Ghost Tribe.

- Alias: Dokkaebi.

7th Place, Paladin: Gill Fishes Tribe.

- Alias: Mermaid.

+

The Paladin, who had been lingering in 9th place, had risen to 7th place over the past two months. See worked hard in dismantling the African warlords. Thanks to that, he got to participate in this stage.

"Alright. Everyone's done. Now each person will get 100 points."

[The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages distributes the grant.]

[You have received 100 race points!]

[Your total race points are now 100.]

The Princess put down her glass on the café table.

"Shall we start lightly with the 31st floor?"

Fwoosh!

At the exact moment the glass touched the table, we were enveloped in light. A moment passed.

When we opened our eyes, we were above a primeval forest.

"Here...?"

"This is the world where the races you chose live in peace. Look below."

Looking down, we saw tiny creatures scurrying about in the forest. Each race had formed its own tribe, living in a primitive state.

"Oh ho, the Mermaids are living in the swamp!"

"Fascinating... The Vampiric Tribe lives in caves."

We observed the races as if visiting a museum.

It was as if we had gained a third-person omniscient perspective.

We zoomed in and out as we wished, even going down among the primitives. They didn't notice us at all.

-Keruk...

-Keruk, ker.

The Earth Spirit Tribe were busily butchering a creature resembling a giant centipede with stone knives. When they roasted the centipede's legs over the fire, surprisingly, it smelled like chicken.

-Keruk!

Young goblins were eagerly devouring the centipede meat.

'Centipede chicken?'

Could it be that in this world, giant centipedes are the source of chicken meat? Then, each leg could taste like a chicken drumstick. Catching one centipede would yield dozens of drumsticks.

Wow, isn't that amazing? Could this world be a paradise?

"Goblins look quite cute from this perspective."

-Are you insane? Well, you've always been...

The Guardian Spirit clicked his tongue in disbelief.

The small primitive communities had us captivated.

Rumble, rumble...

Unfortunately, the peaceful times were brief.

A towering mountain in the midst of the forest began to shake. It was a volcano. The primitives below couldn't see it, but with our third-person view, we could clearly see the lava bubbling up.

"Hmm?"

"Uh-oh."

My comrades were startled.

"This looks... a bit dangerous."

Shortly thereafter, the volcano erupted. We intuitively knew it. Lava would mercilessly engulf the forest, and the races living there would be doomed to extinction.

If nothing was done, all seven races we were guiding would face extinction.

"Then, let's start with the first quest of the 31st floor!"

The Princess announced.

"This is the Great Primeval Forest, where many races coexist. But as you can see, the volcano will soon erupt and destroy everything!"

A hologram appeared before us.

[The 31st floor quest has been given.]

Text quickly formed.

+

[End of the Golden Age]

Difficulty: E

Mission Objective: The Golden Age of all races has come to an end. A volcano is about to erupt in this land where numerous races have built their homes. There's no time. You must guide your protected race to a 'safe area'!

*However, failure to guide them will result in the extinction of your race.

+

Boom!

Almost simultaneously with the quest's announcement, the first explosion from the volcano echoed. Lava spewed, shaking the rocks. Huge boulders teetered as if they would tumble down any moment.

"Uh."

The Black Dragon Witch hastily said,

"Wait. They can't see or hear us. How are we supposed to lead them to safety? Communication itself is impossible!"

"Indeed."

The Princess smiled mischievously.

Behind her smile, Boom! Rocks shot into the air. They fell in the middle of the forest.

-Kirrr!

-Kek! Kek!

The primitive tribes finally sensed something was wrong. Some quickly climbed trees to look at the volcano, which was spewing lava.

"But you are their guardian constellations. From now on, it's up to you to handle it!"

The 31st floor had begun.

Goblins were in a state of confusion.

I smiled at them, unseen.

"Don't worry, little ones."

From now on, I'll carry you.

Chapter 155:

Becoming God (1)

The volcano painted the world in hues of red.

Rumble, rumble, rumble-

Lava engulfed the mountaintop, uncontrollable like overflowing soda. The lush greenery covering the slopes and peaks was instantly set ablaze.

Screams echoed from numerous races.

"I'm just here to assist you."

The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages yawned against the backdrop of the disaster.

"You are different. You are the Guardian Constellations

caring for these children. You chose to open the next stage and selected a race to nurture. Please, make an effort."

"But even if you ask me to try... This is troublesome."

The Paladin frowned, alternating her gaze between the volcano and the primitives. Impatience was evident on her face.

"There's no way to intervene. We can't communicate, be seen, or heard. How can we possibly evacuate these children?"

Our Tower's Vigilante Corps Vice-Captain is inherently good. She would want to help these unfamiliar races.

The other colleagues were similarly restless. Most of them couldn't stand still as lava continued to ravage the primeval forest.

"Hmm."

I stepped in.

"Princess, before starting the stage, you distributed something called [Race Points] to us."

"And?"

"You wouldn't have given them to us without a reason. There must be a purpose for these points."

I spoke calmly.

"As our helper, please tell us what we can do with these [Race Points]. Preferably quickly and intuitively."

"....."

The Princess grinned. Her eyes seemed to say, 'You're correct.' My companions' eyes widened, realizing the validity of my point.

"Aha... Perhaps it's a system to purchase certain items or skills?"

"We'll also use points! Please show us the services available with points!"

"Ha."

The Princess shrugged her shoulders.

"This is why having a quick-witted warrior makes a difference in clearing a stage, right? Well, the King of Death is correct. This certainly falls under the helper's duties."

Swoosh!

A notification window appeared, displaying a hologram before us.

[Welcome to the Civilization Store.]

The hologram contained an extensive list of products.

+

[Oracle Message] - 20p

[Animal Possession] - 40p

[Appearance in Dreams] - 100p

[Hunting Prey Tracking] - 5p

[Bronze-rank Settlement Search] - 80p

[Tribal-rank General (Lottery)] - 100P

[Bronze-rank Technology Invention (Lottery)] - 1,000P

•

•

•

+

'Okay.'

Now the real challenge begins.

I had been referencing the 'strategy guide' Flame Emperor had gone through in the past. He often bragged in interviews about how he conquered stages, and those collections served as a sort of strategy guide.

I remember this strategy guide quite well.

'But that doesn't mean I know every specific tactic.'

I knew about the existence of the [Civilization Store].

However, I didn't know which products would help us overcome the current crisis. I had to figure it out myself, using my own intellect.

'How can I surely guide the goblins to safety? Maybe I should

buy [Oracle Message] to attempt communication?'

I pondered.

Just then, the Paladin spoke urgently.

"I have a question. Does [Oracle Message] directly deliver a message to a race?"

Interestingly, the Paladin had her eye on the same item as I did. The Princess nodded, as if she had expected this.

"Yes, that's right."

"In what way is the message delivered?"

"It's a method you're already familiar with. It's similar to how Constellations communicate with you."

The Princess twirled a lock of hair around her finger.

[The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages demonstrates an example for you.]

A voice echoed in my head. It was an audio message.

"You've experienced it several times already, haven't you?"

"I told you. You're experiencing what it's like to be Constellations. Oh, and remember, [Oracle Message] is a one-time use product. Even if you purchase it, you can only send it once, so be careful! The recipient of the message is also limited to one person! If you want to send more, you'll have to purchase again."

The Paladin nodded in understanding.

"I see. I'll purchase one [Oracle Message]."

The Princess smiled ominously.

"Sure. But remember, there are absolutely no refunds, no matter what happens."

I sensed something was off with the Princess's smile.

But the purchase was already completed.

The Paladin looked down at her chosen race, the Gill Fishes Tribe, which were mermaids. They were floundering in the river, gills fluttering.

"The lava is flowing in from the east... South won't work."

The Paladin muttered to herself. Even in urgency, she tried to stay calm. She chose a leader-like mermaid and declared her oracle.

"[Swim westward with all your might!]"

Shiver!

The mermaid leader splashed vigorously.

-Kyaw? Kyaw Kyaw?

The mermaid seemed startled, thrashing the water with its tail. Suddenly hearing a divine voice in its head would naturally be shocking.

But this mermaid's reaction was odd.

".....Huh?"

The mermaid didn't swim west. It just spun in place. Despite using valuable points, the oracle was ignored. The Paladin stared blankly at the mermaid.

"Wait a minute. This is different! Why isn't it following the oracle?"

"Hmm?"

The Princess leaned on a pillow, feigning ignorance.

"Just because you hear the voice of Constellations doesn't mean you immediately say 'Yes, understood' and respond accordingly, right? Maybe it's similar to that."

"What.....!"

"Or not. Anyway, there's not much time left. If left alone, all races might go extinct from the 31st floor onwards. That would be the end of your tower conquest."

Annoying as she was, the Princess was right.

Rumble, rumble, rumble-

The lava had now reached the foothills. Not just the lava, but the exploding volcanic rocks were also a threat. A single rock hitting a tribe could cause significant damage.

'Why? Why didn't the oracle work?'

I quickly racked my brains.

'Was the Princess deceiving us? No. It's unlikely that the tower's guide would deliberately deceive us. She might not tell the truth, but she wouldn't lie. Could it be that the mermaid genuinely didn't understand?'

While I pondered, the goblins caught my eye.

-Ker! Kerk! Keruk!

The goblins howled. Faced with rocks raining down like meteor showers, the primitive race was in panic.

"....."

That moment.

"Ah."

I realized something.

An all-too-obvious truth.

"The oracle wasn't wrong!"

"Hm?"

"The Paladin's oracle was flawless! The problem lies with them!"

I turned to my companions. Our eyes met, and the Paladin, who was contemplating purchasing another [Oracle Message], paused.

"What do you mean, King of Death?"

"Don't buy another message. It's useless."

"But why? We need to know the reason..."

"Of course! They're real primitives. How could they understand something like [Swim westward with all your might]? They don't even know what [west] is!"

"Ah, indeed!"

"Yes! Their translation might not even be accurate. They lack the [vocabulary]!"

The Paladin's eyes widened.

"What?"

Only then did the Paladin realize the oversight.

The other colleagues' eyes widened too. My point was correct. Compared to the primitives, our language was overly advanced. No matter how much they wanted to understand, they couldn't.

"...Good heavens. So the oracle is truly useless?"

The Black Dragon Witch expressed disbelief.

"[Go that way] might work, but this time we can't specify [that way]... We can't be sure how much they understand our language."

"No, there must be a way."

The Tower does not lie.

It never sets up a stage that is impossible to conquer.

I looked again at the [Civilization Store] with confidence.

+

[Oracle Message] - 20p

[Animal Possession] - 40p

[Appearance in Dreams] - 100p

[Hunting Prey Tracking] - 5p

[Bronze-rank Settlement Search] - 80p

[Tribal-rank General (Lottery)] - 100P

[Bronze-rank Technology Invention (Lottery)] - 1,000P

+

And then.

I thought of a strategy.

A way to evacuate the primitives to a safe area without using language.

"Princess!"

"Yep."

"Can I use [Hunting Prey Tracking] to find a specific prey? For example, if I want a tiger, can it locate the nearest one?"

The Princess nodded.

"Yes, that's possible. There are no tigers in this world, but it can find the closest resembling beast. However, direct possession of a primitive is prohibited. You'll need a higher-grade item for that."

Okay.

A plan formed in my mind.

"I'll purchase one [Hunting Prey Tracking]."

The Black Dragon Witch, not understanding, tried to dissuade me.

"King of Death? In this situation, why leisurely hunt..."

"I'll explain later!"

We were running out of time.

[Purchasing 'Hunting Prey Tracking.']

[5 Race Points will be consumed!]

[You currently have 95 Race Points.]

A card of the same color appeared in my hand.

Without hesitation, I asked the Princess.

"Princess, please locate a creature 'with a unique color,' 'fast on its feet,' and 'fairly large' nearby. Something like a white deer or a white lion, or even a black horse. Anything will do!"

".....Heh."

The Princess's eyes gleamed with amusement.

"Those are pretty vague criteria. But okay, I'll find it for you. You're still beginners after all. I don't want to be as strict as with the others."

With a flick of her finger, the Princess activated the card.

My card melted away.

[Your 'Hunting Prey Tracking' has been consumed.]

The card dissolved into colored dust, moving as if it had its own will. The dust led to a thicket where a large creature crouched.

A lion with white fur.

Fortunately, it was quite close to the goblin tribe.

"I'll purchase another item from the shop."

I spoke decisively.

"I'm buying [Animal Possession]."

Messages appeared in succession.

[Purchasing 'Animal Possession.']

[40 Race Points will be consumed!]

[You currently have 55 Race Points.]

Half of the valuable initial funds were gone in an instant. But it didn't matter. The priority was to save the goblin race from the impending volcanic lava.

"Ah!"

The Heretic Inquisitor realized my plan.

"Indeed! Everyone, possess the most conspicuous animals!"

Following my lead, the Heretic Inquisitor purchased [Hunting Prey Tracking] and [Animal Possession].

"Primitives revere animals with mystical appearances. It's a very basic form of faith! Aha, ha. In a situation like the end of the world, if a 'white lion' or 'black deer' appears, they'll take it as a divine sign!"

Typical of the Heretic Inquisitor. Quick to understand.

"Possess these mystical animals and guide them to safety! They'll follow without needing words! A brilliant idea, King of Death!"

"Ah."

"Certainly..."

"Everyone, hurry up!"

My colleagues purchased the same items.

Leaving them behind, I pointed at the white lion and used the [Animal Possession] card.

"I'll possess this animal."

Sssshhhh!

My consciousness flickered into darkness.

The next moment, I opened my eyes to a different view.

"Growl..."

From my mouth, no, from the beast's jaws, a rough growl escaped. Sharp claws dug into the ground. The beautiful white fur masked the wild ferocity.

"Growl! Growl!"

'Perfect, everything is going as planned!'

I stood up in the lion's body. Its form was utterly different from a human's. Walking on four legs felt strange. Despite the awkwardness, I ran towards the nearby goblins.

'Using aura is... not impossible, but difficult. The Ki points are too different.'

Thump! Thump!

I dashed through the dry forest path. The lion's forelegs

struck the ground, and its hindlegs kicked off. Though quadrupedal running was awkward, the lion's speed was incredibly fast.

'Oh.'

It felt amazing.

'This is unexpectedly pleasant?'

The smell of smoke from the burning trees.

The scent of freshly blossomed flowers.

And this stench... must be the goblins. It smelled like a pot of bean paste stew left out in the summer heat for too long.

'Ugh. Why does this race even smell bad?'

Soon, I arrived at the goblin village. The strong scent made it easier to find.

-Keruk!

-Ker, Kerk!

The primitive goblins were still in a state of panic. Young goblins clung to their mothers, wailing, and the adults either banged their heads on the ground (I had no idea what gesture that was) or stomped their feet.

They were so panicked they didn't even notice the white lion approaching.

‘Such a pitiful and unfortunate race.’

I stood at the entrance of the village.

"Growl!"

I roared towards the goblins.

-Keruk?!

-Kerup! Ker?!

The goblins panicked. Those who were head-butting the ground hastily stood up, only to stumble and fall. The wails of the young goblins intensified.

‘Good job. Very good.’

From the goblins' perspective, the earth had just quaked, a fire demon had covered the sky, and now a strangely colored beast had appeared. It must have felt like the end of the world.

"Growl!"

I swished my tail and hit the ground, then shook my head.

‘Follow me, you little ones!’

Hesitantly, the goblins began to stand up.

‘Yes, that's it! Good, my little ones!’

I snorted.

Goblins. You are bipedal creatures. Though your brains may be soaked in green stupidity as a primitive tribe, you can one day achieve a dazzling civilization!

"Gar, growl!"

‘Come on, follow me!’

I turned around gracefully and walked into the forest.

The goblins hesitantly followed. There was a brief squabble over who would lead, but eventually, all the goblins in the village started to follow me, entranced.

Then.

Boom!

Not long after I led the group away, an exploded rock from the volcano landed on the goblin village. The ground shook

violently.

-Ker?!

-Keru! Kerp, Ker?!

The goblins dropped to the ground in fright. They soon realized that their homeland had suffered a terrible fate and had narrowly escaped the disaster.

[The last residence of the Goblin race has been destroyed!]

[You must now lead them to a new residence.]

The goblins looked at me, utterly lost.

Their goofy faces held a subtle charm.

"Gar."

‘Hmph.’

I snorted as the white lion.

"Kek, Kerk."

‘You should be grateful.’

And with a majestic stride, I walked on.

-Ker...

-Ker, Kerk!

The goblins’ mood changed. Initially following in fear and caution, they suddenly began to eagerly chase after me.

-Kek, Kerk!

The goblins shouted.

-Kek, Kerk! Kek, Kerk!

‘What are these things saying...?’

I was relieved they finally seemed to understand me. Unfortunately, their chatter didn't translate.

Then, a voice from the Tower echoed in my head.

[A Primitive Belief!]

[The Goblin race awakens to primitive religion!]

Huh?

[Hail to you!]

[Your race is the first in this world to adopt a primitive religion!]

I blinked in surprise.

[From now on, the Goblin race will develop the 'White Lion Faith'.]

[You have achieved a first-time achievement!]

[500 Race Points are awarded to you!]

What's this about?

I looked back at the goblin horde in bemusement.

-Kek, Kerk! Kek, Kerk!

The goblins were chanting a strange slogan, following me. Huh. I couldn't help but snort in disbelief.

‘Are these guys really taking me for a god?’

Kim Gong-Ja.

It was the moment I became a god to the goblins.

Chapter 156:

Becoming God (2)

Guided by my lead, the goblins safely escaped.

-Ker! Keru!

-Kek, Kerk!

The goblins hopped around joyously, resembling green chimpanzees. If they had cried 'Ukiki' instead of 'Kerk,' they would have been mistaken for monkeys.

'These little guys are cute.'

-They look cute to you...? Huh?

Guardian Spirit commented with a grimace.

-You sure your eyes haven't gone bad, zombie?

'Look with your heart, Sword Emperor. I see a future for the goblins, a future so noble and beautiful. I can see a future that hasn't arrived yet.'

-Ah, I can't deal with this kid anymore... My mind goes blank every time he opens his mouth...

Meanwhile, other races had also successfully escaped.

The Black Dragon Witch, transformed into an elegant Black Swan, led the Vampiric Tribe. Earlier, when emerging from the forest and looking up, I saw a flurry of bats flapping their wings across the sky. Forming a triangular formation, they followed the Black Swan.

'Oh. That's impressive.'

Our eyes met for a moment as the Black Swan flew past. In its pitch-black eyes, I saw not the wildness of a beast but the intellect of the Black Dragon Witch. Flap! The Black Swan spread its wings wide.

-Yihee!

And then, in an instant, it disappeared beyond the horizon.

My companions, too, had transformed into mystical animals and led a grand escape.

[Quest Clear!]

[You have successfully evacuated your race from the Primeval Forest.]

[As a reward for completing the quest, you receive 300 Race Points!]

[You currently have 855 Race Points.]

The reward was quite generous.

'500 points for creating a primitive religion or something, and 300 points for the quest. Not bad.'

-Hmm. Is that a lot?

'It's sufficient for the beginning. At least we won't starve for points now.'

-If you say so. More power to you, Goblin God Kim Gong-Ja.

'Yes. Now we need to find them a place to live and eat.'

-Is there no damage to your ego at all...?

I chose the next item to purchase in my mind. Shopping in the Civilization Store was possible even in the lion's form.

[Would you like to purchase 'Bronze-rank Settlement Search'?]

Without hesitation, I splurged.

'Yes.'

Messages appeared in succession.

[Purchasing 'Bronze-rank Settlement Search'.]

[80 Race Points will be consumed!]

[You currently have 775 Race Points.]

Whoosh!

A vision unfolded in my mind. After crossing a river and three streams, a suitable settlement area for goblins appeared.

'Appropriate moisture, decent hunting grounds... Not bad.'

Good, now all that was left was to guide them there.

"Goruk! Gor, Growl, Gor!"

'Alright! Follow me!'

I marched forward confidently on the lion's front paws. Like ducklings, the goblins followed me mindlessly, full of joy.

And so, on the sixth day, we finally reached the settlement area indicated in the vision.

-Ker!

The goblins joyfully plunged into the stream.

[The Earth Spirit Tribe is very pleased with this place!]

[The sorrow of losing their homeland diminishes among the Earth Spirit Tribe.]

The goblins rolled around in the river, covering themselves in mud. That seemed to be their hobby.

The mothers dug out gravel and applied clean mud on their young ones' backs. The kids laughed – Ker, Ker! Perhaps they couldn't resist the tickling sensation of the mud?

-Maybe they're trying to mask their own stench. Goblins do have a rather strong smell, don't they? At least the mud helps a bit.

'Interesting perspective.'

-Didn't you know that, Goblin God Kim Gong-Ja?

'A god does not concern himself with every minor detail. Only the grand plan matters.'

-Crazy...

What is he talking about?

I lay down, crossing my front paws, watching the mud festival.

As I watched contentedly, a voice from the Tower spoke.

[Would you like to establish this place as the new settlement for the Earth Spirit Tribe?]

'Yep.'

[A new settlement has been established!]

[Please name this settlement.]

'A name, huh... I'd like to call it Raviel Sanctuary, but I can't pronounce it. They wouldn't be able to either.'

I sadly scratched the ground with my paw. Hmm. The sensation of my claws scratching the ground seemed to alleviate my gloominess...

-Hey. You're becoming more and more like a beast, aren't you...?

'It's an illusion.'

Just then, a fly-like insect buzzed around me. By the way, the animal I possessed looked similar to a lion but wasn't exactly a lion.

I just called it that for convenience.

I swatted the fly with my tail. Thwack! My tail struck the fly perfectly, killing it instantly as it hit my side.

This fly hunting had become my new hobby during this mission.

It was surprisingly fun.

-So, he really has become a beast...?

'If you mean I possess the charm of a beastly man, I gladly accept. Anyway, let's name it [Guru], after the sound of my roar.'

And so, I roared.

"Guru-!"

The Tower responded to my roar.

[The new settlement for the Earth Spirit Tribe will be named 'Guru'.]

[The Earth Spirit Tribe has escaped the risk of extinction!]

[You may now declare stage clear.]

[Would you like to declare stage clear now?]

-Wow, finally! We can leave this growling hell! Let's get out of here! What are you waiting for? Declare it clear!

'Ah, don't you know the Tower?'

-I know! I know! I just want to get out of here!

'I reject that.'

The Race War.

From the 31st floor to the 40th, the theme progresses through time. If the 31st floor is the Stone Age, the 32nd becomes the Neolithic Age, and so on.

If I declare clear now, I'll meet the goblins centuries or even millennia later on the next floor.

'Let's complete everything we can before moving on.'

I slowly reviewed the status of the Goblin race.

I had glanced over it several times while guiding them, but it was a critical issue that needed to be definitively addressed.

'The traits of the goblins were [Victim of Racial Discrimination], [Kinship], [Greed].'

I reviewed the information in order.

+

[Victim of Racial Discrimination]

Rank: F

Effect: The Earth Spirit Tribe is unattractive! Their appearance incites disgust in onlookers. As a result, the Earth Spirit Tribe faces prejudice and misunderstandings, making it difficult to form healthy relationships with other races.

Be warned! The hearts of the discriminated harbor hatred. The greater the Earth Spirit Tribe's hatred grows, the more they will automatically antagonize other races. This issue must be resolved before crossing the point of no return.

*However, this trait may change depending on the course of history.

+

'First, this is the problem.'

What if we move to the next floor and find the goblins have formed hostile relations with all other races? What if, as in typical fantasy worlds, our goblins are seen as 'public enemies'?

That would be horrific.

To have saved them, only for them to become public enemies.

'This must be resolved before we leave... Next is Kinship.'

+

[Kinship]

Rank: C

Effect: The Earth Spirit Tribe has a very strong sense of kinship. When one of their own dies, no race in this world, except for the same goblins, will shed a tear for them. Instead, they cheer, 'A monster has died! It's a cause for celebration!'

Goblins are goblins.

It's an inescapable fate.

Under the belief that they can only rely on their own kind, the Earth Spirit Tribe becomes tightly knit. The greatest taboo in their society is to 'betray their own kind' or 'kill their own kind', among others.

Unless faced with extraordinary misfortune, it's unlikely that the Earth Spirit Tribe will self-destruct due to internal strife!

*However, this trait may change depending on the course of history.

+

Even after reviewing it multiple times, this seems like a good trait.

After all, even goblins deserve to have at least one good trait.

-It doesn't seem like an entirely positive trait...

'Oh? Why do you say that?'

-Just saying. Hurry up and open the next trait.

'Are you finally starting to feel the charm of the goblins?'

-I just want to get this over with...

It's clear as day that he's enjoying nurturing the race, even though he denies it.

-No, I'm not...

Either way, a lion and a ghost sat side by side, peering into the final description box.

+

[Greed]

Rank: B

Effect: The Earth Spirit Tribe is overflowing with greed. Perhaps due to their inferiority complex and self-loathing for being ugly, they seek recognition not for themselves but through their possessions. 'Kerk! I've covered myself in warm mud!' 'Keruk! I've plastered myself with premium mud from upstream!'

An insatiable desire for better things.

A longing for more impressive possessions.

Mixed with feelings of inferiority, self-loathing, and a craving for recognition, the Earth Spirit Tribe's hearts brew a powerful greed. They might begin to covet shiny treasures, or perhaps they will boast about having prettier slaves than others. The Earth Spirit Tribe is greedy, and their potential lies within this greed.

The direction of their 'greed' depends on you.

*However, this trait may change depending on the course of history.

"....."

I pondered deeply.

'This is somewhat similar to me.'

-Huh? What is?

'Nothing. Just thinking aloud. Hmm.'

I slowly raised my heavy lion body.

As I approached the stream, the mud-covered goblin kids noticed me and gathered around.

-Ker.

-Kek, Kerk?

Compared to humans, goblins had fewer facial muscles.

Their mouths were excessively large, and their cheekbones protruded, making it difficult to read their expressions.

“Grrr.”

I raised my paw and struck a rock by the stream. The goblins flinched in surprise, but I paid them no mind and continued to strike with my paw.

Soon, my claws were all broken.

-Huh? What are you doing?

'Just wait and see.'

With my tattered paw, I pressed into the mud. My fur, like a paintbrush soaked in water, became drenched in mud.

The goblins watched my incomprehensible actions with bated breath.

“Grrr.”

I approached the nearest little goblin. As the shadow of the giant lion cast over the youngster, it flinched but didn't flee.

“Gor. Grrr. Grr, Goruk.”

'Right. Be brave. Just stay like that.'

Thump.

I gently rubbed the goblin's belly with my mud-covered paw, drawing a curve. The little goblin twitched each time I applied the mud.

-Ah...

Guardian Spirit spoke up.

-Are you creating a tattoo right now?

Exactly.

'Yes.'

I drew a spiral pattern on the little goblin with mud.

And it wasn't just for this one. After completing the swirl pattern, I drew tattoos on the other goblins as well.

“Gor.”

Drawing with a lion's paw instead of a human hand was clumsy. Painting with clumpy mud instead of fine paint was awkward. But even if it was awkward and clumsy, it was undoubtedly art.

After tattooing every goblin,

-Ker?

The goblins looked at each other curiously, marveling at their bodies. Soon, like children discovering a new toy, they started smearing mud on each other and playing.

-Kerk! Gerup, Gergur.

-Gergur!

The goblins splashed in the stream. When their tattoos washed away, others would draw new ones, and they all laughed – Keruk.

[The Earth Spirit Tribe awakens to an aesthetic sense!]

[The Earth Spirit Tribe becomes enchanted by the beauty their bodies display.]

The Tower's voice echoed in my head.

[The Earth Spirit Tribe's trait 'Victim of Racial Discrimination' evolves!]

[The Earth Spirit Tribe acquires a new trait 'Primitive Fashionista'!]

Letters appeared before my eyes.

+

[Primitive Fashionista]

Rank: E

Effect: The Earth Spirit Tribe is unattractive! Their appearance incites disgust in onlookers. As a result, they face prejudice and misunderstandings, making it difficult to form healthy relationships with other races.

‘Kerk! We are ugly!’ To combat this, the Earth Spirit Tribe invented a special culture. ‘Then we’ll just wear fancy clothes, right?’ They cover their appearance with fashion.

The Earth Spirit Tribe paints a variety of tattoos on their green skin. The more beautiful the tattoo, the more recognition they receive from their kin. Congratulations. The Earth Spirit Tribe now has a culture of fashion!

Blessings to the primitive fashionistas!

‘No matter how much they dress up, a goblin is still a goblin.’

Of course, whether this fashion will be recognized by other races is another matter.

*However, this trait may change depending on the course of history.

+

Okay.

I let out a contented growl.

“Grrr.”

Whether it's the Race War or Guardianship Constellation, it's simple.

Basically, I just need to raise these kids as best as I can.

"Grung, Grrrr, Gop, Goruk!"

‘Hey, I’ll elevate your tribe to the heavens!’

I roared vigorously.

-Kekerkek!

-Kekerkek! Kekerkek!

The goblins, covered in mud, circled me, dancing jubilantly.

A cauldron of emotions.

Guardian Spirit, who had watched the entire scene from beginning to end, muttered softly.

-No... They just seem like a bunch of crazies... Surely they won't turn into a bunch of Kim Gong-Jas, right? A race full of lunatics like Kim Gong-Ja? Nah, that's impossible. Such a fantasy, such a hellish existence, can't unfold in reality...

-Ker!

The grand chant of the goblins echoed through the new settlement.

Chapter 157:

Becoming God (3)

[Purchasing 'Hunting Prey Tracking.']

[5 Race Points will be consumed!]

[You currently have 95 Race Points.]

“Grrrr!”

I tore into the hide of a bull. Although it looked nothing like a cow, with its shell back and porcupine-like spikes, I had my reasons for calling it a bull.

-Eummeo!

Its bellow sounded just like that of a cow.

-Eummeo! Eummeo!

The bull let out a feeble cry. Despite its final struggle and resistance, it was no match for my teeth and claws, and especially not for the spears jabbed by the goblins.

Kuung!

The bull fell.

The goblins who joined me in the hunt jumped around excitedly.

-Kiruk! Ke!

-Kerk, Kekgo, Goruk!

[You have succeeded in ‘Hunting’!]

[You have now fully understood this prey. Hunting this animal further will not yield more Race Points.]

[Your hunting experience has reached its limit. You cannot gain more Race Points from hunting.]

'Well, that's it for hunting in this area.'

-Zombie... Let's just go... Please... We've hunted everything...

'Alright, let's go gathering now!'

-Damn it!

How long have these idyllic days lasted?

[You can no longer secure Race Points through gathering.]

The goblins no longer exposed their bare skin. They used red and green mud to awkwardly, but brilliantly, tattoo themselves.

And something strange happened – the smell began to decrease. Whether it was due to the deodorizing effect of the mud or the power of the Primitive Fashionista trait, the stench

that smelled like a mix of spoiled soybean soup in the summer heat and a sewage tank was now gone.

But that wasn't all.

[The Earth Spirit Tribe has established itself as 'Hunters-Gatherers'!]

[Among the Earth Spirit Tribe, the fear of large animals diminishes.]

[You have gained 50 Race Points.]

[Your current Race Points are 1015.]

“Gor.”

‘Okay.’

I wagged my tail in satisfaction.

‘Now, I’ve almost done everything I can for them.’

The goblins have learned to play with mud and can now hunt large animals in groups.

This is the starting point. The groundwork for a great [Goblin Civilization] to flourish in the future is laid.

‘There are no more Race Points to gain.’

I wonder if the other companions are in a similar situation?

[The Celestial Clan Master leading the Ghost Tribe declares a clear!]

[The Sword Saint leading the Pure Humans declares a clear!]

More companions are declaring ‘Stage Clear’. The Celestial Clan Master was the first, followed by the Sword Saint.

The rest of the companions will probably wrap up this stage one by one.

‘Ah.’

I sighed, feeling a bit regretful.

‘I really wanted to pass on things like 'writing' or 'aura'. This is frustrating...’

-Why? Just teach them.

‘I wish I could, but I can’t.’

Sighing through the lion’s maw, I looked at the Civilization Shop. The shop had almost every item imaginable, including the things I wanted to pass on to the goblins.

‘Item search. Writing.’

The problem is that it’s just a pie in the sky.

The hologram smoothly moved, displaying the product.

+

[Writing]

Description: Your tribe invents letters. Writing records is far more effective than oral transmission! Unlike voices that evaporate as soon as spoken, letters withstand the flow of time.

Price: 4500 Race Points

*The Pure Humans start with this technology.

+

'Damn. Have you ever seen such a crazy price...'

The price is excessively steep.

I have 1015 Race Points right now. Even if I hadn't spent any points on hunting and other activities, it wouldn't be enough to purchase 'Writing'. What's more, the Pure Humans start

with this expensive 'Writing'.

Is this a joke about race balance?

-It's your fault for choosing goblins. Hehe.

The Pure Humans aren't the only ones with a bonus.

In fact, they are underpowered. The Fairy Tribe, led by the Countess, aka Elves, start with both 'Mana Reaction' and 'Aura Reaction', each priced at 6200 points.

It's now clear how disadvantaged the goblins were from the start.

'Of course, I believe these kids will ascend in the future and eat up both the Pure Humans and Elves, but it's still pitiful.'

-Your head might be the pitiful thing here, Zombie.

'I really wanted to leave them with writing at least. Sigh. Is there really no way to accumulate 4500 points...?'

The Tower's voice reached me again.

[The Paladin leading the Gill Fishes Race declares a clear!]

The Paladin had now also declared a clear.

Only three of us remained in the 31st floor stage: the Heretic Inquisitor leading the Mountain Calamity Tribe, the Black Dragon Witch ruling the Vampiric Tribe, and me.

‘Hmm.’

At that point, I decided to give up.

‘Alright, let’s abandon the straightforward method of purchasing 'Writing'.’

-Huh?

‘Even if I managed to collect 4500 points, it would be too precious to spend on one item. And since when have I used a straightforward method? I’ve always relied on cunning.’

-What are you talking about?

‘I’ll just teach them letters myself!’

From that day, I embarked on educating the goblins’ brains and blood.

“Goruk, Gor. Ah. Ker, Ah.”

‘Look, kids, this is A. This is A.’

I drew the letter A on the ground. To ensure they could recognize it, I etched it large with my claw. However, the goblins gathered around me just tilted their heads in confusion.

-Kerrrr?

-Kekerkek?

As expected.

They didn't get it at all.

But I am a man who doesn't know how to give up.

"Gor! Gaa, ah, kar!"

'Look! A, A, this is A!'

I growled, driving the goblins into action.

The goblins, startled, twitched their shoulders.

-Gar...?

-Go, go?

The goblins stood up and walked somewhere.

[The Earth Spirit Tribe is frightened by you.]

[Your inexplicable behavior has plunged the Earth Spirit Tribe into confusion.]

Shortly after, the goblins brought me the meat of the bull caught that morning. They timidly offered the well-cooked meat before me.

-Kekerkek!

The goblins bowed their heads to the ground, crying.

[The Earth Spirit Tribe pleads for you to calm your anger.]

‘What? These guys really think I’m angry about not having bull meat?’

I'm just trying to do some advanced learning for your benefit. You always play around, going 'Goruk, Goruk', but if you don't learn, the Elves next door and the Humans in the neighboring house will catch you and turn you into monster barbecue. Do you want to be barbecue? Huh? Do you want to be treated like experience-farming monsters by the Elves later?

“Grrrung! Gaa, ah, kar!”

-Ker, Kerruk....

I didn't give up and continued trying to teach them letters.

But it was a colossal failure.

The goblins couldn't even learn ABC. It seemed like they memorized A somehow, but with expressions that said, 'What's this even for?' 'Don't know...' 'Not sure why we're doing this...', they became disheartened.

‘Khuung.’

For the first time while leading the goblin tribe, I encountered a real obstacle.

‘Could it be impossible for goblins to learn letters with their intelligence? That's strange. I remember the Earth Spirit Tribe using letters when the Flame Emperor was clearing the 33rd floor. Is it too early in history for their intelligence to develop? It shouldn't be...’

I deeply pondered the situation.

‘Teaching them ABC like this will only lead to them forgetting it soon.’

The goblins must directly feel the meaning of letters. They need to understand why they are learning and what benefits it brings. Otherwise, even if I successfully pass on writing, it will all be forgotten in a generation.

How can I imbue meaning into these letters?

"....."

Wait.

An idea struck me.

‘Maybe I’m trapped in a fixed mindset?’

Right. There’s no need to strictly teach ABC when passing on writing!

I suddenly stood up and roared.

“Grrruk!”

‘Gather around!’

The goblins, who were eating meat, gathered around me, startled. They all looked like droopy-eared puppies, probably thinking, ‘Is he going to do something strange again?’ ‘Ugh, I don’t like this...’ ‘I’d rather he just put mud on us like usual.’

In short, I was a bit sulked.

“Grrr, grruk. Kekekek, gor, ke.”

‘There, there. It’s okay. You know I like you, right?’

I coated my paw with mud and applied it to the goblins. They tickled. The sulking goblins began to loosen up a bit.

-Gorgoruk.

-Kerrup, ker!

Little brats. As easily as they sulk, they reconcile.

My skillful mud application melted their icy hearts. Once the mood lightened up, I showed the goblins some [writing].

‘Look here, kids. This is mud.’

This time, however, I used a slightly different type of writing.

I swiftly drew something with my claw.

■.

First, I drew a square and filled it in black.

Then, I piled up mud next to the ■.

‘Mud. This is mud. Get it?’

-Kerruk...?

The goblins looked puzzled. They didn’t understand much, but I didn’t mind and decided to take my time.

Days passed by.

Each time I applied mud to the goblins, I drew ■ on the ground. Not just that, I tattooed letters on the goblins' bodies whenever I had time.

‘This is daytime. The sky is bright.’

O.

‘Now it’s night. The sky is dark.’

●.

‘That’s the sun. Blinding, right?’

☆.

‘This is the moon.’

★.

‘This is water. Water. Stream water.’

~.

‘What if the water is a bit deep?’

~~.

‘What if the water is extremely deep?’

~~~.

-Kerrr....

-Kerk? Ker, ke?

At first, the goblins were baffled, but they slowly began to understand my [pictures]. They couldn't grasp why A meant 'ah', but they somewhat understood that ■ meant 'mud'.

'Right.'

My initial approach was wrong.

'The world is still small for the goblins.'

In this vast world, there isn't much that goblins recognize.

Huge as it is, what goblins see, feel, smell, and hear here is really just a handful.

-Kerk.



Sky.

-Kerruk.

Land.

-Ker.

Meat.

-Ke.

Water.

The goblins saw something blue stretching above them. They felt something hard yet sometimes soft under their feet. They smelled the pleasant aroma of roasted centipede meat. They heard the soothing sound of something cool to drink and fun to jump into.

-Gor!

They said they were happy when happy.

-Kerruk...

And expressed discontent when they weren't.

Thus, in the world of goblins, there were about six things. Just six. Six words were enough to represent these six aspects of their world.

Six pictures instead of dozens of 'alphabets'.

That's what the goblins needed.

Sssss...

One day, it rained.

The goblins bathed and played in the rain.

I showed them a certain letter.

'Water.'

~.

'Dark sky.'

●.

'Water from the dark sky.'

●~.

'Rain'

I looked up at the rain pouring down from the sky.

The goblins followed my gesture and looked at the rain.

'Rain.'

-.....

After some time passed.

The goblins slowly began to speak.

-Kerkke?

-Kerkke. Kerkke.

The goblins pointed at the rain, then imitated the ●~ I had etched into the ground, drawing a similar figure in the dirt.

-Kerkke!

‘Rain.’

The goblins looked at me as if asking if they got it right.

I nodded in satisfaction.

“Gor.”

‘Good.’

At that moment.

[The Earth Spirit Tribe has awakened to writing!]

[The Earth Spirit Tribe gains a new trait ‘Legacy of Records’!]

Words appeared before my eyes.

+

[Legacy of Records]

Rank: E (A)

Effect: The Earth Spirit Tribe has realized the endless possibilities of drawing! They understand that their drawings are not just visually pleasing but can represent something in this world. They now know that symbols can carry meaning.

'O.'

This represents the sky to the Earth Spirit Tribe.

'■.'

This represents mud and land to them.

'O■.'

Thus, this represents sky and land, expressing 'world' to the Earth Spirit Tribe.

'O■.'

That is their world.

From now on, the Earth Spirit Tribe will develop their pictographic writing. They will leave behind what they love in pictures, and their letters will contain their lives.

May fortune be with them.

\*However, this trait can change depending on the course of history.

+

"....."

What was it?

I felt strangely moved just for teaching a few pictures.

-Kerkke, kerkke!

-Kerkkeruk!

Now, the goblins, covered in mud, drew pictures with joy, ignoring me. Watching them, I felt a mix of emotions – sorrow, happiness, a touch of loneliness. Pride? Admiration? It was an indescribable feeling.

[The Black Dragon Witch leading the Vampiric Tribe declares a clear!]

After about two weeks, the Black Dragon Witch also declared a clear.

Now only the Heretic Inquisitor and I remained on the 31st floor stage.

‘The Heretic Inquisitor must be diligently teaching something too.’

Meanwhile, I taught the goblins numbers.

Initially, I tried teaching them Arabic numerals, but they didn’t understand at all, so I compromised with Roman numerals. I, II, III. Perhaps because they were simple sticks, the goblins understood them.



I would've liked to teach arithmetic, but...

‘These kids don’t get the concept of subtraction...’

A goblin is a goblin.

They couldn't even grasp the existence of numbers greater than six.

Well, it's too much to ask for so much so soon.

‘I guess I've taught them everything I can. Right?’

-Yeah, seems like it, man.

I nodded.

‘It’s time for me to leave.’

That night, when the goblins were deep asleep, I sneaked out

of the tribe.

The goblins would be very sad when they realized I was gone.

But I couldn't leave this white lion body in the middle of the tribe and depart the 31st floor. It might attack and injure the goblins.

"Grrr. Gorrurr."

'Take care, kids.'

I licked a young goblin's forehead with my tongue.

-Gorr...

The little goblin, oblivious, slept soundly.

'Cute things.'

I moved as far away as possible from the goblin settlement, [Guru]. Time passed. In the dark night, where nothing but insect sounds were heard, I faintly heard the goblins' mournful cries from afar.

-Kekerk... Ker...

Had they already realized I was gone?

The goblins were calling out my name, Kekerkker

I didn't look back and disappeared faster into the darkness.

'Live well! Grow well! Let's meet again when you're even more splendid!'

And I whispered in my heart.

'I declare, stage clear!'

The Tower's voice responded.

[Stage Clear!]

[You have cleared the 31st floor.]

[Reward tallying will be conducted after entering the 32nd floor.]

[Sequential layer progression - You will be forcibly transferred to the 32nd floor!]

Sssss...

A white light engulfed my vision.

# Chapter 158: Great Snail Empire (1)

---

Right after clearing the stage.

What awaited me in the 32nd floor, where I was forcibly teleported, were my fellow hunters and [The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages]. Among them, the Princess was holding something odd that looked like a pillow.

“Wait. Is that...?”

Upon closer inspection, it wasn't a pillow but a snail doll.

This is unexpected.

A goblin doll I could understand, but a snail doll....

“There are goblin dolls too.”

“Really?”

“Here.”

The Princess quickly pulled out a goblin doll from her bosom. It had elongated ears, nose, and even cheekbones, all remarkably replicated.

“Where did you get that...?”

“I made it.”

“Could you show me...”

Before I could properly request to see more as a rightful Goblin God, someone interrupted.

“What are you guys doing?”

Black Dragon Witch looked at us incredulously.

“If you have time to play with the Princess, let's move on to the next stage. It took us 24 days just to conquer the 31st floor. ...Or is my sense of time off? It took years to clear the 10th floor. Really now....”

“But you're also holding something in your arms, Black Dragon Witch....”

“This, this is for research purposes.”

Black Dragon Witch quickly hid her bat doll behind her.

Countess and Paladin were also fiddling with elf and mermaid dolls, respectively.

“I'm checking the product for quality. It's a rare item made by the Princess, isn't it?”

“The item descriptions are quite thorough.”

These people....

“King of Death. Here.”

“Ah, thank you.”

I took the goblin doll, hugging it tightly, and looked around.

A white world. Nothing else was visible. It was as if a blank white canvas stretched out infinitely. We were the only ones stranded in the middle of this canvas.

Hmm.

“...Is this the 32nd floor?”

I asked, though I thought it unlikely. As expected, the Princess, hugging her snail doll, shook her head.

“Think of this as a kind of waiting room. To materialize the 32nd floor, all of you first need to declare ‘Stage Clear’. Ah. Like in Viper’s case, he spent fifteen days here waiting for you all.”



“I almost thought I was going to die of boredom!”

Viper, sitting on the white floor, grimaced.

“Why were you all so late? You should've quickly taken care of the kids and come out. Here, we can't even observe what you're doing, so I spent all this time meditating.”

“Along with your dokkaebi doll, right?”

“It helps with meditation. While I'm thoroughly pragmatic and practical in my approach to the game, what were you really doing, arriving now? Always so immersed...”

“No, you're just too detached.”

Paladin sighed.

“Didn't the Princess say when we entered the 31st floor, [From the 31st to 40th floors, it's a race war]. It implies that the stages from the 31st to 40th floors are continuously linked. We might be governing the same tribes we chose in the 31st floor.”

“What?”

“If it’s just clearing the 31st floor, like you said, Celestial Martial Clan Leader, it would’ve been fine to casually take care of them. But if we’re governing them until the 40th floor, it’s a different story. Even if [I’m not there], we need to prepare the tribes in advance to develop on their own.”

Viper blinked his one eye.

“W-Wait. Was there such a conversation?”

“It was clear enough for anyone to notice.”

Paladin’s sigh grew heavier.

“Think a little on your own, Liǎofàn. You tend to gloss over things too easily when they’re not related to martial arts....”

“Really? Is that why everyone lingered in the 31st floor for weeks?”

Viper frantically looked around. His eyes were desperate, as if hoping someone would say 'no'.

Unfortunately, there was no hunter with enough brain cells left to respond to Viper's wish here.

"Celestial Martial Clan Leader, it's okay."

I smiled kindly and patted Viper's shoulder.

"King of Death... no, that can't be right. I can't be the only one who lagged behind like an idiot, right...?"

"Even if your tribe goes extinct, there are still six tribes left."

"Damn it!"

Viper covered his face.

Watching our comical scene, the Princess chuckled mischievously.

“Don’t worry too much. From the first to the seventh in the ranking, everyone has survived ‘to the next era’... to the 32nd floor stage. Thanks to all your efforts, the Stone Age ended quickly. Now it's the Ancient Times.”

Ancient Times.

There was a temporal gap between the 31st and 32nd floors.

‘It must be thousands of years later.’

Thousands of years. During this lengthy period, I was concerned about how well the goblins fared, but hearing the Princess confirm their survival relieved me somewhat.

However, the Princess unexpectedly announced something.

“Alright! Everyone's here, so let's open the next stage.”

The Princess floated the snail doll into the air and climbed on top of it. Then, like a knight on a horse, she lifted one arm and shouted, “Oh-!”

“32nd floor is the world 200 years after the 31st floor!”

"....."

Silence fell among us. My reaction was similar.

"What?"

The Princess had just said 200 years, not 2000.

It's ‘only’ been 200 years since the Stone Age concluded and the Ancient Times began.

“200 years, Princess? Did you mean 2000 years?”

I looked dumbfounded. It made no sense.

In the past, when the Flame Emperor devoted all his points to raising the elves, the gap between the 31st and 32nd floors was over a thousand years. Even if my memory isn’t perfect, it was certainly more than five hundred years.

But only 200 years?

Did we raise our tribes so well?

“You heard right.”

The Princess beamed.

“I was surprised too. I knew you were fast, but I didn’t expect it to be this fast. Or, in this case, should I say ‘slow’? Yep. Sometimes the detour is the shortcut.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ll understand once you go to the 32nd floor. Off we go.”

The Princess set down the goblin doll on the white floor and stretched out her arms.

“Now, opening the 32nd floor!”

“Wait a minute.”

Black Dragon Witch interjected, clearly startled by the number 200 years.

“We haven’t all gathered yet. The Heretic Inquisitor isn’t here.”

Black Dragon Witch was right. Among our group, including myself, only six were present. One of our members, the Heretic Inquisitor, was still missing.

“We should go to the 32nd floor after the Heretic Inquisitor declares ‘Stage Clear’....”

“Oh. Don’t worry about that.”

The Princess waved her hand dismissively.

“I said it earlier. [Everyone who should be here has arrived]. If you’re talking about the Heretic Inquisitor, who’s fourth in our ranking, he’s already arrived at the 32nd floor and waiting.”

“.....What?”

“As I said.”

The Princess smiled.

“You’ll see when you get there.”

Fwaaah!

White light enveloped us.

---

When we opened our eyes, we were floating in the sky. The world unfolded beneath our feet.

The previous world had a vast Great Forest. This time, it was different. No forests, no streams, no sunlight filtering through leaves.

Even the sky was missing.



“My goodness.”

Black Dragon Witch muttered in astonishment.

“What is that...?”

The landscape beneath us, which Black Dragon Witch referred to as ‘that’, was a ‘subterranean city’. There, a city unlike anything I had seen or heard of before had been established.

-It’s tough, lime, the commute home is too far.

Voices flowed from somewhere.

-A new tavern has opened near the Great Void...

-I’d like to postpone this year’s tribute day, lime.

Something squirmed about the city. Not walking, but crawling.

Snails.

Translucent creatures scuttled about, each with a large snail shell on their back.

“Crazy...?”

The underground city, no, the underworld was entirely different from our world. Firstly, there were no roads. Instead of walking, the snails clung to walls to move.

-Don't carelessly stick on our wall roads, lym!

-That's ridiculous. All wall roads in Polis are public property, lime! Where I end up is determined by the gods, but how I crawl is my choice, lime.

The snails freely moved left, right, up, and down.

A vast subterranean world.

At first glance, the 20-plus-story stone buildings were

randomly erected, but nowhere to be found were stairs. Snails simply crawled up the walls and entered their homes through windows.

-Rents have skyrocketed lately, lime...

-I'm sorry to say, but this winter I'll have to stay in an 'old house'....

Even homeless snails existed.

The homeless huddled in small caves, burrowing into snail shells. They exchanged a blue-glowing mineral among themselves. When a snail swallowed a blue stone, its translucent body emitted a bluish light. The snail itself turned blue.

-For this one bite, I endured today, lymu....

-Seeing the bright light, it seems the kids got something good, lime.

-I was lucky. Nowadays, traders have no integrity, lime. How can they mess with rolling tobacco? It's inhumane, lime.

-Just one bite for me....

And it didn't end there.

-Hurry up and move the luggage, lime!

A snail waved its tentacles. Squelch! A squishy sound echoed. The creature struck by the tentacle groaned and heaved heavy stones onto a cart.

The Ghost Tribe.

The dokkaebi, once governed by Viper, struggled with their labor.

-Really, the Ghost Tribe are all lazy! lime!

A snail, apparently a manager, grumbled.

-Despite being expensive, they slack off at the slightest distraction. Lymu. We feed, clothe, shelter, and save them, yet I can't understand their complaints.

-Right. Slaves always try to climb up if you treat them slightly well, lime. A lower species without shells, how dare they act so arrogantly.

-Hey, slave. Try saying 'lime'. If you can pronounce it correctly, I'll let you off.

The snail was much smaller than the Ghost Tribe. The Ghost Tribe members were large like orcs, with a horn in the middle of their foreheads. Yet, they were at the mercy of the tiny snails.

-La, Lymy.

-Look at that! Slaves can't even pronounce lime properly! Born low, they can't even utter our sacred words, lime. Lowly creatures! Hurry up and move those stones!

-Ugh...

Incredible.

Could these snails actually be enslaving the Ghost Tribe?

“No... What is that...”

Viper was dumbstruck.

Suddenly his tribe had become slaves.

“Ah, but that's too much. How can this be? I... I took care of them in my own way and left the 31st floor! I even made them weapons, spears, and taught them how to fight... What is that! Slaves? Could my tribe really have become slaves?!”

“Huh.”

Then, a familiar voice sounded.

“What a pleasure to see familiar faces!”

It was the Heretic Inquisitor.

“Ahaha. Indeed, now we have finally entered a new era. Hmm, slow yet fast. No. Objectively, it's still fast!”

The Heretic Inquisitor was the same as always. Wearing his usual black priest's robe and smiling warmly. So Viper, without sensing anything unusual, rushed at him.

“Hey! You psychopath!”

“Ah, yes.”

“Why is my tribe serving your tribe?!”

Viper grabbed the Heretic Inquisitor's collar, shaking him.

Despite being shaken, the Heretic Inquisitor's smile never faded.

“That's easy to explain! The [Snail Civilization] I established requires highly concentrated labor. Slavery is quite useful for providing labor! 112 years ago, the Ghost Tribe invaded in large numbers, so after defeating them, I captured them all!”

“What, what...?”

“Aha, don’t worry. They are a very proud tribe, so taming was hard, and still is, but I managed to subdue them somewhat! Maybe in three generations, their nature will change.”

"....."

Viper was at a loss for words, failing to comprehend the Heretic Inquisitor’s explanation. Meanwhile, the other hunter colleagues exchanged glances, realizing the situation.

“...Heretic Inquisitor.”

I stepped forward to speak.

“I have a question.”

“Aah, King of Death! Yes! Ask me anything.”

The Heretic Inquisitor beamed. If he had a dog's tail, it would be wagging energetically. His smile was that vibrant.



“We declared 'Stage Clear' on the 31st floor and moved to the waiting room. You weren't there. The Princess said you arrived at the 32nd floor first... What does that mean?”

“Hmm? Ah, I see. Ahaha.”

The Heretic Inquisitor pondered a few times.

“Strictly speaking, that's incorrect. I didn't arrive at the 32nd floor first! I've been on the 31st floor the whole time!”

"....."

Silence.

"...What?"

"Exactly as I said. King of Death! Everyone! I knew you were declaring 'Stage Clear' one by one. The Tower told me. However, I thought, if the 31st floor is connected to the next, there's no need to declare clear, right?"

"....."

"I'm somewhat knowledgeable about the course of human history. This knowledge was sure to help the [Snail Civilization] advance! So, I told the Tower I wouldn't declare 'Stage Clear'."

"So that means..."

"Yes! I've been caring for the Mountain Calamity Tribe all this time!"

The Heretic Inquisitor beamed.

"Welcome, everyone! Aha. It's been 200 years and 6 months 21 days! So good to see you after such a long time!"

Insane.

# Chapter 159: Great Snail Empire (2)

---

In the beginning, there was 'Lime'.

The people did not know where 'Lime' came from or where it was going. However, 'Lime' chose the foremost among them, providing evidence so that the people would realize they were the chosen seed.

-Though there are many people in this world, only you can pronounce 'Lime' completely. I permit only you to call upon this holy name. Ah! This is your authority. As proof of being chosen by 'Lime', recite 'Lime' at all times – while eating, defecating, dressing, undressing, sleeping, waking, always proclaiming my presence in the midst of your lives and voices...

“...What in the world does this mean?”

I asked, to which the Heretic Inquisitor responded with a broad smile.

“This is the holy scripture I created!”

“Holy scripture?”

“Yes! The Mountain Calamity Tribe’s vocal organs are very unique. Among the seven races, only they can pronounce [Lime]! Therefore, I designated this pronunciation as the name of a god.”

The Heretic Inquisitor, with a light tap, landed in the subterranean city. We followed him. He introduced us to the history of the 'Snail Civilization' with a beaming smile.

"Neither the Ghost Tribe nor the Fairy Tribe can pronounce [Lime] correctly! It's simply because their vocal organs are different, but I attributed a mythological meaning to it."

The snails crawled around us, passing through our bodies as if we were invisible to them.

"The Mountain Calamity Tribe can recite [Lime] as evidence of being chosen by heaven!"

"Why...?"

The Paladin spoke up.

"Why would you do this, Heretic Inquisitor? You know better than anyone the terror of religion. Misusing the name of a god recklessly can lead to irreversible consequences-."

"Ah, I didn't misuse it. I used it very deliberately and intentionally!"

"....."

"Use is different from misuse, and even more so from abuse."

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled brightly.

"Everyone, religion is inevitable! Humans always seek causes. They search for reasons for their existence, for why the world exists. God. This word magically fills all ultimate causes!"

The Heretic Inquisitor pointed at a pillar. A giant pillar. Erected in the middle of the underground city, it rose from the bottom of the cave to the ceiling. The pillar was lined with

pictures like Egyptian murals.

The 'holy scripture' I had read earlier was also engraved on this pillar.

“But.....”

“Paladin, I understand what you’re pointing out! But in this era, there is still too much unknown. They don’t know why it rains, why their hearts beat, why they must drink water to live.”

A gentle smile appeared on the Heretic Inquisitor’s face.

“Think about that fear.”

“Fear.....?”

“Yes. Fear.”

The Heretic Inquisitor explained.

“Their hearts throb within them. They hear the beating but do not understand why. When injured, blood flows, and if too much is lost, they die. But they do not understand why the blood flows. Why bread tastes good, why they feel happy when full, why they must eat salt to live – they are completely ignorant.”

The Heretic Inquisitor clasped his hands as if in prayer.

“The world is surrounded by unknown monsters to them! No. Monsters even lurk within their own bodies. They live as dictated, utterly ignorant and powerless! Everyone, do you understand their fear?”

Clang!

A sound of mining echoed from afar.

Deep in the vast cave, miners were extracting rock salt.

“God resolves this ignorance and powerlessness. Now rain is not an unknown monster. It's the tears of God! The world sometimes sheds tears.”

Clang! Clang, clang!

Snail miners, secreting mucus, mined the rock salt. They grabbed sharp rocks with their tentacles and swung them.

“Now salt is not an unknown rock. In the beginning, the Earth Mother Goddess was torn apart and died, her hair became forests, her blood the sea, and her teeth salt. Salt is the remains of a god. Therefore, it's sacred and safe to consume. Ahaha! In modern terms, myth is like stamping a hygiene certificate on each food!”

The Heretic Inquisitor, with his hands clasped in prayer, looked devout.

He continued in a soft voice, like an endless stream.

“And god tells them. You were born because of me. I care about you, thus you are a being that concerns god. Do you see? Because of god, people find a reason for their empty lives.”

"....."

“Imagine!”



The Heretic Inquisitor smiled cheerfully.

“The heartbeat you hear inside is no longer a groan from an unknown monster. God designed people in his image. Thus,

this rhythm is the music composed by god, and I am privy to music composed by god anytime, anywhere.”

The Heretic Inquisitor sighed.

“Isn’t it beautiful...?”

He looked around the underground city.

The world he created.

Watching the civilization formed by the snails, this [Little God] rejoiced.

“Now people escape from just existing. They break free from being mere creatures! Finally, their lives have direction.”

We didn't fall into this world meaninglessly.

We are loved by god.

“Humans constantly build temples. They create wonders to dedicate to god, manifesting evidence of being loved by god on Earth. Isn't it wonderful? Isn't it enchanting? People in this era are courting the world!”

"....."

“All love needs evidence. Effort. Instead of suffocating buried in fear, they struggle and fight to be loved by gods! Even if this love is a dark misunderstanding, sometimes people need misunderstandings to live. I bless them!”

The Heretic Inquisitor released his prayer pose and spread his arms.

“You might consider religion a necessary evil. But every necessary evil is born from a necessary good. These people still need a god! Because of god, they breathe, live, and love.”

That was the Heretic Inquisitor's belief and divine will.

“Humans need a reason to shed tears over a single flower. God gifts them with infinite reasons! The god of antiquity does not annihilate humanity. Because of god, people understand themselves and love the world!”

Silence lingered.

Far away, the sound of rock salt being mined echoed.

I slowly turned to observe the 'underworld'.

-Slaves! Move! Lime!

-Rest time ended long ago. Lime! Hurry, load and transport it to the dock!

Snails clung to stone walls, whipping their tentacles. Slap! The whip-laden slaves knelt. Familiar with the whipping, they moaned but moved on.

-One, two. One, two....

Among them were Viper's people, the Ghost Tribe with a single horn on their foreheads. The dokkaebi were used to carry heavy loads.

-Shik. Shik, shiik...!

The Paladin's people, the Gill Fishes Tribe, swam in the water leading out of the cave. The mermaids swam, towing galleons directly, their upper bodies bound by ropes to the prow.

-Purrurur! Baa! Purr!

The race guided by the Black Dragon Witch, the Vampiric Tribe, was ceaselessly flying in the cave. Bats clutched scrolls or various items in their hind legs. They flew everywhere, from west to east in the cave, delivering goods to the residents.

"Ah."

Noticing my gaze, the Heretic Inquisitor smiled.

"This is the capital of the Slime Civilization, Limepolis. The specialty here is rock salt. According to mythological

traditions, this is where the Earth Mother Goddess fell to her death, dropping her head! The Mountain Calamity Tribe believes this cave is her [skull], and the rock salt her [teeth]! This [sacred tooth] is supplied throughout the empire as the main industry, and the Mountain Calamity Tribe controls power through salt trade.”

“...Amazing. Impressive, but still... 200 years?”

The Black Dragon Witch sighed.

“It makes no sense. How did it last for 200 years?”

“Hmm? We are in a kind of spiritual state now since we have embarked on the mission, aren’t we? 200 years is trivial!”

“No, I mean... it’s been 200 years.”

“Yes! During that time, I continuously possessed a white dog. When the dog died, I would possess its offspring.”

“But what I mean is... never mind.”

Mid-sentence, the Black Dragon Witch looked exasperated. The other companions also had similar expressions.

The Heretic Inquisitor, still grinning, said,

“Therefore, the lineage of dogs I possessed is revered as divine beasts! They reside in the palace and temples. Today, the 34th divine beast died, and I was about to possess the 35th, but coincidentally, you all returned! Welcome back once again. Please, come in!”

"....."

The companions were silent.

Behind the Heretic Inquisitor stood a pillar, and beyond that, a sphinx-like statue. The statue, simply put, was a gigantic Welsh Corgi. It was clear what kind of dog the Heretic Inquisitor had been possessing.

And then.

-Kerrruruk!

A familiar cry came from somewhere.

-Kerrur, Keruk! Today's glory to our sacred White Lion! Ker!

-To the citizens of the great Limepolis, I offer my blood!  
Gorr!

Thump! Thump!

Two goblins, each holding a sword and shield, banged them together. They stood on a flat mudflat. Countless snails surrounded the mudflat, cheering.

-Lime! I bet my entire fortune on you today, you filthy mold!

-Kirke! Show your might today! Kill him!

-Woo! Woo! Woo! Woo!

Hearing the crowd's cheers, the goblins roared.

-Gooooo!

And the goblins charged at each other. Mud splattered. They swung their daggers, fiercely striking each other's shields. Clang! Clang! The harsh and fearsome sound of metal echoed.

The cheering of the snail audience grew louder.

-Woo woo! Woo woo!

-You uncivilized, shell-less barbarians! Swing your forelegs! Limu! Stab with your forelegs!

-What are you doing! Move your legs, you fool! Lime! Lime!

I was momentarily at a loss for words.

"...Gladiators? They're gladiators?"

"Yes!"



The Heretic Inquisitor's smile blossomed.

"Sword slaves!"

A goblin roared, swinging his sword. Blood spurted. The unguarded flesh, geometric tattoos on the body, now marked with red lines.

"The Earth Spirit Tribe is known for their bravery and intelligence! In Limepolis, no, throughout the Snail Empire, they are the most favored race for sword slaves."

A wounded goblin screamed. The opponent seized the moment, grabbing the sword in reverse grip and thrusting it into the goblin's throat.

Blood spurted.

The audience cheered.

-Gooooo!

At that moment.

[The 32nd floor quest has been given.]

Letters formed before my eyes.

+

[The Great Snail Empire - Earth Spirit Tribe Edition]

Difficulty: B+

Objective: The unification of races is imminent. The protagonists are the Mountain Calamity Tribe. Using a highly developed governmental system and religious organization, they have subjugated other races into slavery one by one. If left unchecked, all races will kneel under their slimy rule.

You must rescue the Earth Spirit Tribe from the oppression of the Mountain Calamity Tribe!

\*However, if you fail to guide them, the victory of the

Mountain Calamity Tribe will conclude the 32nd floor.

+

The Great Escape.

That was the mission of this stage.

# Chapter 160: Great Snail Empire (3)

---

Viper, the Black Dragon Witch, and others frowned as they looked into the void, probably having received their quests too. It wasn't hard to guess what those quests were.

‘Probably to escape with their respective races.’

Around that time, the Heretic Inquisitor smiled.

“Oho?”

He must have also received a [Quest].

And guessing its content wasn't difficult either.

“A mission has been given. Ahaha! The quest instructs me to thwart your escape and staunchly defend the empire!”

The exact opposite of our mission.

Defend the empire.

“You must have been tasked with rescuing races from the Snail Empire. Hmm, interesting. Our quest objectives are in direct conflict.”

"....."

An odd silence fell among us, broken by the cheers echoing from the underground city's colosseum.

The Heretic Inquisitor stroked his chin.

“I understand. Everyone, surrender to me.”

“...What?”

The Black Dragon Witch furrowed her brows, puzzled, but the Heretic Inquisitor's expression didn't change. Still smiling gently, he logically laid out his argument.

“I know you’re all emotionally confused right now! Although it was just over a fortnight, you each devoted affection to your races. It’s natural to not accept them becoming slaves. However, this is the fastest way!”

Fast.

“If I hadn’t intervened, the people of this world would have wandered for thousands of years! But thanks to my timely intervention, humanity entered the ancient era in just 200 years. Fast, right?”

“Heretic Inquisitor, even if what you say is true, using religion and slavery like this is...”

“I’m not saying my method is perfect, Black Dragon Witch! Imagine the lives that might have been sacrificed over thousands of years of history. Even if my civilization exploited hundreds of thousands of slaves, it’s ‘just’ a few hundred years!”

"....."

“I will further accelerate history.”

The Heretic Inquisitor declared. Torches flared up everywhere in the underground world, casting a shadow from the giant dog statue behind him.

“From ancient to medieval times. From medieval to modern times. From modern to contemporary times! I will hasten the end of all the mistakes, misunderstandings, and massacres humanity must endure!”

Confidence flowed in the Heretic Inquisitor’s voice.

He conveyed his intent with gentle eyes.

‘I can do this.’

“Everyone, surrender to me! I will remain in this world to guide them. 400 years. No, I’ll raise them to our civilization’s level in 360 years!”

“You’re saying you’ll endure here for another 360 years?”

“Yes!”

Under the pillar inscribed with the history of a civilization, the Heretic Inquisitor beamed.

“Trust me and leave! I will take care of everything!”

---

We discussed but couldn't reach a conclusion. Some companions wanted to leave the stage to the Heretic Inquisitor, while others strongly opposed it.

Eventually, after over two hours, we couldn't agree on a consensus.

“Let's first see how our races are doing. Everyone's getting too heated.”

I suggested.

“This way, it'll only turn into an emotional conflict... Let's see how the children are living. Then we'll naturally come to a decision. Let's meet here again tomorrow. Okay?”

The companions nodded. Sighing or groaning, we dispersed to check on our respective races.



I, of course, went to where the goblins were.

Most of the goblins lived in the salt mines.

-Today's daytime work is over! Lime! Everyone, return to your quarters!

-Only the cave chiefs are allowed outside, except for the mold!

-Line up! Orderly!

The Mountain Calamity Tribe snails waved their tentacles. The goblins, shuddering, entered holes dug right next to the salt mines.

Those 'holes' were the accommodations provided to the Earth Spirit Tribe.

"....."

I was speechless.

Lost for words, a sigh-like sound escaped my sealed lips.

“It’s unbelievable... In holes. These children love mud so much. Living here, where there’s only the smell of salt. At the very least, they should reside somewhere damp.”

-Exactly.

The Guardian Spirit muttered.

-They're always looking for water. Hey.

From hundreds of holes, a goblin or two emerged. The goblins wore red collars around their necks, clutching water jars.

Cave chiefs.

The leaders chosen from each hole were fetching water themselves.

-Kerrr.

Mostly, they were mothers.

I immediately understood why mothers were chosen as cave chiefs.

-Why are two coming out from your hole!

-Keruk, if I disappear, the child keeps crying. Please understand, Ker...

-Tsk!

The Mountain Calamity Tribe supervisors commanded that [all goblins, except cave chiefs, should not roam outside]. However, they didn't stop the maternal love of a mother accompanying her child. If a mother was chosen as a cave chief, she could take her child out, allowing up to two people to leave and fetch two jars of water.

-Gorr!

-Water! Ke, water!

Young goblins plunged into the cave spring. Splash! Splash. While the children swam, the mothers fetched water.

Unvarnished, freshly baked jars. Fragile pottery that would easily break if dropped. For the goblins living as mine slaves, even these were precious assets, so the mothers were careful not to break the jars.

"....."

My words became fewer and fewer.

The time to fetch spring water was the only freedom allowed to the Earth Spirit Tribe. During this precious respite, mother goblins mixed water with sand, trying to mimic the feel of mud. They slowly drew tattoos on the children's skin with this rough, mock mud.

-Gorr!

-Gorr, gorr!

The children joyfully played, oblivious.

One child waved its squid-like arms, smearing mud on its mother's body. The drawing was more like a scribble than a tattoo.

The mother didn't erase the child's scribbles.

-It's time for night work! Lime!

The day's labor continued.

-Don't dawdle, mold!

The snail supervisors urged them on. The Mountain Calamity Tribe called goblins [mold]. It was a derogatory term. In their pronunciation, mold was [org], named because goblins always whimpered goruk goruk.

-Come out of your quarters!

-Don't dawdle! Lazy orgs.

The cruel act of broadly labeling a race for 'funny

pronunciation' left me speechless.

Not only goblins were called by derogatory names.

The Ghost Tribe was [horny-heads]. The Blood Ghost Tribe [blood-suckers]. For the Gill Fishes Tribe, they were simply [fish]. Under the rule of the Mountain Calamity Tribe, the unique characteristics of races had become a subject of mockery.

-Start working!

-Begin the night work!

Bang!

Goblins wielded their stone hammers, smashing the rock salt. The salt mined from the mines was extremely hard and large. The goblins' night work was to break it down to edible sizes.

-Kerrr...

-Kerruk. Kerrr.

The rock salt emitted a foul odor as it broke, smelling like rotten egg yolks. Bang! Bang! Bang! For one hour, two hours, three hours, the goblins broke the rock salt, smearing their long noses with the stench.

-Kerrr...

From a distance, the goblins appeared to be wielding laundry beaters. But up close, it was evident that their fingernails were all worn down.

As the salt shattered, so did their nails.

Blood flowed from their wrinkled fingers, and the salty smell of the rock salt seeped into their wounds. The goblins occasionally groaned, but they continued their work as if accustomed to it.

-Lime.

The snail supervisor looked up.

In the center of the underground world, there was a single hole in the cave ceiling. During the day, sunlight poured through it, and at night, moonlight settled in. Now, stars in the night sky could be glimpsed.

-Work is over!

-The night shift is ending, lime!

-All miners, return to your quarters! Leave all hammers in their place. Any mold caught taking a hammer will receive 50 lashes! Lime! Remember! Any mold caught taking a hammer will receive 50 lashes!

The goblins returned to their holes with their heads down.

-Kerrr... Gorr.

Waiting for the Earth Spirit Tribe returning to the holes were two jars of water and a few fish, resembling carps, thrown in by the supervisors.

These too were caught by the Gill Fishes Tribe, aquatic slaves feeding other aquatic slaves.



"....."

Smoke rose from each hole as fish were grilled. One, two, three, four, and hundreds...

Children of the goblins kept reaching for the half-cooked fish. Tired from mining rock salt all day, the mothers weakly swatted the backs of their children's hands, as if shooing away flies.

Yet the children kept hungrily eyeing the food. Eventually, the first fish cooked were given to them. The children voraciously tore into the fish.

-These creatures always have to burn their food before eating it, Lime.

The snail supervisors overseeing the night laughed.

-Their digestive systems are less developed than ours.

-Real barbarians. How can they burn food like that?

-Speaking of which, the next candidates for the colosseum...

Night fell.

The goblins fell asleep. The supervisors dozed off on the watchtowers or played with air. Apart from some distant revelers, the underground world sank into a tranquil silence.

"Hmm."

By this point, I had already made up my mind.

"I think I owe an apology to Raviel."

I said.

The Guardian Spirit crossed its arms, as if it had expected my decision.

-Going to regress?

"Yes. I'll go back and talk to the Heretic Inquisitor. Perhaps we can create a different future."

-What if the talk doesn't work?

"Then we'll talk some more. Anyway, we have about 200 years, right?"

The Guardian Spirit twitched its nose.

-I disagree.

"Why? Do you somewhat agree with what the Heretic Inquisitor said?"

-No, it's not that... Sigh. How do I explain this so that this kid gets it?

The Guardian Spirit scratched its head.

-Let's say I'm your child.

"Really?"

-Hypothetically! Don't look at me like I'm crazy. Anyway, suppose I'm your child and I come home from school having been beaten up. Would you regress a day to erase that fact?

"...What are you talking about?"

-Think from my perspective.

The Guardian Spirit looked me straight in the eye.

-Suppose I had an accident. Bad luck, died. Then it's only natural for you to regress. Don't even think twice, regress and save me. Got it?

"But what are you..."

-But if you go back a day just because I got beaten, what about my chance? It'd be pretty crappy from my perspective. 'I got beaten and you regress and erase it? Don't I get a chance?' That's what I'd think.

“What chance?”

-The chance to kick those guys' butts. This is something you already know. Just a few months ago, you got a good beating from someone you raised.

I pondered.

"But..."

-Just trust.

“Whom?”

-Yourself.

The Guardian Spirit responded firmly.

-And the kids around you.

I mulled over it.

Mice in the cave chirped.

After a while...

-Huh?

The Guardian Spirit suddenly spoke.

-Look at that, Zombie. Look at them.

“What?”

-Those goblins.

I turned my head towards where the Guardian Spirit pointed.

-They're not sleeping. What are they up to?

Indeed.

Goblins were stealthily emerging from their holes. One or two from each. After confirming that the supervisors on the towers were dozing off, the goblins quietly headed somewhere.

-They're going into the cave?

The goblins entered the salt mine.

The mine was labyrinthine, like an ant colony. The Mountain Calamity Tribe supervisors, relatively sensitive to salt, mostly directed slaves from outside the mine and rarely ventured this deep.

-Kerrr...

-Kerruk, Kerr.

The goblins spoke in hushed tones as they walked. The deeper they went, the narrower the mine passage became, and the ceiling got lower. It was like a maze. But the goblins skillfully found their way, as if they had trodden this path several times before.

-Huh?

The Guardian Spirit raised its mouth corners in amusement.

-Look at this?

"....."

-It's darkest under the lamp. They made a secret tunnel right under the rulers' noses?

Underground level 2. Level 3. Level 4.

The goblins went down to a deep place. The number of forks they had passed was in the hundreds. Anyone who entered recklessly without knowing the way would likely never find their way out.

Finally, after over an hour of descent.

-Kerr.



A wide cavity opened up.

-Kerruk, Kerr.

-Kerrr...

In the dark cavity, torches flickered dimly. Every time the light faintly illuminated, the goblins' outlines wavered.

There wasn't just one path leading here. There were several. Not only the goblins I had followed, but also groups from elsewhere had gathered.

-Aaah.

The Guardian Spirit marveled.

-See? I told you. They are people too. They're not just waiting for someone to come and save them!

As if responding to the Guardian Spirit's words, the Tower whispered to me.

[The Earth Spirit Tribe begins a secret meeting.]

# Chapter 161: Cave Fire (1)

---

The cave was filled with air. It was cool. The goblins just sniffed with their noses, unaffected by the cold vapor clinging to their skin.

About a thousand goblins all remained silent.

-Today in the arena, a great warrior died.

Someone spoke softly amid them.

-The warrior's name was Gyari. Kerr. She was the daughter of the white-maned tribe's chieftain, Orogon, and Gorhe, and a descendant of Gorhir, a great warrior who inherited the tattoo from the White Lion.

The voice was not prominent; it was buried in the crowd. Leaning on the shadows of their kind and the cave's shades, a goblin was speaking. It wasn't a speech from a podium, so it was not an oration.

-She was a laughing child. Kerr.

-Always picking fights since she was young, and eventually, she died from getting beaten up.

It wasn't a single person's speech, so the goblins freely spoke their minds. In the dark cave, goblins threw in their words from here and there. Fragments of speech gathered to assemble the story of a goblin called Gyari.

-Gyari never remembered whom she hit.

-But she never forgot who hit her. Kerrr.

-She was a child living with poison in her nose. I remember. When young, Gorhe tried to apply a tattoo on Gyari. But Gyari shook her head, saying she would draw it herself after seeing others' tattoos.

-Kerr. Gyari was always a head-shaker.

An entire life was compiled through cooperative narration. A thousand fragments, a thousand snippets, were forming the story of a goblin named Gyari.

I realized.

‘...This is a funeral.’

Today, a goblin died in the colosseum. That Earth Spirit Tribe member was Gyari. Those who knew Gyari, who even once talked to her, had now gathered here underground.

-For Gyari, nodding to people and swinging a sword at the world were the same.

-She thought they were the same. Kerruk.

-That's why she became a gladiator.

The fire flickered.

Shadows were cast on the cave walls. Within these shadows, the goblins were indistinguishable. They were a mass. The bumpy shadows opened their mouths and whispered.

-Thirty-six of our kin died by Gyari's sword.

-A cruel child.

-When the Mountain Calamity Tribe branded her as a gladiator, Gyari laughed. She thought it was a splendid tattoo.

-A terrifying child.

-Happy to wield a sword, but Gyari was only allowed to fight in the arena. Her only allowed opponents were her kin. Gorr. It was Gyari's misfortune that she could only kill her kin with her happy swordsmanship.

-Kerrr...

-It's difficult to understand.

-An unfortunate child.

The fire flickered.

-Was Gyari one of our kin?

The shadows answered.

-Gorr.

-Gyari was a drawer of tattoos. An artist. A lover of mud and a yearner of rainwater.

-Gyari was us.

An elderly voice spoke.

-Gyari will return to Guru.

Guru.

A word familiar to me.

As I silently watched the goblin's funeral, the Tower's voice reached me.

[You have witnessed the Guru Doctrine of the Earth Spirit Tribe.]

Text appeared before me.

+

[Guru Doctrine]

Category: Religion. White Lion Faith.

Origin: [Fellow Kinship Ritual (C)]

Description: 'Guru' is the homeland of all Earth Spirit Tribe members. Guru is the first village established by the Earth Spirit Tribe after the Golden Era's fall. Guru is the nation of the Earth Spirit Tribe. Guru is where warm stream water flows and soft mud swells.

Guru.

It is the last land where the White Lion resided.



The Earth Spirit Tribe does not distinguish between this world and the afterlife, only between 'Guru' and 'non-Guru.' What the Earth Spirit Tribe expects from life – rainwater, mud, plenty of fish, a comfortable resting place – can all be found in this world. Hence, a belief in the afterlife is unnecessary for them.

The homeland of all kin.

They wish to return to Guru.

\*However, over time, memories of Guru will fade.

\*If left unchecked, 'Guru' will transform into an abstract place! In that case, Guru will become a concept of 'a space existing somewhere else, not in this world.'

\*It's been quite some time since the Earth Spirit Tribe lost Guru! There's a chance that the Guru Doctrine will transform into a doctrine about the afterlife!

+

"....."

I stared blankly at the description.

It contained words that were hard for me to understand.

But there was something that only I could understand.

“I named it without much thought. Guru.”

My heart twinged.

“...And it became something immense for these kids.”

Something.

A feeling I'd never experienced before arose.

It was weird. I was proud that the goblins had grown on their own, without me. But I was scared that a word I had casually thrown out had become a meaning for these kids, that it had solidified into a meaning, that they had clung to it to survive.

An anxious feeling.

I was worried about these kids.

“The kids.....”

That's right.

“This is what it feels like to watch over children.”

Until now, I had never imagined having a child. I never thought of myself becoming a parent to someone. But intentionally or not, I had played a role akin to a parent for the Earth Spirit Tribe.

-Maybe? I've never raised offspring, so I'm not sure.

"....."

My heart fluttered.

-Kerruk.

An elderly goblin stepped forward. In the center of the cave, a fire was burning. The old goblin stood in front of the fire, and the Earth Spirit Tribe members, who had been casually throwing pieces of Gyari's story, fell silent.

Silence.

The old goblin waited until the silence became more transparent.

“...Wait?”

He put his hands into the burning fire.

“Hold on. Isn't that... suicide by self-immolation?”

-No, watch closely, zombie. His hands aren't burning.

The Guardian Spirit cut off my concern.

-That guy. He's an Aura user.

“Eh?”

-Look at him. He's using Aura. He's wrapped his hands in Aura.

The Guardian Spirit was right.

The flames obscured the view, but faintly, certainly, the goblin's wrinkled hands were swirling with Aura. It was a red Aura. The old goblin buried his hands in the fire.

Whooosh!

The flames soared.

The previously just-burning fire strangely twisted. The elder used his Aura to manipulate the fire. At the tips of the old man's hands, the flames rose like ascending dragons, swirled around, and spread out like blossoming flowers.

-.....

-.....

The goblins silently watched the ever-changing flames, their eyes calm like spectators watching a stage.

Whoosh. Whish!

The cave was vast, but the vast space was entirely black. The flames were the only colorful light captivating everyone's gaze.

‘Ah.’

And then I understood.

‘That is a painting.’

Indeed.

The old man was painting with fire.

The flames blazed.

Each flame rose differently.

Two branches of fire split open like mouths, soaring high, reaching the ceiling of the cave.

▲.

It was anger.

The fire's peak hit the ceiling and shattered into pieces. Sparks fell like petals. Slowly. Gently. In the dark cave, the sparks twinkled and eventually vanished, leaving darkness in their wake.

▼.

It was sorrow.

The fire continued to rise from the bonfire.

Small. Into five branches. Like five fingers.

But the fingers of flame couldn't reach the ceiling. They couldn't catch the falling sparks. Between the falling sparks from the sky and the rising flames from the ground was an irreparable gap of air.



That was Gyari's death and their funeral.

The goblins cried silently.

All the Earth Spirit Tribe members watching the fire knew the meaning of the flames. It was their script. Their letters. Their painting. Every minutely trembling flame, every weakly fading spark, was a clear gesture to the Earth Spirit Tribe.



The elder unleashed the fire.

[You have witnessed the Earth Spirit Tribe's Blood Fire.]

Text shimmered in the flickering flames.

+

[Blood Fire]

Category: Art.

Origin: [Primitive Fashionista (E)]

Description: Blood Fire is a unique art of the Earth Spirit Tribe. After being conquered by the Mountain Calamity Tribe and dragged to the hollow city, Limepolis, the Earth Spirit Tribe found it difficult to obtain mud. It became hard to express their pictographic language.

‘We must draw.’

Yet, the Earth Spirit Tribe's aesthetic consciousness did not wane.

‘We want to draw.’

It instead ignited.

The Earth Spirit Tribe chose fire as a substitute for mud.

In a dark cave, it's hard to recognize a painting. But using fire, the darkness of the cave suddenly transforms into a vast canvas. The Earth Spirit Tribe adapted to and utilized their cave life.

‘Beautiful.’

The mud-dwelling tribe was mesmerized by the art of fire.

‘Gorr.’

The cave's fire.

The Earth Spirit Tribe named this Blood Fire. Sometimes called Hole Painting as the cave's painting or Fire Painting or Blood Painting comparing the flames to blood.

Fire burns and then disappears. It leaves no trace. Therefore, it's good for evading the surveillance of the Mountain Calamity Tribe.

When witnessing Blood Fire, it's polite to remain silent. This too is to avoid being caught by the Mountain Calamity Tribe.

May fortune accompany the silent fire.

\*However, only Aura users can perform Blood Fire.

\*Very few among the Earth Spirit Tribe can use Aura! Among them, only one 'priest' can use red Aura. If the priest dies without a successor, the art of Blood Fire will decline.

+

The elder waved his hand through the flames.

Whooosh... oosh... oosh...

The once fiercely burning fire gradually diminished. Without sparks hitting and breaking on the ceiling, without flames rising and howling from the wood. The fire silently subsided without leaving a trace.

And it went out.



Night had fallen.

With the fire extinguished, the cave was enveloped in complete darkness.

There was no light anywhere.

By extinguishing the fire, the elder had painted the last picture that Blood Fire could express. The darkness of the cave was no longer just empty space. It was the picture drawn by the elder.

-.....

The goblins saw the 'night' and quietly wept in the midst of it.

-.....Gorr.....

No one lit a torch. It was ● now. The goblins accepted the ●. Without anyone saying or commanding to leave, the goblins turned to leave on their own.

To sleep.

The goblins groped their way along the path they came from in the ●. Nothing could be seen in the ●.

But their scent lingered.

Sniffing the scent of their kin, the goblins returned home in groups. The Earth Spirit Tribe member with the best nose led the way. The other goblins followed, holding his hand or shoulder.

Thus, the goblins left the cave, their own temple.

"....."

Only I, the Guardian Spirit, and the elderly goblin priest remained in the underground temple of the underground world.

-Kerr... Kerrr...

The old man, seemingly exhausted, sat on the cave floor. This place seemed like his home. The goblins left some fish behind when they departed the temple, and the old man, sitting down, tore into the fish.

"....."

I silently observed the tribe that had set up a temple in the cave.

Here, the children of the earth conducted a funeral. They buried the death of their kin.

I had never taught them how to conduct a funeral. I hadn't spoken about how to swallow death. What I taught was merely tattoos to mask the smell and paintings to represent six worlds.

Just that.

With just that, the Earth Spirit Tribe set up a temple. They found fire on their own.

"Even though I might be like a parent to these children..."

I spoke.

"They are not mine."

They did not grow as I thought, nor did they grow as I expected. These children found their own way.

They learned how to accept death.

I was proud of that.

-Kerrr....

Leaving the old priest behind, I went up to the underground city.

‘I know what I should do for the kids.’

Not salvation, but support.

Not worry, but encouragement.

‘Supporting and encouraging these children. That’s my role.’

At the place where the Mountain Calamity Tribe's giant pillar stood.

My colleagues, whom I had parted with yesterday, were gathered there. Had they, like me, visited their respective tribes? The Black Dragon Witch silently stared at the ground, and Viper grimly crossed his arms.

“Ah. You’ve arrived, King of Death!”



The Heretic Inquisitor waved his hand.

“The King of Death is the last to arrive! Well. Have you made up your mind?”

“Yes.”

I nodded.

“I can’t surrender to you, after all. I won’t let the children I nurtured lose their letters and forget their homeland.”

“Ahaha. Then?”

“I will help the Earth Spirit Tribe escape from your underground, Heretic Inquisitor.”

I said.

“And I will eliminate you from the 32nd floor.”

“Ahaha.”

The Heretic Inquisitor grinned broadly.

“I thought you would say that, King of Death. As expected! Good. Let’s bet our respective tribes and wage war against each other!”

That was our declaration of war.

# Chapter 162: Cave Fire (2)

---

“I’d like to hear the opinions of the others.”

The Heretic Inquisitor addressed his companions.

“Will you surrender to me? Or will you stand with the King of Death against me? Ahaha. I’m fine with either choice.”

“...Isn’t this an act of betrayal?”

The Black Dragon Witch held her forehead. Perhaps a headache was throbbing. She gave a sharp look to the psychopath she had known for a long time.

“We swore not to be hostile to each other, remember? Once on that night. Once when we conquered the 28th floor with the King of Death. I thought a vow repeated twice would carry more weight...”

“It’s alright this time! Whether I win or you win, the stage will be cleared either way. We all will be victorious. It’s just a matter of differing approaches to victory!”

“Sigh...”

“I will stand behind the King of Death.”

The Sword Saint declared.

“I’m weary of a life chasing quick results and came to the tower seeking change. Now that I’m here, I don’t wish to revert to my old ways. Temple Master of the Omnipotent God. Though you’ve courteously offered surrender, I too, must courteously decline.”

One by one, the companions shifted their stance. Step by step. The Heretic Inquisitor watched their movements with a smile.

“Aha.”

Five stood behind me.

“As expected! I truly lack trust!”

No one stood behind the Heretic Inquisitor.

Until yesterday, a few had sympathized with the Heretic Inquisitor. The Countess did. But now, after spending a day witnessing the conditions of their respective tribes, no one sided with him.

“You’re not untrustworthy.”

The Paladin spoke.

“We all know you’re a great guild leader. And that you’d be [the worst parent]. Children tend to resemble their parents. Leaving the children entirely in your hands... I’d feel more secure leaving them with Viper.”

“Huh? Why drag me into this when I’ve been quiet?”

“It’s a compliment. You’d make a better parent than the Heretic Inquisitor.”

“Hey hey... what a compliment. You might as well say I'd be a better leader than Hitler.”

6 to 1.

Despite the overwhelming disadvantage, the Heretic Inquisitor continued to beam.

“What's your plan now, King of Death? The city I built is strong. The slaves have already forgotten their past wildness and submitted to the Mountain Calamity Tribe's rule!”

The Heretic Inquisitor seemed confident.

“You must have seen the Earth Spirit Tribe's secret meeting. There, they wouldn't have condemned or slandered the Mountain Calamity Tribe! They just conducted their rituals. That's how solid the Mountain Calamity Tribe's rule is!”

‘As expected.’

He knew about the goblins' meeting but left it unchecked.

Like me, the Heretic Inquisitor could turn invisible. Having ruled here for 200 years, he wouldn't have missed the secret meeting.

[It doesn't matter. It's no significant threat.]

That must have been the Heretic Inquisitor's assessment to leave the meeting be.

"I'm sorry, but your tribes have lost hope. They merely mourn and commemorate the past. My 200 years made that possible. King of Death! Do you have a way to raise those who have kneeled?"

"....."

I quietly surveyed the underground world.

Dawn was breaking.

From the ceiling of the underground city, a streak of blue light flowed. The goblins, with heavy eyelids, crawled out of their pits. In the old world, the last to sleep and the first to wake were always the slaves.

“I'm not the one to raise them.”

I opened the [Civilization Shop].

Items in the shop were displayed.

+

[Oracle Message] - 20p

[Animal Possession] - 40p

[Appearance in Dreams] - 100p

[Hunting Prey Tracking] - 5p

[Bronze-rank Settlement Search] - 80p

[Tribal-rank General (Lottery)] - 100P



[Bronze-rank Technology Invention (Lottery)] - 1,000P

.

.

.

+

I selected one item from the list.

"It's just a small catalyst to help the children stand up."

Soon, the Tower's voice inquired.

[Would you like to purchase 'Oracle Message'?]

[20 race points will be consumed!]

[Your current race points are 995.]

I didn't stop there.

[Purchasing 'Oracle Message'.]

[20 race points will be consumed!]

[Your current race points are 975.]

I poured nearly all my points into it.

[Purchasing 'Oracle Message'.]

[Purchasing 'Oracle Message'.]

[Purchasing 'Oracle Message'.]

I recalled the times I had to endure alone. 4000 days of return. When I faced four thousand deaths by myself, what

helped me was a voice.

[You have died.] The Tower's voice.

Every time I died, the Tower notified me of my death. Even if I returned, the Tower knew.

The fact that someone in this world was watching me, remembering me.

In really tough times, that fact comforted me.

[Purchasing 'Oracle Message'.]

Now it was my turn to be someone's comfort.

[20 race points will be consumed!]

[Your current race points are 215.]

I purchased 40 Oracle Messages.

The Heretic Inquisitor was still grinning. He wouldn't know what item I purchased.

In the meantime, I had designated 40 individuals, including the goblin priest, the supervisors responsible for each pit, and the sword fighters resting in the gladiators' quarters, as recipients of the oracle.

‘...What should I tell them?’

I pondered.

‘I don't want to tell them to rebel against the Mountain Calamity Tribe. Whether to revolt or to obey, it's for the goblins to decide. What I need to give the children is not the choice itself. It's to help them make their own decisions.’

The message could only be a single sentence.

After much thought, I chose the oracle to send from the words I could say.

[The White Lion is with you.]

Pause.

A mother applying mud to her child's face flinched.

[The White Lion is with you.]

A supervisor just leaving the pit, picking up a stone axe, twitched.

[The White Lion is with you.]

In a cramped shelter, a gladiator was startled.

He dropped the whetstone while sharpening his dagger.

[The White Lion is with you.]

You worship this person as a god, but he is powerless.

He lacks the power to overturn the earth or shake the heavens with miracles.

All I can do is voice a single sentence.

[The White Lion is with you.]

That was the first oracle I delivered.

-.....

The old goblin, lying on the cave floor, stirred. The priest, using the charred remains of wood as a staff, struggled to stand up. Crunch. The stick couldn't bear his weight and broke, but the priest was already on his feet.

-Gorrr...

The elderly goblin laboriously traversed the labyrinthine underground cave. With each step, his pace quickened. Using not just his feet but also his hands, the old goblin climbed upwards, further up from the underground.

-The White Lion has spoken to us...

The priest grasped a rock with his front hand and pushed off the cave floor with his back foot. Red aura flowed from his aged flesh. The aura, resembling flames, carried his voice throughout the cave.

-The White Lion has spoken to us!

The echo resounded.

-The White Lion has spoken to us!

There were dozens of paths in the goblins' underground cave. The priest's voice, fueled by aura and bellowed in defiance, echoed along these many pathways, reaching long-abandoned salt mines and areas where dawn labor was just beginning.

-He has spoken... to us...

-The White Lion has spoken to us!

The echo of the priest's voice finally reached the entrance of the mine. There, the goblin pits were located. Goblins drinking water from jars at dawn perked up their ears.

-The White Lion has spoken to us...

Then, the old man collapsed, having drained his life force to expend every last drop of his aura.

-He has spoken...

The elderly priest lay on the ground, not reserving any strength to rise again. His own voice still echoed back at him. As his voice echoed, the priest closed his eyes.

-Ker.

-Kekkerkek...?

The goblins stirred. They peeked out of their pits, all eyes fixated on the mine's dark entrance, where echoes still resonated.



-Kerk.

One of the supervisors, who had received an oracle from me, stood up while setting down a child.

-The White Lion has spoken to us!

Before the last echoes of the old man faded, the supervisor shouted. He was not alone. Dozens of Earth Spirit Tribesmen, who had received the oracle, raised their heads in succession.

-At last, the White Lion has returned!

-I heard it too! Kerk, I did!

-He said he is with us!

That was all. The children who received the oracle, desperate to share this with their kin, urgently cried out. Just that was enough to unsettle the Mountain Calamity Tribe overseers.

-What's this, lime? Why are these creatures suddenly...

-Quiet! Everyone quiet!

-From now on, any goblin that makes noise will be whipped!

The snails crawled out of their towers, brandishing their tentacles. Crack! The sound of a whip made several goblins cower. Even though some Earth Spirit Tribesmen continued to shout, the Mountain Calamity Tribe didn't spare any and whipped the instigators.

"....."

The Heretic Inquisitor hummed and stroked his chin.

"I see. You activated the Oracle Message? Simple yet effective. But King of Death, your points are limited. You can't send an oracle to even thousands, let alone tens of thousands! This disturbance can be managed by the Mountain Calamity Tribe---."

I didn't wait for him to finish speaking.

Immediately, I purchased the next item.

[Purchasing 'Hunting Prey Tracking'.]

[5 race points will be consumed!]

[Your current race points are 210.]

It was an item I had already purchased once.

I quickly used the item.

'Please locate the nearest lion.'

A map formed in my mind.

It was the Colosseum. Right next to the arena was an animal enclosure, where five lions were caged. A lion nonchalantly gnawed on a bone.

‘Okay.’

I purchased the last third item from the shop.

‘I will buy Animal Possession.’

The Tower responded.

[Purchasing ‘Animal Possession’.]

[40 race points will be consumed!]

[Your current race points are 170.]

Before the Heretic Inquisitor could finish speaking, I possessed one of the lions in the Colosseum. Whoosh! My vision twisted. As if a fuse had blown, my mind darkened.

But only for a moment.

The next instant, I was inhabiting the body of the lion.

“Grrrr...”

Unlike the previous stage, this lion did not have white fur. Its mane was an ordinary brown.

But that didn't matter.

“Grrrum. Grrr.”

Regardless of the fur color, a lion's roar is a lion's roar.

I summoned aura from my entire body. Red-tinged aura surged from my heart. Thump! I encapsulated every beat of my heart and exploded it into a roar.

“Grrrrruk!”

Beasts in the opposite cage were terrified.

“Grrrrrrr!”

My roar transcended the bars, escaping the animal enclosure. It echoed in the plaza where the Colosseum stood, down the streets, along the walls where the Mountain Calamity Tribe trafficked, to the ceiling of the underground city, and finally into the pits dug by the goblins.

‘I am here.’

Even if the lion's eyes couldn't see, I knew.

Now, the goblins are undoubtedly listening to my call.

Hearing my voice.

“Grrrr...”

I took a deep breath and then...

“Guru-!”

I unleashed a powerful lion's roar.

The name of the place that became the Earth Spirit Tribe's homeland. The name I gave them. Our first shared name, word, and eventually belief—I bellowed it.

“Guru!”

The response did not take long.

-Guru...

From across the great cavity, a shout echoed back. The shout was infinitely smaller than my voice carrying aura, but my ears did not miss the goblins' cry.

"Guru!"

And then.

They didn't miss it either.

[An uprising occurs in Limepolis!]

[The Earth Spirit Tribe rebels against the Mountain Calamity Tribe!]



# Chapter 163: Cave Fire (3)

---

The commotion in the early morning woke up the Mountain Calamity Tribe.

-What's this uproar!

-The lion suddenly started roaring. Lime.

-Unsettling noises are coming from the mines...

Buildings sprouted like mushrooms in the underground city. From the windows of these tall structures, snails emerged. Hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands. From the snails that slept the lightest to those that were deeply asleep, the slime of the Mountain Calamity Tribe covered the walls.

-Is it just a disturbance? Or a rebellion?

-It's a rebellion!

-Blow the horns!

-Lime! Let's awaken the spirits of our ancestors!

Snails climbed up the walls. Slap! Using their antennae, the snails slapped their own faces. This was their way of waking up from sleep.

Boooooom...

The first Mountain Calamity Tribesman to reach the top of the barrier blew a horn. It was not a typical horn, but the shell of a dead snail. The Mountain Calamity Tribe used the remains of their deceased kin as a conduit, producing a long, ominous horn sound.

Boooooom...

Following the first horn, other Mountain Calamity Tribesmen climbed up the barrier. Those on the wall brought the shells of their kin to their mouths. In the underground city, with its numerous buildings, each building acted like a

pipe, resonating throughout the great cavity. Booom. Booom. The harmony of the organs played by the Mountain Calamity Tribe shook the dark underground world. The voices of the goblins were buried beneath these sounds.

Bark! Bark!

The dogs raised by the Mountain Calamity Tribe barked. Deeming dogs sacred for their resemblance to deities, the Mountain Calamity Tribe held them in high regard. Dogs grown in the caves had wet noses and their barks sounded gloomy. The harsh barking melded with the dead snail's harmonies.

“Grrrr.”

I shattered the cage. Screech! The bars, reinforced with aura in my forepaws, sliced like tofu. By the time the animal keepers emerged to point their tentacles at me, I had already escaped and was running through the streets of Polis.

-A lion!

-The lion from the arena has escaped!

Snails climbing the wall paths were startled upon seeing me. Some snails hurriedly scampered to higher ground. I struck the ground with my hind legs, leaping onto the giant pillar—right onto the one carved with the history of the Mountain Calamity Tribe.

“Grrrr!”

My forepaws dug into the pillar. Red aura surged from them. Like a mountain climber, I ascended the pillar, step by step.

-Lime!

-Look over there!

The Mountain Calamity Tribe was alarmed by my ascent. Other snails, climbing different buildings, scattered, leaving trails of slime. Some lost their balance and slid down the walls.

I stood atop the pillar, overlooking the city.

Boooooom...

The underground world was still filled with the sound of horns. The sound flowed from dead bodies. Following this sound, the Mountain Calamity Tribe armed themselves and assembled. Their forces moved throughout the city. Soon, they would suppress the goblins.

‘I won’t leave it be.’

I puffed out my chest. No building was taller than the pillar I had climbed. I took in the highest air of the city into my lungs and slowly opened the lion's maw.

Goooooooo-

A low growl erupted from my mouth.

Like ripples spreading across a pond, the lion's roar displaced the Mountain Calamity Tribe's horns. The roar spread farther and wider. My lungs were deeper than the empty insides of the dead snails, and my voice more ferocious than their harmonies.

-Gor!

Finally, I caught sight of the goblins. Armed with stone hammers, they gathered at the entrance of the mine.

My seeing them meant, conversely, that they too could see me.

The goblins shouted.

-Kekerkker!

That was my name.

When the Earth Spirit Tribe's language was still amidst the cries of beasts, the goblins called me Kekerkker.

‘Ke’ signified water. Everything pure and transparent in this world was called ‘Ke’ by the goblins.

‘Kerk’ denoted the sky. Everything lofty and sacred in this world was ‘Kerk’ to them.

‘Ker’ meant meat and also animals.

Thus, my name was.

-Kekerkker!

The pure white beast descended from the sky.

Otherwise known as the White Lion.

I stood tall in the heart of the underground world and roared.

“Guru!”

Seeing me on the pillar, the Mountain Calamity Tribe hesitated, while the goblins rolled forward. The goblins formed a line. It was the hunting formation I had taught them long ago when we hunted bulls.

The goblins had preserved the time we spent together two hundred years ago. Like a casual word from a parent leaving a lifelong mark on a child.

Feeling a sense of responsibility, I looked at the formation formed by the goblins.

-Guru!

Alright.

My little ones.

I will take you to the homeland you yearn for.

“Grruk.”

I exerted strength in my forepaws. The aura that surged from my heart flowed through the lion's forearms, paws, and claws.

Crack-Crack-Crack-.

The pillar cracked where my claws dug in. The red aura infiltrated the pillar like a spider web in an instant.



Demonic Heavenly God Art - Reformation.

The First Form.

Sword of Burning Youth.

The giant pillar shattered like glass. The snails screamed. The carved pieces, holding the Mountain Calamity Tribe's myths, broke apart.

I stepped on the fragments of the collapsing pillar as I descended. When I landed on the ground, the pillar had completely collapsed. Dust swirled around me.

‘Now, the Mountain Calamity Tribe's spirit has surely crumbled.’

In this era, people lived in myths. The collapse of the pillar was more than just a single building falling. The pillar was the Mountain Calamity Tribe's history and religion. Its collapse signified a disaster.

A deity had descended.

‘On the contrary, the goblins will be emboldened.’

But I wasn't the only deity roaming the underground world.

A prophecy I had never issued was heard.

[The Heretic Inquisitor admires your swift strategy.]

Then, cutting through the dust cloud, a hunting dog leaped at me.

“Kaah!”

The hunting dog howled and clawed at my waist. It was a surprise attack. I roared and swung my forepaws. Whoosh! But my claws swiped through the air, not the hunting dog's head. The hunting dog, which was right in front of me, had suddenly disappeared.

‘Holy Technique!’

I immediately realized the identity of the hunting dog.

‘Did the Heretic Inquisitor also possess an animal?’

The Heretic Inquisitor quickly grasped my objective. To bring down the pillar symbolizing the Mountain Calamity Tribe's religion. To plunge the Mountain Calamity Tribe into panic.

I aimed to swiftly secure victory by staging a scene from mythology. If the Mountain Calamity Tribe fell into chaos, it would make the Earth Spirit Tribe's escape easier. In response, the Heretic Inquisitor possessed a divine beast to confront me.

‘Where are you.’

My waist throbbed. Blood flowed from the wound torn by the hunting dog. I guarded all directions, but the Heretic Inquisitor was nowhere to be seen. The dust cloud still obscured my vision.

‘Where will you appear from, Heretic Inquisitor!’

It was at that moment when the scent of oil wafted to my nose.

"Grr!"

As soon as I smelled the oil, I rolled to the side. Thump! The hunting dog leapt from mid-air, striking the ground where I had been. It licked its lips, as if regretting its missed attack.

The hunting dog had golden fur.

It was clear that the Mountain Calamity Tribe's priests had always cared for this creature. Small jewels were embedded in the hunting dog's teeth. Swirling wave patterns adorned its short fur.

Most importantly, the scent of olive-like fragrant oil emanated from its entire body.

‘You chose a divine beast to fight in a mythological manner.’

I growled, making a beastly sound.

‘But that’s where you went wrong, Heretic Inquisitor. Your body reeks of fragrant oil. I might have fallen for your ambush once, but don’t think a second ambush with [that smell] will work!’

In this body, I could only produce the roar of a lion. Yet, it seemed like the Heretic Inquisitor understood my roar. He ceased his ambush, realizing its futility.

We looked at each other, taking a step each.

“Karrrr.”

"Grr..."

The sounds of the hunting dog and the lion mingled in the dust.

I slowly circled to catch the hunting dog.

‘You won’t beat me in a one-on-one fight, unless it's a group battle. Your Holy Technique is formidable but is more of a support skill. Without comrades to fight alongside, it’s only half as effective.’

The golden hunting dog growled.

To me, it sounded like the Heretic Inquisitor's laughter.

[The Heretic Inquisitor says he is happy to fight you.]

‘Happy?’

[The Heretic Inquisitor wants you to prove that you are more capable than him.]

I couldn't immediately grasp the meaning of the message.

The hunting dog moved its forepaws more slowly, as if reading my expression.

[The Heretic Inquisitor says,]

[He acts only to achieve the best outcome.]

Slowly, the dust cloud settled.

[Everyone has different abilities.]

[The best effort of a capable person is more valid than that of an incompetent one.]

[If it's proven that you are more capable than him, the Heretic Inquisitor is ready to submit to you.]

Beyond the settling dust, the figures of the Earth Spirit Tribe and Mountain Calamity Tribe became visible.

Both tribes faced each other, with us in the middle.

[The Heretic Inquisitor has shown you his best over 200 years.]

[Now, he asks for your best.]

The hunting dog charged at me.

I too roared and raised my claws.

As we collided, the citizens rushed towards the slaves, and the slaves charged at the citizens.

-Lime!

-Kekerkker!

The Mountain Calamity Tribe, clad in leather armor, swung their tentacles wielding blades. The goblins, lacking proper clothing, swung their stone hammers with bare bodies. The citizens overwhelmingly outmatched in armament, but the snails were unsettled by the sight of the falling pillar, and the slaves had the upper hand in morale.

“Grrr!”

My claws tore through the Heretic Inquisitor's hind leg. Kaaa! The hunting dog twisted its neck, howling in pain. However, my attack wasn't fatal.

Each time I tried to land a decisive blow, the Heretic Inquisitor skillfully used his Holy Technique to evade. The Holy Technique, though ineffective for ambush, was still valid for dodging.



The Heretic Inquisitor's tactics were clear.

‘Are you trying to delay?’

The hunting dog whimpered softly. I couldn't understand the sound of the hunting dog, but the intention of the Heretic Inquisitor was easy to imagine.

He must be thinking, ‘The Mountain Calamity Tribe is in disarray now, but they will gradually regain their composure. More forces will converge here. If I just delay, I am bound to win.’

A war of attrition.

That was the Heretic Inquisitor's strategy.

“Grrr.”

I watched the hunting dog with blood dripping from my waist. The hunting dog limped on its hind leg, locking eyes with me. Both of us were wounded beasts.

‘Not a bad strategy, but.’

I growled.

‘It only works when you're dealing with me alone. In the current situation, it's a bad move.’

Time was definitely not on the Heretic Inquisitor's side.

More precisely, it couldn't be on the Mountain Calamity Tribe's side.

The time that the snails had ruled was now suffocating them.

[Rebellion breaks out in Limepolis!]

Suddenly, something appeared from the sky.

A black swan.

The Black Dragon Witch's divine beast had appeared using animal possession.

Bats hanging from the cave ceiling fluttered their wings. The bats swooped down on the snails moving towards the salt mine. The Mountain Calamity Tribe screamed, waving their tentacles, but the Ghost Tribe revealed even more ferocious fangs.

‘The one stalling wasn’t you but me, Heretic Inquisitor.’

The beastly roars echoing in the underground world didn't stop there. From the dried-up river docks, the salt-stacked harbor, from the western end to the eastern end of the cave, four roars erupted.

[The Gill Fishes Race rebels against the Mountain Calamity Tribe!]

[The Ghost Tribe rebels against the Mountain Calamity Tribe!]

[The Fairy Tribe rebels against the Mountain Calamity Tribe!]

[The Pure Humans Race rebels against the Mountain Calamity Tribe!]

It was the sound of an empire crumbling.

# Chapter 164: Rain, Mud and Fire (1)

---

Young members of the Earth Spirit Tribe didn't know what 'rain' was.

Only the aged ones, the grandmothers, knew of 'rain.' Sometimes, the old Earth Spirits would gather around the campfire and murmur.

-Rain is water that falls from the black sky.

An elderly Earth Spirit drew a picture with charcoal on their nails.

●. It represented the night. Darkness. Since the Earth Spirit Tribe became slaves to the Mountain Calamity Tribe and started living here in the Great Hollow, it became the most familiar character.

-When rain falls, the whole world fills with moisture. You can feel the dampness everywhere without going to a stream

or a well.

-All the dry land quickly turns to mush. Becoming mud. When it rains, just walking on the ground gives a pleasant sensation under your toes.

The elders drew '●~' on the ground while narrating.

Rain falling from the dark night sky.

-Goruk.

It sounded like a dream.

Water overturning the sky, mud filling the land.

In the Great Hollow, water and mud were hard to come by. Water was only allowed to be fetched twice a day. The land of the Great Hollow, made of gravel and sand, made it difficult to create mud, no matter how much water was mixed.

-Sometimes, water drips from the cave ceiling, right?

An old Earth Spirit whispered.

-That is rain.

-But the ceiling doesn't drop enough water to fill the cave?

-It's because the holes in the ceiling are too narrow. Ker. The outside world is different.

-Is there a world outside too?

-This place is a pit. A small pit. A well. Once you leave the cave, the world is so vast, this place is barely a handful in comparison.

-Kerrrr. Sounds like a lie.

To the young Earth Spirit, the Great Hollow was the world. The ceiling of the Great Hollow was high, and the depths were profound. It seemed endless no matter how much they dug. Could such a Great Hollow be merely a well?

It was indeed an unbelievable story.

-Someday, the White Lion will return. Gor.

-Once, this world was covered in trees from heaven to earth. We lived in the World Forest. But the wrath of gods struck, and the World Forest went up in flames. The fire never ceased. For 10 days the fire grew, and for 100 days, it burned as it grew. Then the White Lion guided us.

-The White Lion will return and save us from this well.

-Kekkerkeker.

As time passed, the old Earth Spirits died.

All who remembered 'Guru' fell.

Now, not even the oldest knew of rain. Occasionally, Earth Spirits who had immersed their noses in overflowing mud appeared, but it was a luxury awarded for risking their lives in the Colosseum. It was not because the 'rain' had fallen from the sky.



-Kerkke.

Rain.

-Kerruk.

Mud.

Looking at two jars of water fetched from the stream, the Earth Spirits yearned for rain. Smearing mud, created by mixing water with sand, onto their skin, they nurtured a longing for mud.

Somewhere else, not here.

Another life, not now.

-Guru.

Our homeland.

2.

Limepolis.

Shouts erupted throughout the city, where the Mountain Calamity Tribe had established a dark civilization.

[The Ghost Tribe rebels against the Mountain Calamity Tribe!]

[The Gill Fishes Race rebels against the Mountain Calamity Tribe!]

[The Fairy Tribe rebels against the Mountain Calamity Tribe!]

[The Pure Race rebels against the Mountain Calamity Tribe!]

Each shout, weak on its own, couldn't overpower the trumpeting of the Mountain Calamity Tribe. But it was only a matter of time. Shouts from five locations, engulfing the city, began to surround it.

“Kiiuu.”

The Black Dragon Witch’s divine beast. The Black Swan flapped its wings. I couldn’t understand bird calls, but somehow, I comprehended her message.

‘I’ve come to help, King of Death.’

I nodded my head.

‘With the Black Dragon Witch’s help, the battle will be easier.’

I had collaborated with the Black Dragon Witch several times.

Although she might not remember, during the subjugation of the [Demon King of the Autumn Rain], I became familiar with her combat style over hundreds of repetitions.

“Grrruk!”

I roared and charged at the hunting dog. Fwoosh! The Demonic Heavenly God Art erupted, setting the surroundings ablaze. As flames enveloped us from all directions, the hunting dog used its Holy Technique to evade.

‘Now's the time!’

But the Heretic Inquisitor wasn't the only hunter capable of Animal Possession. Poof! The Black Dragon Witch immediately followed where the Heretic Inquisitor escaped. He hadn't anticipated her move while evading my attack, and she caught him off guard.

Crack!

The Black Swan's sharp talons scratched the hunting dog's golden fur.

“Kar-!”

The hunting dog bled and screamed. It twisted its neck to bite the Black Swan's wings. The Black Swan and hunting dog tumbled in the mud, entangled.

This time I saw an opening.

‘Switching offense and defense.’

I leaped and pounced on the hunting dog’s waist. My jaws sunk deep into its tough golden fur. Blood flowed from my mouth, and simultaneously, a scream erupted from the hunting dog.

One-sided domination.

The Earth Spirits cheered as the hunting dog was wounded.

-Kekkerkeker!

-The White Lion defeats the Golden Dog!

-Guru-ro! Let’s return to our homeland!

As the hunting dog’s injuries increased, the Earth Spirits grew more triumphant. In contrast, the Mountain Calamity Tribe panicked. They had swiftly dealt with the large-scale

slave rebellion, but seeing their divine beast wounded, they lost their composure.

[The mining area of Limepolis is liberated.]

The Earth Spirits gradually drove the Mountain Calamity Tribe back.

-When will reinforcements arrive! Lime!

-Everywhere else, slaves are causing disturbances too...

-The horned ones are causing havoc! Laymu! We need support!

-At the docks, the fish are in an uproar!

-Reinforcements are out of the question. It's critical here too!

-Request aid from other Polises...

-How can we request reinforcements when the waterways are blocked! The bat brats have gone crazy too!

The snails desperately resisted.

But the slaves that had been oppressed by the snails in various places now seized their tentacles. Earth Spirits on land, Gill Fishes in water, Vampires in the air, and Ghosts, Fairies, and Pure Race in the streets.

Wherever the snails had enslaved others, flames erupted.

[The entertainment district of Limepolis is liberated.]

[The temple district of Limepolis is liberated.]

The enslaved races, unable to communicate with each other, had never united under the Mountain Calamity Tribe's tentacles. The six races each had their own language. But gods and humans were the same in not understanding each other's words. A revelation far more powerful than words, divine beasts led the races. While the Black Dragon Witch and I cornered the Heretic Inquisitor, other allies stirred up Limepolis as they pleased.

The Mountain Calamity Tribe was losing control of the city.

[The gate district of Limepolis is liberated.]

[The barracks district of Limepolis is liberated.]

The tide turned.

The rebellion that started in the mining district soon spread to the dock area.

Mermaids splashed in the river that connected the inside and outside of the cave. They were fish slaves of the Gill Fishes Race. Breaking the ropes around their necks, the mermaids sunk the ships.

-These! Lowly fish dare!

A Mountain Calamity Tribe official raised their tentacles high and struck down. Slap! A mermaid screamed as it was hit and fell back into the water. But it was in vain. Dozens of mermaids grabbed the bottom of the galleons and shook them vigorously.



-Aaah!

The snails slipped off the decks. Splash! The fallen snail was surrounded by mermaids in the water.

-Stay away! Stay away! The fish, aah! Aaah!

About twenty mermaids bit the snail, reminiscent of a pack of sharks hunting a penguin. Despite thrashing its tentacles, the snail couldn't drive the mermaids away in the water. Soon, only an empty snail shell remained on the surface.

[The dock district of Limepolis is liberated.]

Crack!

The huge dock-bound galleons capsized. The sacks of salt onboard sank along with the ships. The finely ground rock salt that the Earth Spirits had labored over all night dissolved without a trace upon touching the river water.

The hunting dog watched this scene from the corner of its eye.

"....."

Dozens of galleons collapsed. Amidst the wreckage, a pink dolphin leaped up. It was the divine beast possessed by the Paladin. Whoosh! The dolphin elegantly dived back under the water.

The Gill Fishes cheered and splashed water with their tails.

[Limepolis falls to the rebels.]

The hunting dog opened its mouth.

"Karr."

Perhaps the Heretic Inquisitor laughed, Ahahah.

The underground world he had built over 200 years was collapsing.

"Karruk, Karr."

The hunting dog stepped back. Drip. With each step, sticky blood trailed. Its beautiful golden fur, already torn by the lion's teeth and the black swan's talons, was bloody.

The same was true for the Mountain Calamity Tribe.

-Lime...

-Lime...

Snails, scared, hid behind the hunting dog. Their shells were indented by the Earth Spirits' stone hammers. Many had their tentacles or feelers cut off.

Snails from all over the city fled towards the hunting dog.

-Grruk.

Naturally, the slave races that drove them there also gathered.

A blood-soaked Ghost Tribe member shouted fiercely.

-Kill those bastards!

-Pay them back for what they did to us!

The Ghost Tribe, resembling dokkaebis, had a single horn on their foreheads. Originally standing tall like a unicorn's, these horns were now broken midway.

A mark of slavery.

The snails broke the horns of the Ghost Tribe, crushing their pride and dignity. A price was paid. Where pride was broken, resentment grew like mold, and where dignity was shattered, poisonous mushrooms of hatred sprouted.

-Damn brutes...

The same went for other races.

-They fed us dirt, laughing.

-Throw them in the pit and pour salt on them!

The Pure Humans Race growled.

-They captured our children, put them in wells, and called them 'fish tanks.'

-Throw them in the Colosseum and make them fight each other!

The Gill Fishes shouted from the waterside. Curses rippled across the dark water.

-They pulled our long ears.

-Stuff their mouths with their broken feelers.

The Fairy Tribe spoke.

-Blood...

-.....

The Ghost Tribe silently observed the Mountain Calamity Tribe from the cave and building walls. Unlike others, they were quiet, only occasionally flying in with animal carcasses, dropping them. They were the heads of the dogs revered by the snails.

Each of the six races, speaking their own languages, couldn't share their anger. But they knew enough of the Mountain Calamity Tribe's language. Forced to learn their master's language, they understood.

-Kill.

Someone whispered in the Mountain Calamity Tribe's language.

-Kill.

That single word was known to every race. It was always what the snails said to their slaves. The moan that first leaked from the Ghost Tribe quickly became a universal language, echoing throughout the cave.

-Kill!

The Mountain Calamity Tribe trembled with fear.

Finally, for the first time since their enslavement, the six races shared a sentiment. Its name was rage.

Everyone was soaked in blood.

And they wanted more.

"....."

I looked around at the snails cornered at the dock.

‘It would be easy to order their massacre.’

Likewise, preventing the massacre would also be simple.

Right now, to the Earth Spirits, I was almost a god. A god's command is absolute. Whether it's massacre or mercy, the Earth Spirits would obey.

‘But, this isn't something for me to command.’

I turned around.

‘You choose.’

And slowly walked towards the exit of the Great Hollow.

-Ker?

-Kekkerker...?

Confused noises from the Earth Spirits echoed behind me.

I didn't stop. Walking slowly enough for them to follow, yet fast enough to bid farewell. The Ghost Tribe hesitantly made way.

-.....



-.....

Silence flowed among the Earth Spirits. Like followers facing a cryptic oracle, they looked at each other's faces. As my footsteps grew distant, someone took a step.

-Goruk.

Their direction wasn't towards the gathered Mountain Calamity Tribe at the dock but towards me.

Dozens of Earth Spirits who had directly received my oracle followed me first.

Then came the young ones. The children preferred chasing their first-seen god over avenging their race.

-Kerr...

-Kekerkker.

As a child followed, the mother chased after.

As the chief followed, other Earth Spirits moved one by one.

The sound of stone hammers dropping echoed here and there. Casting aside the evidence of their slavery, the Earth Spirits followed the lion they revered as a god.

‘Right.’

In the dark underground world, a procession of thousands followed me.

‘Follow if you want.’

We walked towards the only entrance leading outside from the underground city.

No one stopped us.

As I stepped into the bright light at the entrance, the Tower's voice reached me.

[The Earth Spirits start escaping Limepolis.]

Let's go home now.

# Chapter 165: Rain, Mud and Fire (2)

---

As I stepped forward, I instinctively closed my eyes.

“Grruk.”

The darkness of the cave was deep. As dark as it was, the emergence from it felt dramatic. Each step forward felt like a spotlight illuminating my path.

Light enveloped us.

-Ker, Ker!

The goblins quickly bowed their heads. Their prolonged life in the caves had altered their physiology. Thinner eyelids. Enlarged eyeballs. They had grown sensitive to light.

For a while, we walked, looking down at our feet.

-.....

The wind blew.

Then, the sunset unfolded before us.

-The sky.....

The goblins murmured softly.

It was already evening in the outside world.

The greasiness from the sunset spread out, painting the world red.

-The sky is red.

For the first time, the slaves gazed upon the endless sky. It

was a luxury they had never experienced before, despite it being a fundamental right to look up at the sky from birth.

-The elders were right. It's the sky.

-Why is the sky red? Goruk. Is it bleeding?

-Red...

-The world is burning.

In awe, fear, or perhaps lost in an unknown joy, the goblins murmured. They looked around, trying to comprehend the world.

[The goblins have been freed from slavery.]

[The status of the Earth Spirit Tribe is changing!]

Words appeared before my eyes.

+

[Earth Spirit Tribe]

Extinction Grade: B (Caution)

Maxim: 'We are fire.'

Description: goblins are a race with all abilities in the lower tier. Their individual capabilities are insignificant. Thus, they unite as a community!

goblins have developed only a small number of characters. These are known by every Earth Spirit, from the most humble to the most noble. Minimal language. Minimal characters. Knowledge does not divide the goblins.

'We are fire.'

Fire may burn in many ways, but it always blazes as one. goblins have devised many cultures to become 'one.'

They hold 'gatherings' more in darkness than in bright daylight. The appearance of goblins is obscured in the dark, and individuals become indistinguishable. Thus, every Earth Spirit participating in the gathering becomes 'anonymous' while speaking.

Keep the fire of the goblins burning!

Traits: [Blood Fire (\*)], [Guru Cult], [Legacy of Records], [Greed (\*)]

Evolution: Unknown. There are 2 evolutions.

Alias: Goblin, etc.

\*Caution! There are traits at risk of disappearing.

+

‘Ah, as expected.’

I furrowed my brow.



‘With the priest's death, [Blood Fire] is at risk of being lost.’

Guardian Spirit shrugged.

-Well, considering the condition is to use aura, specifically red aura, it's quite tricky.

‘Right... Hmm. For this stage, we need to start with aura first.’

-Is there a way? Buying aura from that civilization shop will cost an arm and a leg.

‘Yes, that's true. So, I'll buy something else.’

I thought it over.

‘Open the civilization shop.’

Swish.

Items displayed in the shop appeared.

+

[Oracle Message] - 20p

[Animal Possession] - 40p

[Appearance in Dreams] - 100p

[Hunting Prey Tracking] - 5p

[Bronze-rank Settlement Search] - 80p

[Tribal-rank General (Lottery)] - 100P

[Bronze-rank Technology Invention (Lottery)] - 1,000p

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+

I purchased an item I had never used before.

‘I’ll buy one [Appearance in Dreams].’

Clang, the sound of a coin dropping resonated.

[Purchasing ‘Appearance in Dreams’.]

[100 race points will be used!]

[Your current race points are 70.]

‘Okay.’

I had already thought of the goblin to use this item on.

I turned to look at a young goblin.

Lying down using his fellow goblin's buttock as a pillow, snoring away, his name was Gorke.

‘Means clear water, right.’

Gorke, the goblin with the name meaning clear water, was mumbling in his sleep.

-Kerukke.

Rain.

-Kerruk.

Mud.

-Guru.

Dreaming of somewhere else, I quietly watched the sleeping Gorke.

I activated the item.

‘[Appearance in Dreams].’

Whoosh!

The scenery swirled, turning white around me.

---

A moment later, I found myself standing in the middle of a plain.

“Hoo?”

The vast plain seemed endless. Shhh. Rain poured down over it. The plain, soaked in rain, became muddy and dense.

In the middle of the muddy plain, Gorke lay with his mouth open.

The pouring rain drenched Gorke's mouth.

-Gorurururu.

Gorke blissfully swallowed the rainwater.

His face showed contentment as if he needed nothing more in this world.

That was the dream landscape of a young goblin longing for home.

"Indeed..."

I was convinced in many ways.

"Whether goblins or humans, desires aren't that different, are they?"

-Goruk?

Hearing my voice, Gorke sat up abruptly.

-Who's there!

“Can you hear my voice? Can you see me? Gorke.”

-Goru...? Pure Race?

Gorke looked puzzled.

“I am not Pure Race. Pitiful child, my name is Kekerkker. The revered White Lion, the being that will lead you to the promised home of Guru.”

-Keruk...? Kekerkker? Impossible!

Gorke snorted. Pfft! Being a Goblin with a big nose, his snort sounded as grand as an actual fart.

-Kekerkker is a lion with a beautiful mane and thick skin. But what are you? With your spiky black hair and skinny skin, you don't look anything like Kekerkker! Kekerkker wasn't ugly like you!

"Aren't you just a little brat? Damn."

-Damn? Keruk? What does that mean?

"It means a brat who should be shoved headfirst into a hole in the ground."

-Eh, such a foul-mouthed Pure Race. Ker. Someone as vulgar as you can't be the revered White Lion!

"Gorke. It was I who taught you letters. It was I who taught you how to hunt. I am Kekerkker, and I am the White Lion, how can you doubt me?"

-Show me proof!

"Very well."



I dug a hole in the mud.

Then I grabbed Gorke's ankle and stuck his head first into the hole.

"Do you see the evidence now?"

-Kerrrr?! Ker! It's a demon! A demon has appeared!

"What? You can't see it? Well, I'll have to show you more proof, as I hold you in such high regard."

I scooped up handfuls of mud and filled the hole.

Still pouring, the rain mixed with the mud, completely covering Gorke in a mud pack.

He screamed.

-I believe it! Keruk, I believe! You are definitely Kekerkker!

"Hmm. Quick to understand, I see. That's good."

I pulled Gorke out of the hole.

Mud-covered and shivering, the goblin stared at me.

"Gorke. My appearance in your dream is of great significance."

As I dusted the mud off his head, I continued.

"I, Kekerkker, intend to teach you aura."

-Aura?

"Didn't the priest show you Blood Fire? Didn't he have red energy swirling in his hands? That's aura."

-Ah. You mean [Holy Blood].

"Holy Blood?"

-We have a body and a soul. Everyone has a body, but the soul is one. One and complete. Goruk. Those who reach beyond the limits of the body to the soul can bleed not just from their body but also from their soul.... But.

Gorke frowned.

-Strange. This is the teaching you gave us, Kekerkker. If you really are Kekerkker, why don't you remember what you taught?

"Kid, I never taught such a thing. What I taught you was how to write letters, count to three, and how to hunt."

-Ker? Is there anyone who can't count to three?

These kids.

Forgetting the past in just 200 years.

How hard I worked to teach them Roman numerals.

"Enough. If you still doubt me, go find the lion Kekerkker when you wake up in the morning! I am that lion, and you will see that I am the one who appeared in your dream. So for now, shut up and learn what I teach."

-Holy Blood, is it?

"Yes. Let's begin the lesson."

I raised my arm and started beating the Goblin.

-Keruk?! It hurts! Kerrrr! Why are you hitting me suddenly?!

"Learning aura is the fastest when you're being hit."

It was a method taught to me by Guardian Spirit.

Truthfully, this was the only method I knew. If there was a more conventional method, like sitting cross-legged, focusing the mind, etc., I'd want to learn it first, but that wasn't an

option....

"From now on, I'll beat you so much you'll wish you were dead. While I do, I'll continue to send aura into your body, so feel the flow within you. Capture it. Recognize the blood vessels spread like spiderwebs throughout your body."

-Kerrr! It hurts! It hurts! Kerrruk?!

"Ah."

Gorke curled up. I gently grabbed his wrist, straightened his arm, and then hit his palm, wrist, shoulder, and chest in sequence. Thump! Thump! Aura flowed from my fist into Gorke's body.

-Kerrrr?!

"This is all teaching that will become flesh and blood. Focus."

-There will be nothing left but flesh and blood!

"Exactly. Didn't you call aura holy blood? To show holy blood, the soul must be wounded enough to bleed, right?"

Despite my logical words, Gorke kept dodging.

-I'm going to die!

"No. This is not life, it's a dream. No matter how much I beat you, it'll only hurt as if you're dying, but you won't actually die. It's the perfect environment for learning aura."

-Kerub!

The dream landscape changed from the muddy plain to Slimepolis's arena. To Gorke, the current situation seemed indistinguishable from the Colosseum.

"Oh, this is even better!"

I was delighted.

"Look, Gorke. Those gladiators over there are glaring at you,

their eyes fierce as if they'd do anything to cut off your head. Even in a dream, it will hurt if they decapitate you. Hurry up and fight back!"

-Ah, a nightmare. Ker. A terrible nightmare!

Gorke cried.

-Kekerkker! Where are you, who saved us from hell? A demon is tormenting your child! Save me, Ker! Save me!

"Ah, I am Kekerkker."

Time flowed slowly in the dream.

A considerable amount of time passed, but Gorke's dream did not end. Thanks to that, the young Goblin experienced countless non-deaths, and I leisurely guided him.

After a while,

"Ah!"

Flames flickered faintly in Gorke's palm.

Although weak, it was undoubtedly aura.

"Look, Gorke! It's aura. The holy blood has appeared in you!"

-Kerrr....

The young Goblin looked at his palm. His gaze was empty, as if he had lost something precious.

-Kill me.... Let me go, demon. I can't take it anymore....

"Usually, if you don't mind dying, learning while dying is the fastest. Many warriors spend a lifetime in martial arts without understanding aura. On the other hand, you've grasped the essence in just one night. Isn't this a rare opportunity?"

-Just kill me...!

"From now on, you must diligently serve the Earth Spirit Tribe."



I smiled contentedly and gently placed a hand on Gorke's shoulder.

Gorke flinched.

-Serve?

"Yes. The priest died, and there's no one to perform Blood Fire. You shall take his place. I find your culture beautiful. You must strive to ensure its beauty does not fade."

-Kerrr. But I lack the qualifications to be a priest....

"But your aura still seems a bit immature. What do you say, Gorke? Will you suffer for ten more days to master the ultimate form of aura?"

-I'll do it. Gorke! I'll be the priest!

"Excellent."

I nodded in satisfaction.

"Then I'll leave this dream. When you wake up, come to me and check. If I really am Kekercker, I'll pat you on the shoulder."

Then I awoke from the dream.

Quiet dawn.

The Goblins were already up, preparing to continue their journey home. Mothers caught fish by the river, and children grilled them. Many Goblins quietly watched the rising sun.

-Keruk...!

Not far away, a young Goblin suddenly stood up. It was Gorke. His green forehead was wrinkled, and he was drenched in cold sweat.

-Kerrr... Am I alive? I'm alive, Ker?

Gorke breathed heavily. Unsure if he was dreaming or awake, the Goblin slapped his cheek six times. Finally realizing the nightmare was over, Gorke sighed deeply in relief.

-.....

But that was short-lived.

Hesitantly, Gorke approached me.

-Kekerkker...

The young Goblin looked up at me with desperate eyes.

-Last night, a demon tormented me. Ker. The demon dared to impersonate Kekerkker and tormented me. I thought I was going to die. I believed I was dead. I wish you could show me that Kekerkker is not a demon....

"Grr."

Chin.

I slowly raised my paw and touched Gorke's shoulder.

-.....

Gorke's face filled with despair.

"Grr. Gor, Kruk. Grurum."

'Keep my words in mind and do well, kid.'

Though Gorke couldn't understand the lion's words, he shivered.

[A new successor of Blood Fire appears.]

[The Earth Spirit Tribe is no longer at risk of losing the Blood Fire trait!]

That went well. Really well.

-This kid....

Guardian Spirit muttered, having watched me teaching aura to Gorke from beginning to end.

-Why teach so crudely... Don't do that... Be nicer, really....

# Chapter 166: Rain, Mud and Fire (3)

---

The Earth Spirit Tribe was at risk of losing more than just the [Blood Fire] trait.

"It must be because of their long suffering under the Mountain Calamity Tribe."

I pondered over the next trait that needed attention.

+

[Greed]

Rank: B

Effect: The Earth Spirit Tribe is overflowing with greed. Perhaps due to their inferiority complex and self-loathing for

being ugly, they seek recognition not for themselves but through their possessions. 'Kerk! I've covered myself in warm mud!' 'Keruk! I've plastered myself with premium mud from upstream!'

An insatiable desire for better things.

A longing for more impressive possessions.

Mixed with feelings of inferiority, self-loathing, and a craving for recognition, the Earth Spirit Tribe's hearts brew a powerful greed. They might begin to covet shiny treasures, or perhaps they will boast about having prettier slaves than others. The Earth Spirit Tribe is greedy, and their potential lies within this greed.

The direction of their 'greed' depends on you.

\*However, this trait may change depending on the course of history.

\*Warning! Due to prolonged oppression, the Earth Spirit Tribe has begun to become indifferent to desire. Resigned to the thought that they cannot achieve what they desire, the Greed trait is at risk of becoming dormant if they continuously fail to experience 'the fulfillment of desire.'

+

"Hmm."

Greed is essentially desire. Having an ambition for something. Greed, desire, ambition - these words might have negative connotations, but...

My thoughts were different.

"It's better than being indifferent to everything."

-Well, I think so too.

Guardian Spirit scratched the back of his head.

-Desire is like a flow. It's like a river. If you dam it up and forcibly stop it, it builds up and floods. If you completely cover it up so it can't overflow, it stagnates and rots. Where does the rotten water go? It seeps underground, eating away at the land.



Guardian Spirit's voice was quite serious.

-Waterways need to be released. If you're going to release it, do it big! Let it flow in one direction. I see that as the direction of life.

"This disciple's opinion is similar, master."

-Hey, hey, who's your master? I've never had a disciple who teaches as ignorantly as you.

"What else should a tadpole learn to swim from but a frog? Sword Emperor, you are my frog, and I am your tadpole."

-Crazy brat...

We, master and disciple, proudly pondered side by side.

"Now, how should we guide the [Greed] in a splendid direction?"

The deliberation didn't last long.

Before I could find the answer, or before Guardian Spirit could tell me, someone else brought the solution.

More precisely, not 'someone else' but 'some others.'

-Kekerkker!

On the third week of the journey home.

Goblins at the back of the procession caused a ruckus. The ones who had been following me leisurely suddenly rushed forward in panic. Wondering what was happening, I turned my head and locked eyes with Gorke.

-Soldiers are visible from the back! Ker!

"Soldiers?"

I concentrated aura in my eyes and looked far beyond the horizon.

The first thing I saw was a cloud of dust. It was clear

weather, yet there was dust billowing. It wasn't a natural occurrence, but the dust that rises when a herd of beasts stampedes.

I enhanced my vision a bit more.

"Hmm."

Hundreds of dogs.

Hunting dogs panted as they galloped across the plains.

No matter how much dogs are pack animals, hundreds is not a number that gathers spontaneously. Proving this, the hunting dogs carried something on their backs.

-The Mountain Calamity Tribe!

Snails clung tightly to the hunting dogs.

-The Mountain Calamity Tribe is pursuing us! Keruk! Form battle lines! Form battle lines!

-Children to the center! Be careful not to get trampled!

Cavalry.

No, the Canine Cavalry was approaching.

---

The Canine Cavalry of the Mountain Calamity Tribe was fast.

-Lime!

-Drive them towards the riverbank! Keep the distance!

As soon as the Earth Spirit Tribe formed a defensive line, the Mountain Calamity Tribe gave up the charge. Instead, they slowly herded us, nudging our weak formation, causing the Earth Spirit Tribe to involuntarily step back.

-Kerruk...!

-Don't let the formation break! Match your steps and sides!

Although the Earth Spirit Tribe outnumbered them, there were many elderly and children among them. They had to form a protective formation. The Earth Spirit Tribe was defensive, while the Canine Cavalry of the Mountain Calamity Tribe took the offensive advantage. Using their mobility, they leisurely herded us towards the riverbank.

"That's a good strategy."

I shielded the Earth Spirit Tribe from the front, thinking.

"I thought they were weak after collapsing so easily in Limepolis, but..."

-If they couldn't command the military, they wouldn't have been able to rule the six tribes. What happened in that cave was because all the slaves rose up at once, right?

"True, that makes sense."

I had stood at the forefront of soldiers in the 11th floor, [Aegim Empire's] port battle. So, I wasn't completely ignorant of military tactics.

Even to my eyes, the command of the Mountain Calamity Tribe was adept.

-Buuu.

The Mountain Calamity Tribe blew snail horns to control the pace of the advance. Sometimes they rushed as if to attack immediately, and other times they slowly and indirectly pressured.

-Lime!

Once the encirclement was complete, a commanding snail, who seemed to be the general, approached.

The general rode a much larger hunting dog than the other Canine Cavalry. Did the snail's mucus act as an adhesive? Unlike cavalry, there were no saddles or harnesses.

-Address the dirty mold slaves!

The general snail raised his voice.

-Your 'slave rebellion' has already been suppressed! Limepolis has risen from defeat. Our glorious empire's twelve cities have formed a large army and are pursuing the remnants. This is the proof!

The general inserted his tentacle into the snail shell. Something round. The Mountain Calamity Tribe raised it high and then hurled it towards us.

It was the head of a Ghost Tribe member.

The general did not stop there, continuing to pull out more heads. Earth Spirit Tribe, Pure Race, Vampiric Tribe, Fairy Tribe. Heads from each tribe rolled on the ground.

-Watch carefully! Lime! This is the fate of slaves who dared to rebel against the glorious Slime Empire! Our wrath is great and enduring. These are not the first punishments we have given, nor are they the last. mold. If you do not wish your dirty heads to form a bridge of blood, surrender immediately!

-Ker, Kerr.

The Earth Spirit Tribe shrank back.

-Other tribes have already been suppressed?

-It's a lie. That can't be. The world of the Mountain Calamity Tribe is already over.

-I don't want to return to hell, Ker....

Hmm.

"They're shaking our morale."

-What will you do?

"Expose their false morale."

I stepped forward.

The Earth Spirit Tribe stopped their murmuring and looked at my back. Between the standoff of the Mountain Calamity Tribe and the Earth Spirit Tribe, a plain lay. In the middle of the plain, I quietly glared at the Mountain Calamity Tribe's general.



[Purchasing 'Oracle Message.']

[20 race points are consumed!]

[You currently have 50 race points.]

Sorry, snail of this world.

I'm one step ahead in deception.

I used the divine message to directly implant words into the Mountain Calamity Tribe general's mind.

[The White Lion sees through your lies!]

Startled!

The general on the back of the hunting dog twitched his tentacles. Although I'm not familiar with the physiology of the Mountain Calamity Tribe, I could tell he was tense.

A simple story.

'There's no way they've really suppressed the rebellion.'

If the Mountain Calamity Tribe had won, the Tower would have informed me with a message. That the rebellion failed. That they returned to slavery.

'I haven't heard any such notifications yet.'

The conclusion was clear.

The Mountain Calamity Tribe general had made a bluff with lies.

'Well, I also figured it out because I receive benefits from the Tower system. But you must use everything at your disposal.'

I opened my beastly jaws wide and inhaled deeply.

Then, with aura, I unleashed a lion's roar.

"Gooooo!"

My roar echoed across the plains. Gekeng! The hunting dogs were startled and writhed. The Mountain Calamity Tribe didn't fall or slip due to their adhesive strength, but they too were unsettled.

-The god of mold...

-False gods descended all at once, bringing disaster to the city.

-Limepolis fools offended Lime. Only those who sufficiently serve Lime can enjoy blessings.

From the Mountain Calamity Tribe's perspective, I was an evil god. But even an evil god is still a god. Seeing the god with the Earth Spirit Tribe in person, the Mountain Calamity Tribe lost their momentum and hesitated.

"Good."

I seized the opportunity.

The opportunity to revive the Earth Spirit Tribe's [Greed].

[Purchasing 'Oracle Message']

[20 race points are consumed!]

[You currently have 30 race points.]

Despite clearing the 31st floor, the great escape on the 32nd floor, freeing the slaves, and continuing the lineage of [Blood Fire], I had not yet received a tally of race points.

There was a reason to save them for later, but now wasn't the time to explain.

"This will be enough."

I spent the remaining points to acquire another divine message.

I sent a message to the Mountain Calamity Tribe general.

[The White Lion proposes an honorable duel.]

The Mountain Calamity Tribe general twitched. It must have been frightening to be addressed by a wicked god.

But even then, the general didn't shy away from a counter-question.

-Lime. An honorable duel, you say...?

"Krrr."

Actions speak louder than words.

I turned around and walked back to the Earth Spirit Tribe, who looked at me with puzzled expressions. Enjoying the attention of the children, I stopped in front of one Goblin.

"Hey."

It was Gorke.

"Get on."

-.....

Gorke's face darkened.

-Ker, Kekerkker! It's an immense honor to have such an insignificant creature like me in your presence. May you proceed as you wish, Kekerkker.

"Enough of that."

I bent my front legs to make it easier for him to climb, assuming the posture of a slide.

"Get on, I said."

-Kerup!

Gorke hiccuped.

He looked around with pleading eyes for help.

-Wh... why is the White Lion doing this to me? It's really strange. Do you understand the will of the White Lion, Ker?

The Earth Spirit Tribe murmured amongst themselves.

-It seems like he's telling you to get on...?

-It definitely looks like he's allowing you to get on his back.

In desperation, Gorke spoke out.

-Kerurup! How could we, mere followers, rudely climb onto the back of the White Lion? It's blasphemy! There must be another, holier meaning that we can't even imagine!

I bent my hind legs as well.

Then I lifted my tail and tapped, tapped my waist.

The Earth Spirit Tribe deeply pondered.

-It really seems like he's telling you to get on...?

-If you don't, he might get very angry....

-Isn't disobeying the White Lion's command a greater blasphemy? Keruk?

Gorke looked distraught.

"That brat."

I decided to spend my last points to personally deliver a divine message to Gorke.

[The White Lion says if you don't get on quickly, he will beat you up.]

Eventually, Gorke, with tears in his eyes, climbed onto my back.



Seeing Gorke's tears, those around let out a rumble of admiration.

-Look! The grandson of Kirugepub, Gorke, has been granted grace by the White Lion!

-He's so moved that he's even crying! Gor!

-He's crying! It's worth crying over! It's a glory that will last for generations!

-I'm so envious!

Gorke cried even harder.

-Kerrr... No, it's a misunderstanding... Kekerkker isn't the kind of god you think... Rather than a god, he's more like a brother, and a very bad one at that....

Of course, Gorke's voice was drowned out by the noise.

Insincere shouts always disappear.

Ununderstood by anyone for the tears he shed, Gorke was carried on my back to the Mountain Calamity Tribe general.

-Indeed.

The Mountain Calamity Tribe general stared at me and Gorke on my back.

-So that's what an honorable duel means. I understand.

The general wiggled his antennae.

-I heard you mold didn't interfere with the massacre of our fellow Limepolis citizens. Lime. Though your fate is to rot in the salt mines, there's room for leniency for not participating in the slaughter.

The general murmured, perhaps this too was Lime's will.

He then turned his head and shouted to his army.

-Dirty mold and their god have proposed a duel to us! How

amusing, slaves who only swung pickaxes in pits! Soldiers! Isn't there a hero among us who can break the pride of these mold!

-.....

-Success in the duel will bring a glorious life, promised by my antennae! Wealth! Slaves! Honor! Anything is possible. Break the noses of these mold!

The Mountain Calamity Tribe soldiers murmured.

Shortly after, one snail riding a hunting dog stepped forward boldly.

-Lime! I will seize the glory!

It was indeed a giant hunting dog.

Honestly, calling it a dog was legally questionable. At any rate, it was a beast the size of a lion with six legs, too dog-like to be called a dog.

And it wasn't just the dog with many things.

-I, a descendant of the Spiral Apostle lineage, stand here, a member of one of the seven families of the Rift City, Lekamulime!

The Mountain Calamity Tribe soldier with more tentacles than the others wielded a sword in each one, with four tentacles swishing through the air, the swords slicing the atmosphere. Shick! Shick! The dazzling swordplay drew admiration from the Mountain Calamity Tribe.

-Oh. A noble!

-Wow... that's the fearsome Spiral Apostle lineage...

-Truly blessed by Lime!

These guys are amusing.

"I wonder if nobility is determined by the number of tentacles?"

-It seems so.

"That's really strange."

-Yeah. Quite erotic.

"What?"

-Huh?

As the Guardian Spirit and I were marveling at the peculiarities of snail civilization, the so-called descendant of the Spiral Apostle lineage had come quite close.

-I am Seimseulam, a descendant of the Spiral Apostle lineage, ruler of the Rift City! Servant of the evil god! State your name!

Gorke tensed up at such a grand self-introduction.

-Ki, Kirugepub's grandson Gorke....

-A priest's kin?

-Kerrr. The priest has passed away.

-A noble?

-We don't have nobles, Keruk....

-A mere slave.

The Mountain Calamity Tribe soldier twirled a head antenna.

It seemed to be a gesture of ridicule.

-Today, I'll show you the dignity of one loved by Lime! Here!

The Mountain Calamity Tribe led the hunting dog into a charge.

The four swords crossed, making a noisy clang, clang. Seemingly trying to overpower with sound before the fight. I thought no one would fall for such a silly trick, but the coward on my back was thoroughly scared.

-Ker! Kerrrr!

Gorke grabbed my mane and howled.

-Why me! Why do I have to suffer like this, Keruk! It's a demon! I've been tricked by a demon!

"Krrrung."

Hey. Don't worry.

Trust this brother!

I'll turn you into a hero!

# Chapter 167: Rain, Mud and Fire (4)

---

-Lime! I'll slice off your nose in one stroke!

The noble soldier charged in swiftly.

"Oh?"

But this was quite fascinating.

He wasn't using a single or double sword like a Pure Human. It was the Quadruple Sword Style. Displaying swords in all four directions: up, down, left, and right, he swung them around.

The diversity of attack patterns was something that primates with only two arms would find hard to mimic.



"Interesting."

The advantage of the Mountain Calamity Tribe with several tentacles on their body was apparent.

Despite numerous battles I've encountered, I had never seen this kind of swordsmanship from [such] a race.

'The vertical strikes are feints. A bluff.'

I quickly assessed the enemy's sword movements with my eyes.

'The horizontal strikes are the real ones... The left one is a distraction. The right one is the main attack. Okay, if the left one is blocked, he'll immediately switch to the other side.'

"Hmm."

Guardian Spirit sighed as if deeply moved.

-They say even a dog at a noodle shop can cook ramen after

three years. Kim Zombie. Finally, you're starting to make sense.

'It's the Vice-lord of the Demonic Cult, sir.'

-Who are you calling sir?

Anyway... what should I say about this?

'It's a bit strange how simple racial differences lead to variations in swordsmanship.'

-What? Isn't that obvious?

'Yes. But the obviousness only really hits you when you face it head-on. Hmm. This really is martial arts of the demonic unorthodox path. Maybe it could help me refine the Demonic Heavenly God Art...'

-Oh, are you planning to study the snails' swordsmanship now?

'We'll see.'

I skillfully ducked under the feints and used my left and right paws to lightly kick away the Mountain Calamity Tribe soldier's swords.

-Lime?!

The noble was shocked, his antennae spread wide.

'Sorry, kid.'

There was no need for a power struggle.

'It's an issue of the engine before skill.'

The Mountain Calamity Tribe soldier either didn't know how to use aura, or hadn't learned to extend it to the blades held in his tentacles. I had been praised by Guardian Spirit for my talent in manipulating aura. The soldier simply couldn't keep up with me.

No matter how good his riding skills or how noble his mount, he couldn't be faster than a novice pilot in an airplane.

Moreover, I was no longer at the level to be considered a novice.

-You, evil god! Lime! Grant me strength!

The noble swung his swords more fiercely, but it was futile. He couldn't even cut a single hair of my mane. I enjoyed the rhythm of the fight, kicking away his swords with a thud, thud.

-Kerup?! Keru!

Of course, this was my relaxed commentary.

To Gorke, swords were whizzing by right in front of him.

-Save me! Save the Goblin! This demon isn't Kekerkker, is it?! I'm doomed! Gorke is doomed!

"Tsk, tsk."

It was pitiful.

I had even set up a stage in his dreams and bestowed aura upon him. Even if he was scared of dying, shouldn't he show some spirit? Let's say he was really in danger of dying. Wouldn't I help him out?

-Hey, Zombie.

'Yes?'

-Your way of dealing with this Gorke Goblin... it reminds me of someone teaching another. Reminiscent of someone here, teaching someone else. It's probably just my imagination, right?

'I don't know what you're talking about. If you're going to spout nonsense, just watch.'

-Yeah... I guess... It's just me feeling sorry for the goblin. I've hardly felt sorry for humans, but here I am, feeling sorry for a goblin.

What nonsense was this ghost talking about?

"Krrung."

I focused on defense, parrying the noble's sword attacks with my claws, never attacking the soldier myself.

The one to defeat this noble is not me.

'It's Gorke's turn.'

'It's the turn of the Earth Spirit Tribe.'

I patiently waited.

-Ker. Kerr...?

After some time, Gorke seemed to realize that [he was not in immediate danger of dying] and started to relax. He stopped begging and began watching the combat unfolding before him.

-...Gerup...

'Right.'

Facing it head-on.

The first step is to face the challenges that have come upon oneself directly.

'That's it.'

I more aggressively parried the snail noble's sword attacks. Chaang! My claws strongly pushed away the swords.

-Lime?!

Momentarily, the noble's body was wide open.

If I swung my claws just once more, it would be over. The noble would be cut in half without a chance to defend.

But, I didn't.

I just stood there.

-...!

The noble's face turned red. The Mountain Calamity Tribe's skin was somewhat transparent. When blood rushed, it was quite noticeable.

The noble soldier swung his swords even more furiously.

-Don't insult me!

No, that's not it.

-Don't humiliate my family! Lime!

If someone must be humiliated here, it's me.



'Gorke was a slave until recently and is now facing nobility. You are a brave soldier fighting against an evil god. Either way, you deserve praise.'

As for me?

I'm practically a god in this world, toying with a noble soldier.

It's not only against the teachings of the Demonic Cult, but also immature for an adult.

'Sorry.'

But it's necessary.

'I'm responsible for these kids.'

A good parent doesn't mind taking humiliation for their children. A good teacher swallows humiliation for their students. Those who believe in something more honorable than themselves willingly accept disgrace.

And what about a god?

'Now I'm a Constellation looking after an entire race.'

Taking a little humiliation to take care of the children, enduring a bit of disgrace for those who have lived as slaves, is something I can easily bear.

'Now, Gorke!'

I happily took the humiliation.

'And young Earth Spirit Tribe! Look! This is the Mountain Calamity Tribe you feared. A member of the nobility that ruled over you. How is it?'

Once again, I forcefully pushed away the noble's swords. Chaang! Once again, an opening leading directly to the noble appeared. The same gap as before that Gorke just stared at blankly.

'Are you still not confident enough to confront him one-on-one?'

This time was different.

'If you lack confidence, I'll create it for you.'

As if possessed, Gorke moved his arm.

Red aura blossomed from the young Earth Spirit Tribe's hand.

Thump!

-Huh?

A moan, origin unknown, leaked out.

The Mountain Calamity Tribe noble looked down at his body in shock, and the young Earth Spirit Tribe gazed at his hand in a daze.

A fist mark.

A red scar on the noble's torso, clearly imprinted like a stamp.

'Nice shot.'

I smiled inwardly.

'That's it.'

The next moment, the noble bent over and vomited.

-Blargh! Blugh, blargh... Wheeeck!

The noble's digestive fluid poured over the head of the hunting dog. Luckily, the Mountain Calamity Tribe seemed to consume a lot of soup, so the vomit was free of solids, but the hunting dog didn't seem to appreciate it much.

-Woof! Kiging, woof!

The giant hunting dog, its struggles as immense as its size, shook like a mountain during an earthquake and ran towards

the Mountain Calamity Tribe's camp, carrying the noble clinging to it.

-Blargh!

Even while being carried away, the noble kept spewing rainbow-colored vomit.

Gorke looked at his fist in disbelief, opening and closing it.

-Gorr...

After him, more challengers came forth.

Not just the nobles, but also the noble's private soldiers, superior soldiers brimming with confidence, and even the lowly soldiers seeking a quick fortune — a total of eleven Mountain Calamity Tribe members challenged me.

But none of them could surpass my claws.

As I've said before, it was an impossible fight from the start.

-.....

As the fight dragged on, Gorke spoke less.

-Gorke! Gorke! Gorke!

And as the victories piled up, the Earth Spirit Tribe went wild with excitement.

'How about that.'

I intentionally took breaks between fights, not immediately accepting each challenge. Instead, I leisurely walked in front of the Earth Spirit Tribe.

Gorke, the victorious warrior, was on my back.

'Impressive, right?'

I captivated the eyes of the Earth Spirit Tribe.

'Aren't you envious?'

I tickled the hearts of the Earth Spirit Tribe.

'Don't you also want to become like this?'

I splashed red paint into their minds.

'There are beautiful things in this world other than Fire Painting. Not just the fragrance of mud. The beauty of victory in battle. Accepting and overcoming challenges. These are as beautiful as fire and as fragrant as mud.'

The Earth Spirit Tribe was clearly intoxicated by the beauty of the duel and the fragrance of victory.

Otherwise, why would their eyes sparkle?

To those who look at the world and sparkle, I wanted to offer nothing but a smile.

'Accept envy as envy. Long for it! Dream. Life only comes

alive when it flows somewhere. Envy will whisper to you the direction to flow. Be the water that whispers dreams, not wine that stagnates and rots.'

I felt it when I saw the sword-slave fighting in the Colosseum.

There's a dormant fighting spirit in the Earth Spirit Tribe.

The Earth Spirit Tribe considered their fellow tribesman 'Gyari,' who died in the Colosseum, as an oddity. They regarded her as a peculiar child and mourned him. But if Gyari loved the fight, other members of the Earth Spirit Tribe could love the same thing.

"Krruk!"

I kicked away the eleventh challenger's sword.

'The White Lion is by your side.'

Even though I'm just a fake Constellation, a baseless belief.



I want to be remembered as a beautiful god who whispered beauty to you.

Probably.

「 Can I be remembered by you as a single peony? 」

Certainly.

The Master must have wished for only that.

If sharing life with another person is destiny, and passing will onto others is karmic connection, then teaching longing to these children is inevitability.

I parried the twelfth challenger's sword.

[The Earth Spirit Tribe awakens to the aesthetics of dueling.]

The Tower whispered in my mind.

[The Earth Spirit Tribe desires the honor of victory.]

[The Earth Spirit Tribe longs for the glory and disgrace of challenge.]

Perhaps the Tower has its own aesthetics and procedures, always sending notifications, but at least in this case, it was unnecessary.

[The Earth Spirit Tribe's trait 'Greed' changes!]

Just by looking at the dumbfounded faces of the Earth Spirit Tribe, I could tell.

[The Earth Spirit Tribe gains a new trait 'Competitive Spirit!']

The characters carved before my eyes:

+

[Competitive Spirit]

Category: Cultural, Collective Unconscious.

Origin: [Greed (B)]

Description: The Earth Spirit Tribe is greedy. Greed is not born from the vulgarity of nature but from the lack of life. To any race, the appearance of the Earth Spirit Tribe is ugly, so they are born into the world with inherent deficiencies.

'Life is only life when it flows through the world.'

From now on, the Earth Spirit Tribe will not blame the world for this deficiency, but instead, challenge the world.

'If it must flow, let it be a torrent.'

The Earth Spirit Tribe believes they can become strong. They believe they can achieve their desires! The sword is a symbol of belief, dueling is the procedure of belief, and victory is the proof of belief.

'More fiercely!'

The Earth Spirit Tribe will endlessly crave.

For more honorable battles. For more glorious victories.

The Earth Spirit Tribe will continue to seek the symbols of belief, and perhaps this will be an endless tragedy. But what does it matter? The Earth Spirit Tribe will willingly shed tears for this tragedy and applaud the failed heroes.

May dreams accompany the flowing water.

\*However, aura users may be treated as a privileged class.

\*This trait can change depending on historical developments.

+

Crack.

It was after defeating the thirteenth challenger.

Drops of water fell on my lion's mane.

-Gorr, krrr. Gorr.

At first, I thought it was sweat from Gorke. He had fought 13 consecutive battles for the first time in his life, drenched in sweat. Before reaching his physical limits, he was pushed to the brink of his mental endurance, unable to use aura any longer.

But it wasn't sweat.

It was rain.

-Gorr?

-Kerr?

The Earth Spirit Tribe looked up at the sky in astonishment.

Drip-drop, drip, drop...

Rain fell. Raindrops hit the Earth Spirit Tribe's beak-like noses, bouncing off. The drops that couldn't bear the weight flowed down as rainwater.

-Rain.

-Kerrkeda...

-Rain.

-It's really water from the sky...

The Earth Spirit Tribe opened their mouths to catch the rain. They looked more ecstatic than when they first saw the Blood Fire in the cave or the sunset after leaving the cave for the first time.

-Gorlup. Gorr, gorr!

-Kerrke! Kerrke!

The Earth Spirit Tribe spread their tiny arms, rolled around,

and splashed in the small puddles under their feet, sending sticky mud flying. Some rolled on the ground, covering themselves in rain and mud.

It was too chaotic to be sacred.

Too sacred to be chaotic.

-.....

The Mountain Calamity Tribe's general put a snail trumpet to his mouth.

-This is troublesome. We hastily formed a unit to pursue them here, but now a monsoon has started, causing the river to overflow. The dirty Earth Spirit Tribe has already crossed the river... It's too rough to make the hunting dogs swim. Lime. How can we, born as mortals, stand against immortal nature? Is this the curse of the evil god?

The general muttered and turned his head.

-Or perhaps this too is the will of Lime.

He shouted to his troops as he went among the hundreds of canine cavalry.

-Stop pursuing the Earth Spirit Tribe across the river!

-The tentacles of the ravine, but that's...

-Lime. It's my decision. We can't be the only ones to sacrifice in the midst of immortals. We will join the pursuit unit of White Mountain City and chase after the Pure Humans Race. Troops, move out!

Boooooom-

The trumpet sound pierced through the rain. The Mountain Calamity Tribe tapped the dogs' waists with their tentacles. The dogs panted and stepped back, soon disappearing into the pouring rain, dragging long shadows.

Boooooom...

The trumpet lasted a little longer than the shadows before cutting off.



The sound of rain filled the surroundings.

"....."

I watched the direction where the canine cavalry disappeared for a while. They were a fast-arriving and light-departing army. I guessed why the Heretic Inquisitor was so confident and why they were still laughing despite losing to us.

“Grrr.”

I turned to the Earth Spirit Tribe.

The kids were enjoying the rain and mud.

'I've done all I can.'

Leading them to Guru will end all my duties.

'It's time to wrap up this stage.'

But before that.

I watched the Earth Spirit Tribe playing in the rain a little longer.

'Adorable little ones.'

Smiling inwardly.

# Chapter 168:

## Between a Master and a Friend (1)

---

A week had passed since we shook off the pursuit of the Mountain Calamity Tribe. We finally arrived at the Earth Spirit Tribe's homeland.

[The Earth Spirit Tribe returns home.]

[Quest Clear!]

[You have successfully led the tribe out of Limepolis.]

[As a reward for completing the quest, you receive race points...]

The reward for the main quest of the 32nd floor was quite generous. As I had done throughout this level, I saved all but 100 of those race points.

'I have a specific use for them.'

After saving the points, I looked at the Earth Spirit Tribe's homeland.

Guru.

The homeland the Earth Spirit Tribe longed for was... somewhat disappointing. To be honest, it was almost a ruin.

-Well, that's expected.

Guardian Spirit shrugged.

-When human hands don't touch it, a village is quickly overgrown with bushes. I once returned to my homeland, taken over by Black Path bandits, and it had turned into a jungle.

'Really? You had such a past?'

-Of course. I'm a man with many pasts. If my life story were

written as a novel, it would be a grand work of 39 volumes for part one, 22 for part two, and 13 for the side stories.

'That specific number somehow annoys me...'

-And after dying, I became a ghost and am currently serializing part three. After you die, I plan to possess someone else and continue with the second part of the side story.

'Please, enough!'

We looked around the old homeland. Weeds and shrubs. Green plants had taken over Guru.

Any sign that someone once lived here had disappeared, with only very old goblin-made stone pillars and statues, moss-covered, standing as evidence of compromise with time.

-Oh.

Among them was a strangely familiar statue. Not because I had seen the statue before, but because the subject it depicted was familiar.

White marble. Mane and large teeth carefully carved, though with unskilled hands...

-Did they even make a sculpture of you?

It was me.

-White lion, so they got marble for it. Wow, that's dedication. Utmost devotion.

'Indeed.'

I slowly looked around. The Earth Spirit Tribe, apparently finding something wonderful about this green jungle, were unraveling their bundles with laughter. Thump! Thwack! Some were hitting the shrubs with stone hammers brought from Limepolis, eager to make a place to live.

'I'm not their master, though.'

The line between master and friend. The farthest stranger and the closest stranger, with parents in between, perhaps.

Parents can play the role of master or become friends, but the decision may lie not with the child but with the parent.

'I should tell them before leaving this stage.'

That night.

I used the 100 race points I had saved to get an item.

[I purchase 'Appearance in Dreams.']

[100 race points have been consumed!]

[Your available race points are now 0.]

[All other race points are currently invested and cannot be accessed...]

I entered Gorke's dream.

"Hello? Little one. Long time no see."

-Kirrrrrr?! Oh, demon!

I was greeted warmly.

"Ah, I feel a bit shy when you're so happy to see me... Did you miss me that much? I'm sorry I couldn't look into your heart."

'If you're really sorry, don't appear in my dreams!'

Gorke jumped up.

-Last time, fighting those snails, I thought I was going to die!

"Hey, you didn't die, right? As long as you don't die, everything will eventually contribute to your tenacity. Gorke. You must not be crushed by the world but crush the world in your life."

-Still, such dirty words. Even if it's the same words, how can you say them so filthily? Kerr. Whether a god or a demon, I



wish you'd use cleaner language... When you were a lion, you were cool, but in dreams, you're just terrible...

Gorke muttered. His illusion shattered. I didn't deny his words; instead, I agreed.

"That's right, kid!"

-Gorr?

"Currently, the Earth Spirit Tribe harbors too sweet an illusion. That I am your savior, cool, and absolutely perfect, and that I will unconditionally look after you. But my true nature, as you said, is a bit devilish."

-'A bit'...?

Gorke momentarily wore a philosophical expression. Perhaps the first philosopher in the history of the Earth Spirit Tribe, but I broke his thought. If he left behind a saying like 'Everything is made of Kerr!', it would only trouble future students.

"You alone know my true nature. I'm not the god you think I

am. Just a helper and an advisor. Gorke, you have the duty to spread the truth to your family, relatives, and tribe."

-Kerr! I don't want to. It seems bothersome!

"In our last fight, I noticed your aura was still immature and had not reached its peak. Let's do a year of secluded training in this dream."

-Gorke loves the truth! Gorke will spread the truth!

Gorke burned with passion. Good to see.

-But, I'm curious.

"Hmm?"

-If you're not a god, why does Kerke care for us? Why do you pay attention to us? Why did you save us from the primordial disaster and rescue us from the snails? I don't understand why Kerke does it.

"Firstly, because you're cute and charming..."

-Kerr? Are you blind?

This kid.

"Actually, I'm not much different from you. I'm just another person. But if I had to say why I treat you well... it's because you're somewhat similar to me."

-Similar? That's strange. Kerke is nothing like us.

"It's not about appearances."

I scratched my head.

"People are drawn to things they think are similar to themselves. I see myself in you. In your greed, I see my greed, and in your situation, I see mine. I discover myself."

-Gorr...?

"If I cherish you, it's probably because I cherish myself."

I stroked Gorke's head.

"But if you insist on worshipping me, think of me not as a god but rather as a friend. I'd rather be treated with friendship than worshipped as an idol. Trust is much better than faith."

-Idol over friendship, trust over faith...

"Yes. Just a friend who occasionally stays by your side. Isn't it cooler to say 'We're friends with a god' than 'We are loved by a god'?"

Gorke looked up at me blankly.

[The faith of the Earth Spirit Tribe shows signs of change!]

[A primitive religion 'White Lion Faith' is likely to gain new doctrines.]

I smiled wryly.

"Do well. I have to leave your side for a while. Teach the others aura. Let them know I want to remain as a friend."

-Leaving?

"Yeah. I've done my duty by bringing you to Guru. I'll be angry if I come back and find you getting beaten by the Mountain Calamity Tribe again."

I playfully rubbed Gorke's cheeks with both hands. Amusing sounds of 'Gorr, Kerr' escaped from Gorke's mouth.

"Teach the other kids about aura, and tell them about my true nature. Oh, and I almost forgot to say this."

"Good job in the last fight. You were quite impressive."

I lightly patted Gorke's shoulders.

"Live vigorously."

Gorke opened his mouth to say something, but I promptly

exited the dream. Long farewells only prolong the feeling of longing, so it's better to leave as if you'll meet again tomorrow.

[Item usage has ended.]

The dream ended.

As soon as I woke up, I leapt out of Guru. It was the middle of the night. The Earth Spirit Tribe, having walked for several weeks, had fallen into deep slumber.

There shouldn't have been anyone following me, but...

'Hmm.'

I sensed someone desperately trying to keep up with me.

'Gorke, perhaps.'

Despite his words about demons, it seems he has grown fond of me.

'I tried to be distant just for this reason...'

Feeling the weight of the connections formed between people, I increased my pace. Gorke was persistent but couldn't match my speed. The gap between us widened.

After running through the forest for a while, I finally lost his presence.

'Now.'

I let out a roar, shaking my lion's mane.

'By now, the other hunters must be pondering.'

-Pondering?

'Yes. After seeing the Heretic Inquisitor's crazy stunt of staying in the stage, they must be thinking, [Isn't it better to stay and show off as much as possible?].'

It's a game of chicken.

'The problem is, such crazy acts are only possible for the Heretic Inquisitor.'

To endure for hundreds, maybe even a thousand years?

'Only a 130% pure psychopath like the Heretic Inquisitor can do it.'

Moreover, the Heretic Inquisitor has already been disqualified from this stage.

He failed to stop the escape of the slave tribe.

'Eventually, everyone will have to give up and declare [Stage Clear]. The hesitation is just because they feel like they're losing out if they declare it first.'

-Hmm.

The Guardian Spirit nodded.

-So, what will you do?



'In such cases, someone has to make the first move, even at a loss, to encourage others to follow.'

I murmured to myself, having moved far enough from Guru.

'I declare, stage clear.'

Sssshh!

White light enveloped my entire body.

[Stage Clear!]

[You have cleared the 32nd-floor stage.]

[The reward will be tabulated after entering the 33rd floor.]

[Sequential layer progression - You are forcibly transferred to the 33rd floor!]

---

The next moment, I was standing in a white space.

A waiting room before moving to the 33rd floor.

There was already one hunter who had arrived earlier than me, having declared [Stage Clear] first.

"Ahah! You've arrived!"

The Heretic Inquisitor.

The only one who failed the quest and thus failed to clear the stage, was waving his hand.

"I've been waiting for you! King of Death!"

"....."

"I've been working non-stop for 200 years. I gave it my all! Even if I reached the top of the tower, I couldn't have worked harder than when I established the Slime Empire. Do you understand? King of Death, I have shown you all my

capabilities!"

"....."

"And yet, I lost to you."

"You didn't lose to me."

I spoke.

"You lost to all of us."

"It's the same!"

The Heretic Inquisitor shook his head firmly.

"From the top rank to the seventh, it was you who united the fellows. Frankly, it's only fair to say that I didn't even have a momentary insight! I don't include personal bias in my assessments."

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled cheerfully.

"My abilities only go so far! My judgment was inferior to yours. My ethics were less than yours. My competence didn't surpass yours! Relatively, I am more incompetent."

"....."

"Incompetent actions lead to ruin. I don't want to be someone who pushes the button of destruction and calamity! It's only right to leave the decisions and actions to someone more competent."

"What are you saying?"

"A simple logic, King of Death."

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled.

"From now on, I will serve you as my master."

# Chapter 169:

## Between a Master and a Friend (2)

---

Master.

"....."

I gazed intently at my counterpart.

The fact that the Heretic Inquisitor was not using the term 'master' as a mere metaphor or symbol was evident from his beaming smile. Sometimes a boy, sometimes a young man, this man was not one to joke.

Still, I had to probe further.

"Just to clarify, Heretic Inquisitor, when you say you will serve me as your master...."

"I will obey your commands."

The Heretic Inquisitor replied instantly.

"I will kill whoever you wish to be killed, and spare those you wish to be spared! As I said, I will align my judgments and actions with yours."

The Heretic Inquisitor raised his right hand and placed it over his heart, adopting a dignified posture reminiscent of a butler.

"I am quite a useful tool!"

"....."

"A good tool's advantage lies in its consistent performance. Not to boast, but there isn't a more useful tool than me in purging factions, maintaining internal discipline, and keeping a group unified! King of Death, you can always trust and use my abilities!"

In other words,

The Heretic Inquisitor was saying:

[I will never change.]

"Please use me!"

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled broadly.

His confident expression of immutability somehow caused a twinge in my heart.

「 Having gained emotions, I seem to have become a bit mischievous! 」

Because I knew the Heretic Inquisitor had changed.

「 I am becoming addicted to feeling emotions. 」

「 Is this how you always feel living with these emotions? 」

Only I alone.

Even the Heretic Inquisitor himself had not experienced this facet, which I alone remember.

Under a tree shedding its pale magnolia blossoms, the Heretic Inquisitor murmured.

「Had I done this then, or that at that moment. Drifting in such thoughts, wandering, yet still living on like that.」

「That must be why you are so beautiful and lovable.」

「If only I, too, could feel like you...」

The Heretic Inquisitor hadn't forgotten those words.

I could guess the end of the sentence he swallowed, “If only I, too, could have felt emotions like you. Would I have lived a different life?”

Having encountered many psychopaths, I know the



boundary that separates them from others.

It's linked by three fragments of a sentence.

‘If only I, too, like you.’

From the moment these words are uttered,

The Heretic Inquisitor was no longer just a psychopath to me, but a man who had somehow ended up living his current life.

“...Name.”

I spoke up.

“Huh?”

“Your name. Not your alias, your real name. The Sword Saint’s name is Marcus Callenbury, and Viper's name is Liǎofàn.”

And the Countess's real name is 'Nisha'. Unintentionally, the Paladin once referred to the Countess by her real name. However, since she had never told me herself, I pretended not to know.

So far, only the Sword Saint and Viper had revealed their real names to me.

“Heretic Inquisitor, I want to know your name.”

“Ahah.”

The Heretic Inquisitor blinked.

“Is that an order?”

“If I ask you as a favor, will you tell me your name?”

“Yes!”

“Why?”

“We, or rather I, had made a promise with the Black Dragon Witch long ago. [We are strangers who have abandoned the outside world, pouring everything into the Sea of Death – nationality, property, relations, everything. Therefore, let's erase the names given by the outside world and only address each other by names earned in the tower.]”

Indeed.

‘So there was such a promise.’

I was reminded anew that I was not an original member of the tower.

“The Black Dragon Witch has complex feelings towards the outside world. Hating it, despising it, yet yearning for recognition from them. Ahaha. Probably, she is the most emotionally intense person among us!”

The Heretic Inquisitor winked his left eye.

“Anyway, the Sword Saint has left our organization. He doesn't need to abide by that promise! Also, Viper never really cared much about such promises. But I hold promises in high regard. King of Death. If you really want to know the name I had in the outside world...”

The Heretic Inquisitor's eyes widened slightly.

“Please, command me.”

"....."

“I will comply.”

I understood.

This wasn't just about whether or not to say a name.

It was about prioritizing my [command] over the [promise] made among the original members.

It was a pledge of loyalty to me.

‘...Can I take responsibility?’

I pondered.

‘Can I give this man a different life? Can I take responsibility for a psychopath, a man who became a psychopath? The intention is there, the desire too. But do I have the ability?’

I looked down at the Heretic Inquisitor silently.

Without a word, he just waited for my lips to part.

‘In [Tales of Sormewin Academy], I had the opportunity to reform the Heretic Inquisitor. But I failed. I missed the chance. In assisting Raviel, I couldn't spare the effort to take care of this child too.’

If given another chance,

I pondered whether I could offer the Heretic Inquisitor another life.

‘I can.’

I reached a decision.

‘And I want to.’

I nodded.

“Yes.”

Although the second chance has not yet arrived,

Until it does, let’s take responsibility for the child in front of me for the time being.

“Please tell me your name.”

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled lightly.

“My birth name is Bambolina.”

Laughter flowed beneath his golden hair.

“Strictly speaking, it's hard to call it a birth name. It's more

of a nickname!”

Nickname.

“I grew up in the hands of the mafia. The mafia often called me ‘baby doll,’ and that name stuck. Ah, Bambolina means ‘doll’! I was also called KyKna.”

The Heretic Inquisitor cheerfully continued.

“The organization that imprisoned me had its base in Bulgaria. It was an organization with branches in many areas. I was trained to be useful for their business.”

“The reason you specifically used the past tense is because...”

“It no longer exists on earth!”

The Heretic Inquisitor grinned, pulling out a padlock from his pocket. Swish. Swish. The padlock spun on his left hand like a rolling pen.

“I was confined for 11 years. One day, after training, as I lay in bed, a question occurred to me. [I can open the lock on that door. Is there any reason not to?]”

Click.

The padlock in the Heretic Inquisitor's hand made a metallic sound as it opened.

“Upon reflection, I realized there was no reason not to!”

Thus, he escaped.

“I saw no reason not to kill my dedicated watcher. No reason not to assassinate the boss!”

Some people won't act without a reason, but the Heretic Inquisitor certainly belonged to those who would act without one.

“I sowed discord between two high-ranking officers and four lower-ranking ones. I subtly manipulated the scenes to grow suspicion. Indeed, after half a year, they began suspecting it was my doing, but by then, half of the organization was



already decimated!”

The mafia's ‘baby doll’ smoothly entered the Tower.

The Tower gained a creature of terrifying competence.

“...Why choose me as your master?”

“The first reason is, of course, that you, King of Death, are more capable than I.”

The Heretic Inquisitor slowly trailed off.

“The second reason is... because I hesitated.”

“Hesitated?”

“Hmm. Yes... How should I explain this for you to understand?”

Rarely, the Heretic Inquisitor seemed troubled as he furrowed his brows.

“After clearing [Tales of Sormewin Academy], I became somewhat... different. Even when trying to execute terrorists as usual, I couldn’t act as swiftly as before. To others, it might have seemed like only a second's delay, but to me, that one second was significant...”

Lost in thought, the Heretic Inquisitor paused.

“During that second, I recalled the scenes I shared with you at Sormewin Academy.”

"....."

“Strange, isn’t it?”

No.

Not strange at all.

In fact, I am inwardly startled.

‘The influence remained.’

The path where the Heretic Inquisitor fully immersed himself in Goldencup vanished. It was erased. However, even in the new history I forged, he must have felt Goldencup’s emotions, however faintly.

Even if the immersion rate was less than 10%.

Even if it was just 1%.

The little doll undoubtedly experienced ‘emotions.’

“You, King of Death, are my hesitation.”

The Heretic Inquisitor said.

“You occupied a second in my life. It was the first time I experienced such a thing. Maybe with you, seconds in my life could eventually become minutes, then hours!”

The Heretic Inquisitor beamed radiantly.

“I realize now, this must be what they call hope in humanity. Perhaps people always wait for someone else to occupy their time. In that sense, you are my hope!”

“Just because you occupy my time doesn't mean I become lesser. Yes, somehow, I'm certain of it.”

The Heretic Inquisitor handed me a lock.

Rusted with age.

“With you, my monotone melody might be complemented by your rhythm. My simple hum might be added with your lyrics, at least I can imagine it through metaphors.”

I accepted the lock.

“You might turn even a person like me into music, King of Death.”

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled.

“May I choose you as my hope?”

"....."

Heavy.

Frightening words.

The weight and fear are so close that I might fear taking on the Heretic Inquisitor as a burden.

I thought of the weight of Preta, the heaviness of the followers, the weight of Silvia Evanair, and the weight of the Constellation Killer. By the time I considered the weight of the Earth Spirit Tribe, I realized I could take on one more burden.

“Yes.”

The Heretic Inquisitor is my comrade.

“I will be your hope.”

Even if he seems like a beast, it doesn't matter.

Humans, after all, are just beasts aspiring to be people.

Both the child before me and I are on the path to becoming human.

“Without my permission,”

I commanded.

“Do not kill anyone.”

“Yes!”

“Do not torture anyone without my permission.”

“Yes.”

“Without my permission, do not imprison anyone.”

“Understood!”

“When in doubt, talk to me. In return, I will listen without contempt. I won’t look at you strangely. I will think from your perspective, Bambolina. Treat me as your equal.”

"....."

The Heretic Inquisitor clasped his hands over his heart.

For the first time, I felt he was [praying].

“Yes. To you, more capable than me. When you are my hope, I will work for you.”

Fourth in the ranks. Master of the Temple of the Omnipotent God.

The small doll swore loyalty to me.

“I have failed this stage. I cannot join you in the 32nd floor. This time too, arranged temporarily by [The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages], will soon end. I will keep your orders in mind in Babylon!”

“Yes.”

I patted the Heretic Inquisitor’s head.

“Stay put and take care of the house, Mr. Fake Cult Leader.”

“Ahaha-.”

The Heretic Inquisitor laughed.

“I will heed your command, noble sir!”

The Heretic Inquisitor’s figure melted away.

[The Heretic Inquisitor has failed to achieve the quest.]



[The Heretic Inquisitor has been eliminated from the stage!]

Then, in the next moment, my other comrades appeared around me.

Sword Saint. Black Dragon Witch. Countess. Viper. Paladin.

The six of us in the raid team, including myself, looked at each other, puzzled.

“...Something’s different this time. We had to wait a bit even after declaring a clear, huh?”

The Black Dragon Witch spoke.

“King of Death. You were the first to declare a clear. Where have you been until now?”

I smiled.

“Just saying goodbye to the Heretic Inquisitor.”

The path we've walked is not without meaning.

Even if it's unspoken and unseen, somewhere, someone is being influenced by us.

Holding the lock tightly, I spoke.

"Thank you all for your hard work. Let's move on to the next stage."

# Chapter 170:

## Between a Master and a Friend (3)

---

We chatted about the stage we had just conquered, the 32nd floor, how everyone managed to escape Limepolis, and whether they successfully shook off the pursuit...

Of course, there was also some backbiting.

“That Heretic Inquisitor really needs to be dealt with!”

Black Dragon Witch expressed her frustration.

“I can’t fathom what he’s thinking. I mean, I do understand, but that only makes me angrier! Normally, no one would go that far.”

“Well, he’s not normal, so he behaves like that.”

Viper spoke indifferently, his expression not pleasant. Ever since learning that the Heretic Inquisitor had reigned alone for 200 years, Viper had been wearing a face like he'd swallowed something bitter.

“A person who's lived like that all their life isn't going to change now.”

“...There's something more important than that.”

I opened the conversation.

“About the rewards, everyone.”

“Huh? Rewards?”

“Yes. We still haven't received the rewards for clearing the 31st floor, right? We were told that the 31st floor rewards would be given on the 32nd floor, but then the rewards for the 32nd are supposed to be given on the 33rd. The rewards owed to us keep getting deferred.”

“...Hmm.”

Countess tapped her chin with the end of her fan, her eyes gleaming. Among the top rankers, she was particularly sensitive to matters of money and rewards.

“Indeed, that’s true. I remember the tower never owing hunters before. It can’t be that they have nothing to give us, right...?”

“Yep! That can’t be it!”

[The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages manifests.]

Poof!

With a comical sound, the Princess appeared. Not just the sound, but even the location of her appearance was odd. Like a mole, she poked her head up from below. Viper, who was nearby, was startled.

“Whoa?! That scared me!”

“Sorry, sorry. I was a bit delayed because I had some work up above. Ah, being capable sure is a hassle. When you have abilities, they summon you here and there.”

The Princess crawled out of the hole in the ground. As her body emerged, the floor returned to its pristine white state.

“You had work [up above]?”

“Yep, despite appearances, I hold a pretty high position. I have to participate in managing the tower. Anyway, about the rewards?”

The Princess dusted off her knees.

“We're not stingy with rewards. It's just that we planned to give them all to you after you clear the 40th floor.”

Countess raised her eyebrows in intrigue.

“You mean to bundle the rewards for ten floors and settle them together?”

“Yep. There's a reason for that, which you'll find out later.”

The Princess glanced at me.

Constellation was smiling with her eyes.

“Seems like someone already has a hunch about it.”

“Well, but if we're too secretive, I feel bad. Even if we can't give the [Stage Clear Reward] right away, I'll give you something small for now. Ahem. I do have that much discretion!”

The Princess proudly puffed out her chest.

“Let's see. If I neatly divide the race points that the Heretic had and distribute them... Yep, this is how it'll be!”

Swoosh.

A message appeared before us.

[The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages is tabulating points.]

[You have gained 9,160 race points!]

[You currently have 9,190 race points.]

There was a moment of silence.

“...What?”

Black Dragon Witch mumbled in disbelief.

“Ten thousand? Are you sure you didn’t make a mistake? ...  
Ten thousand points?”

My comrades were dumbfounded.

‘That’s more than expected.’

I was surprised too. Considering Black Dragon Witch's reaction, it seemed like each of us received 9,160 points.

“That’s correct.”



The Princess affirmed coolly.

“It’s not favoritism. The Heretic was eliminated, so we just divided his points by six and gave them to you. It’s our principle to favor the winners over the losers!”

“Wait a minute... Are you saying the Heretic Inquisitor had sixty thousand points?”

“Exactly 54,964 points. There were four points left over as interest, which I just gave to Swordy boy. Consider it as a courtesy for the top ranker.”

"....."

We were at a loss for words.

“Huh? Why the long faces?”

The Princess tilted her head, puzzled.

“The Heretic monopolized the stage for 200 years, 6 months,

and 21 days. It's natural for him to have accumulated that many points. Feel free to be happy!"

With a jaunty clap of her hands, the Princess said, "Now we're going to start the 33rd floor stage. Before I accelerate the time in that world, does anyone want to spend their points in advance?"

Sword Saint raised his hand.

"I have a question."

"Yep, Swordy boy. Go ahead."

"What do you mean by 'spend in advance'?"

"It's exactly as it sounds. The world of the race you'll be intervening in... Ugh, it's annoying to call it since it has no name. Anyway, that world is currently on pause. Like a temporary stop, you know? If you use items now, they will affect the history, and the results will show up in the next stage."

The Princess swirled her index finger in the air, tracing

invisible characters.

Purple text began to form in mid-air.

+

[Bronze-rank Technology Invention (Lottery)] - 1,000p

[Silver-rank Technology Invention (Lottery)] -3,000p

[Platinum-rank Technology Invention (Lottery)] -6,000p

+

“If you use these items now, they will be reflected in history, and you’ll see the results in the next stage. You can’t control history in real-time, but from your perspective, the effects of the items will be immediate, so it’s not too bad, right?”

“...Indeed.”

Sword Saint stroked his beard.

“While we can’t fully control history, we can try to influence its flow. Last time we immediately skipped to the next stage without such an opportunity.”

“Ah, yeah. Since the Heretic pulled that trick, I felt a bit sorry for you guys.”

The Princess sighed.

“He just exploited a loophole in the system. It’s my fault for exposing that loophole in the first place. Really, you and Swordy never leave the system alone.”

“Hmm.”

While the Princess grumbled, my comrades began to open the [Civilization Store] and browse through items. I, watching both the Princess and my comrades, was lost in thought.

‘...She smoothly sidestepped the topic of stage rewards.’

My comrades didn't seem to notice anything odd, but having experienced the future once, I know. The continual deferral of rewards is a kind of [hint].

As soon as I mentioned it, the Princess appeared and changed the subject.

'Did she deliberately counter me?'

Our eyes met. The Princess was smiling and waving. There was no hostility on her face, but her intentions were not clear either.

[The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages seeks your understanding.]

Understanding, huh.

'Well.'

I looked at the Princess and nodded silently without a word.

‘Whatever I tell them from start to finish would only deprive my comrades of their opportunities to grow.’

Until now, I've been leading my comrades using my experience of regression as capital. I've wielded the privilege of knowing the future.

However, this privilege also has an expiration date.

‘The Flame Emperor cleared stages up to the 40th floor.’

Beyond that lies the unknown.

Although I know what concept the 40th to 49th floors are based on, and I'm aware that the 50th floor opens a stage shared by all worlds' towers, that's all I know.

From the 51st floor onwards, even I will be stepping into an unknown world.

‘Then... It's problematic to have subordinates who only move as I instruct. I absolutely need comrades who can fill the gaps in my thinking, the parts I haven't considered.’

Hoarding knowledge and experience for oneself.

Like monopolizing food, monopolizing knowledge is also harmful.

It might solve immediate difficulties, but from a broader perspective, it gnaws away at the strength of [our tower].

‘I can't follow in the footsteps of the Flame Emperor.’

I accepted the Princess' understanding.

Let's leave it to my comrades to realize the truth on their own.

They're all people who've struggled like me, even better than me. They'll figure it out on their own.

‘The real question is where to invest the remaining points....’

I carefully examined the [Civilization Store].

In truth, I already had an item in mind to purchase.

‘There’s a reason why I’ve been investing every spare point into it from the 32nd floor.’

I read the item description.

+

[Race Evolution]

Rank: Undecided

Effect: Certain races possess evolutionary potentials. In worlds where aura or magic exists, ecosystems are incredibly complex, leading to dramatic evolution! Aura is the power to materialize will, and changes driven by will are much faster than those driven by natural selection.

Evolution doesn’t guarantee progress in a positive direction. A race that wills destruction may evolve into one that solely commits massacres. Those willing isolation might become completely detached from the world. Choose carefully!



Cost: 8,900 race points (Currently, 1,100 points have been invested....)

Unlock Condition: Your race must acquire at least three identities.

\*Currently, the Earth Spirit Tribe meets the evolution conditions.

+

"I originally thought I could only buy it after the 34th floor, but..."

I sparkled with excitement.

"I can buy it right now."

Race Evolution.

The reason the Earth Spirit Tribe could fight against the [High Elves] raised by the Flame Emperor until the very end.

-Eh?

Guardian Spirit let out a surprised sound.

-Was there such a backstory?

‘Of course. Did you think I chose goblins for no reason?’

-I thought it was out of sympathy for being similar.

‘I did feel that. And still do. But I was serious when I said these guys would soar into the sky one day. I sincerely believed the goblins would rise.’

-Was that for real...?

‘Tsk. As if I would lie.’

-Your life is a lie, you prophet.

Let's call it a white lie.

"Princess."

"Hm?"

"I'll purchase this."

I pointed to [Race Evolution]. The others couldn't see it, but it appeared that the Princess could see the hologram, as she showed interest with an "Heh."

"You really know how to spend points wisely, King. Don't you regret it? You could draw several items like [Bronze-rank Technology Invention] or [Nation-level General]."

"No."

Simply inventing technologies is meaningless if they can't be utilized properly.

Even if a talented individual emerges, it's pointless if they

are hindered by jealousy and cannot rise.

On the other hand, [Race Evolution], benefiting the entire Earth Spirit Tribe, assuredly has a solid effect.

"I'll go with this."

"No regrets?"

"None. Why do you keep asking? Do you wish I chose something else?"

"...That's why dealing with a cheat player is..."

The Princess sighed softly.

"Thanks for the good shopping."

A sound of coins dropping echoed.

[You have purchased 'Race Evolution'.]

[8,900 race points have been spent!]

[You now have 260 race points remaining.]

Okay.

I immediately used the item.

[A tidal shift in the era! The Earth Spirit Tribe undergoes evolution!]

[The status of the Earth Spirit Tribe is changing.]

[You will not be able to confirm the evolved form of the Earth Spirit Tribe until you enter the next stage.]

I smiled contently.

"Okay. One more stage before the final evolution, but we're getting closer to the goal."

The day when goblins stand as the rulers of the world is not far off.

'Ah, the moment when Goruks echo throughout the world and everyone chants Keruk, it ignites a fire in my desolate heart and makes my cold heart flutter.'

-Crazy bastard....

The other comrades also purchased items. Some spent all their points, while others saved for later. Others distributed their points evenly, each with their own shopping methods.

"Is everyone done? Nothing left?"

The Princess looked around and nodded.

"Alright. No dilly-dallying! I'm now going to start spinning the history of that world. Let's see, how many hundred years will pass this time.... Heh? Oh. Huh?"

The Princess blinked in surprise.

"This time, far more time has passed than last time. It's been 660 years since the fall of Limepolis due to the slave uprising."

660 years.

Definitely a leap in time compared to the drastically shortened era by the Heretic.

"The last era's losers, the Mountain Calamity Tribe... oh dear."

"What happened to the Mountain Calamity Tribe?"

"Hmm. Well, you'll find out when you go in."

The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages spread her arms wide.

"Then, I'm now opening the 33rd floor!"

A familiar white light engulfed our sight.

By now, the sensation of the brain swirling was quite bearable.

-Woah!

The next moment, a thunderous roar of battle echoed in our ears.

-Kill them! Sever the filthy tentacles of the snails!

-Charge! Don't allow the enemy any flanking maneuvers! Stick to them till the end!

We found ourselves in the midst of a battlefield.



# Chapter 171: Battle for the Holy Land (1)

---

There are those who liken the sight of humans losing their lives in war to 'flowers splendidly wilting'. I assert that such a person has never actually found themselves in the midst of a battlefield.

-Charge forward! Push through the gates! Krurung, Kreuk!

Right before my eyes, a head was severed, and then, with a crunch, a giant axe crushed a soldier along with his armor.

The sound of flesh tearing, the thunderous crash of metal breaking, the groans of soldiers... On the battlefield, lives bubbled and burst like foam in a heated swamp.

"Wait a moment. What's happening here?"

The Black Dragon Witch spoke in confusion, not startled by the horrors of battle, but rather bewildered by our sudden teleportation into the thick of it.

"Princess, what's going on... She's not here. Does anyone have a quest window open?"

"No."

"Nothing here!"

"How inconsiderate."

The Black Dragon Witch clicked her tongue.

"Are they expecting us to figure out the situation on our own? The [Librarian] might have been a bit odd, but at least a kind Constellation... Sigh. Everyone, let's fly up and survey the situation from above. It'll be clearer then."

With a tap, the Black Dragon Witch jumped off the ground.

"Huh?"

But she didn't take flight.

She frowned, puzzled.

"...What? We can't fly?"

Her observation was accurate.

Up until the 31st and 32nd floors, we had the freedom to fly. We could even observe beyond the horizon. It was as if we had transcended.

‘It seems the real challenge begins now.’

I understood the hidden meaning behind this anomaly.

‘It's actually a good thing. Whether it's skills or powers, if we get too comfortable with them, our senses as hunters dull. In case of any unforeseen accidents, in the worst-case scenario, I can just turn back time.’

I looked around.

Currently, we were virtually invisible. Decapitated heads

soaring through the air, splattering blood, all passed through our bodies freely. Having someone's intestines fly through me was not a pleasant experience, but-

"There are several races involved in this battle, not just one or two."

Focusing, I could easily observe the surrounding situation.

"The Pure Humans Race, the Fairy Tribe, the Ghost Tribe... It's a multi-race coalition. They seem to be fighting each other, but they're actually on the same side. Each race appears to be handling a different military role. The Pure Humans Race forms a shield wall for infantry, the Fairy Tribe are archers... and the Ghost Tribe is the cavalry."

I narrowed my eyes.

"In the air, the Vampiric Tribe is flying around. Hmm, I don't see the Gill Fishes Tribe, but it seems like these are the races that used to be slaves in Limepolis, now united as a coalition."

"Then the enemy is..."

"Yes."

I nodded.

"Most likely the Mountain Calamity Tribe."

The coalition army roared, gradually pushing their formation forward. Surrounded by soldiers, it was hard to grasp the overall progress of the battle, but I could sense that the tide was turning.

"This won't do. If we just stay here, we won't be able to do anything other than befriending corpses."

The Black Dragon Witch grabbed my hand.

"I'll scout with the King. It's hard to regroup if we scatter, so you guys wait here. King of Death, are you okay with this?"

I realized what the Black Dragon Witch intended to do. Teleportation. She planned to scout using her exclusive skill, which could transfer not only herself but also others, provided they consented to the skill's use.

"Yes."

"Good."

Black aura seeped from her, gripping my wrist.

"Teleport!"

The next moment, we were in the air. Below us, thousands of soldiers swarmed like insects. As we began to fall, pulled by gravity, the Black Dragon Witch used her skill again.

"Teleport!"

For a brief moment, our fall halted.

"...Are you going to use teleportation every time we start falling to stay in place?"

"What else can we do if we can't fly? Teleport. I've learned through long experience as a hunter that a skill becomes more convenient the more creatively it's used. Teleport."

"Wow, that's really not stylish at all..."

"Does style feed you? Teleport. I'm busy using my skill, so you take a look at the ground."

"Yes, ma'am."

We managed to achieve a sort of floating step in the void, meticulously surveying the battlefield.

"Huh."

I was soon gripped by a strange sense of familiarity.

"This landscape looks familiar..."

"You're right. I also have this vague feeling of recognition."

"It's not a meeting battle, but a siege."

As we suspected, the Mountain Calamity Tribe was the opposition facing the coalition. They had established their base at the entrance of a massive cave, which seemed to serve as both their fortress wall and gate.

"...Isn't that Limepolis?"

The city remembered for the historic mass escape of slaves.

Now, the former slaves, no longer bound, were attacking it.

---

"It has become a holy land," declared the Sword Emperor.

We shared the information we had gathered.

"I heard soldiers in the Pure Humans Race camp chattering. They were confident that this expedition would surely reclaim the holy land. Since they referred to it as [this] expedition, it seems this isn't their first assault on Limepolis."

"Ah, I got that info too. This is the 6th expedition."



The Viper raised his hand.

"For hundreds of years, coalition forces have been formed repeatedly to pressure the Slime Empire. It's nearly obliterated now, with only Limepolis remaining unconquered."

"Holy land... Another troublesome term."

The Black Dragon Witch pressed her forehead, clearly disgusted.

"If I had to pick the three words I hate the most in the world, they'd be terror, holy land, and heresy. Ahh, at the dawn of the Tower, all sorts of heretics flocked here, shouting, 'This is the true holy land! The Tower of Babel, newly granted by God!'"

"The [Neo Babylonian Church], right?"

The Paladin crossed his arms.

"To be precise, they were the milder ones. I remember the heretics who screamed, 'This is R'lyeh!' and caused chaos."

I tilted my head in confusion.

"R'lyeh? What's that?"

"I'm not entirely sure. It's a city from some novel, said to be sunk in the deep sea."

"But the Tower isn't in the deep sea, is it?"

The Tower exists everywhere and nowhere.

If anything, from the outside world, the Tower is more like a 'mirage'.

No matter where one looks from, whether from Seoul or Busan, from Korea or Chile, the Tower's shadow can be seen on the horizon.

As if beckoning one to flee here.

"These are heretics who take fiction literally. Don't expect rational thinking from them. By the way, some of them are

still active under the banner of the Temple of the Omnipotent God Guild."

"Eh, is that okay? They're lunatics."

"Why do you think we continue to entrust the Temple to the Heretic Inquisitor? To rule over madmen, you need someone even madder than them."

"Indeed..."

The Temple of the Omnipotent God is more chaotic than I thought.

The Black Dragon Witch sighed, surveying the surroundings.

"It would be quickest to leave such problems to the Heretic Inquisitor... Of all times to be eliminated. When he's actually needed, he's not here."

The battle took a brief pause.

Just like the air cools slowly after a hot early summer day, the battlefield, which had been fierce throughout the day, was now quiet under the evening twilight. Soldiers of the multi-racial coalition were preparing their dinner.

"Of all places, it had to be a holy land..."

"It makes sense that Limepolis is considered a holy land."

I chimed in.

"It's the land where the guardian gods of all seven races have descended. It's natural to regard it as sacred. From the Mountain Calamity Tribe to the Pure Humans Race, the Vampiric Tribe, the Gill Fishes Tribe, the Ghost Tribe, and the Fairy Tribe, it would be considered a holy land to all of them."

The Sword Emperor nodded.

"So, the Mountain Calamity Tribe is defending it, while the other races are attempting to reclaim it."

"And it's the last remaining city of the empire... Neither side can easily back down."

For the multi-racial coalition, there's a history of being oppressed as slaves by the Mountain Calamity Tribe. It's a complex mix of faith, grudge, and politics. It's not something that can be easily resolved.

"Ugh."

The Black Dragon Witch groaned.

"It's strange. Before clearing the last stage, I had sternly told the Vampiric Tribe children that there is no god, and even if there is, I am not one. Could my teachings have been lost...?"

"Ah, I did something similar."

I was intrigued by the Black Dragon Witch's words.

"What did you spend your points on, Black Dragon Witch?"

"[Race Evolution]."

Oh.

I thought the Black Dragon Witch would be the type to save and accumulate points, like a frugal hamster.

“That’s quite a big investment. Unexpected.”

"....."

The Black Dragon Witch stared at me blankly, then sighed as if I were clueless.

“...I eavesdropped on your item choice.”

“What?”

“I took your choice as a reference. I thought it must be a good item if you chose it, so I picked the same.”

“Isn’t that too much of a copycat move?”

“Shut up. What’s wrong with following a successful person’s lead?”

“Wow, totally shameless... Vampiric Tribe are intelligent bats, right? It's interesting to think how they might evolve.”

“I don't know. Maybe they'll turn into vampires?”

“Shh.”

The Paladin raised his hand, pointing to one side of the military camp.

“It's getting noisy.”

We immediately fell silent. As the Paladin said, there was a commotion in the coalition camp. Soldiers who were having dinner hurriedly gulped down their naan bread and gathered somewhere.

“Let's check it out.”

We all clung to the Black Dragon Witch and teleported. “Feels like I've become a mother pig...,” she grumbled, but it was the fastest method.

At the entrance of the camp.

There stood hundreds of warriors in formation. These were warriors of a race that was neither the Gill Fishes Tribe, the Vampiric Tribe, the Pure Humans Race, the Ghost Tribe, nor the Fairy Tribe.

A Pure Humans Race commander spoke to them.

“Warriors of the Wetlands, what brings you here? We are an alliance bound by a holy oath to avenge old grievances. Do not intrude here with sword and spear.”

“Ugor.”

The leader of the warriors nodded lightly.

“I am Gerkessada, the 73rd-ranked chief warrior of the Fire River Council and the commander of the vanguard in this expedition. My distant ancestor mined rock salt in Limepolis. Our swords have not yet turned against you, so rest assured.”

The Earth Spirit Tribe.



The race I was guiding appeared on horseback, confronting the coalition camp.

“An expedition? Weren’t the people of the Wetlands declared non-participants in this war?”

“We said we wouldn’t join your expedition, not that we wouldn’t participate in the war.”

An Earth Spirit Tribe warrior spoke calmly.

“The Council decided to join the war, albeit belatedly.”

“What? Joining the war?”

“Ugor. As a noble representative of the Council, I’ve come to inform you of this decision. We have no intention to ambush or betray you.”

Interesting. It’s clear that 600 years have passed.

‘Their way of speaking has become quite archaic.’

Until the last stage, the Earth Spirit Tribe's unique pronunciation was pronounced. But now, the warrior's speech lacked such traces, and

their pronunciation had rounded out, turning 'Goruk' closer to 'Ugo-u'.

-It's not just the speech... They're huge now!

Indeed.

The Earth Spirit Tribe, previously of dwarf stature, had grown nearly twice in size. They were as big, if not bigger, than the Pure Humans Race.

‘[Race Evolution] has successfully occurred.’

Larger than humans but smaller than orcs.

-Krrr.

Even more notably, they rode lions as big as themselves. The

lions snorted, glaring at the Pure Humans Race commander, who stepped back nervously.

-They won't bite.

The Earth Spirit Tribe warrior patted the lion's mane.

-This one is a kind friend. Don't worry.

-What do you mean by joining the war? If you're not with our expedition, does that mean you're siding with the Mountain Calamity Tribe? Make it clear. Are you here as a herald of war?

-By the name of Kekerkker and Gorke, I swear, we are not.

Swearing in the name of Gore as well?

The little guy finally made it big.

-We're only participating to prevent sins committed in the name of the gods.

-Sins? Sins?

-Yes. You are committing a wrong. The guardian gods never wished for us to annihilate the Mountain Calamity Tribe. When we sought revenge during the Great Escape, the gods turned away. Their will is clear and distinct.

The Earth Spirit Tribe warrior bared his teeth.

-Further war is neither honorable nor sacred. Taking away the last refuge of the Mountain Calamity Tribe, who whipped us, is just as cruel.

-What...

-Enough with revenge. Fellow chained ones.

The Earth Spirit Tribe chief warrior spoke.

-Stop the fight. We have come to end this age-old war.

# Chapter 172: Battle for the Holy Land (2)

---

The coalition camp grew noisy.

“End an age-old war...?”

“Not to annihilate the Mountain Calamity Tribe?”

It wasn't a positive uproar. The commanders of the various races, who had been quietly listening to the Earth Spirit Tribe chief warrior, began to express their anger.

“Ultimately, you're siding with the slave masters.”

“Where's this nonsense coming from!”

“Is this why you hesitated to join the war until now!”

“Waiting until both armies are exhausted, then swooping in to claim victory. Are you under the Mountain Calamity Tribe's orders? Aren't you ashamed before the spirits of your ancestors?”

A flood of accusations poured out.

The Earth Spirit Tribe chief warrior didn't blink.

“It doesn't matter what you say. We simply declare what we believe. The Fire River Council held 12 sub-councils and convened 6 major councils. [Driving the Mountain Calamity Tribe to extinction exceeds the bounds of just revenge] was our consensus.”

“Traitors!”

“Go chain yourselves up again!”

“Just you wait.”

Flap.

Bats perched on the wooden fences flapped their wings. Hundreds of bats gathered in one place, soon forming human figures. Vampires cloaked in black mantles – the evolved form of the Vampiric Tribe.

“I am Carayan, a border count from the Firin, leading 1600 elite troops. My ancestors lived in the ceiling of Limepolis, and my mother and grandfather participated in the last expedition.”

“...They really turned into vampires?”

The Black Dragon Witch seemed uneasy, unfamiliar with her race's evolution. Of course, our conversations weren't audible to the inhabitants of this world.

“Warriors of the Wetlands, you were the first to escape Limepolis during the Great Escape. First to rise with stone axes, yet when the opportunity to finish the Mountain Calamity Tribe came, you turned your backs.”

The Vampiric noble, a vampire, bared his fangs.

“According to legend, the Mountain Calamity Tribe's pursuit force inexplicably let you go.”

“.....”

“There are doubts. You’ve consistently refused to join the expeditions since the first, and now you suddenly appear to cry for peace. Perhaps you’ve had a secret pact with the Mountain Calamity Tribe for a long time?”

“That event happened over half a millennium ago. The repelling of the Mountain Calamity Tribe's pursuit was the achievement of Kekerkker and his loyal apostle Gorke. Apostle Gorke, riding on the back of Kekerkker, defeated 13 Mountain Calamity Tribe soldiers in consecutive duels.”

Wow.

‘Our Gorke became an apostle?’

I felt a mix of pride and sorrow. He used to be a kid who hated fighting me, calling me a devil. Now he’s made history.

“The pursuit force’s leader withdrew his troops, impressed by the duel.”

“Huh. How moving.”



The vampire sneered.

“A noble prophet’s duel and the touched enemy leader. A saga worthy of legends. I, being a cynic and clumsy in nature, tend to lend my ear to things like [secret pacts between two forces] rather than [the enemy leader’s sentiment].”

The Earth Spirit Tribe chief warrior made a subtle expression.

“...It was far from an honorable duel. Kekerkker, cunning and brutal, forced the unwilling Gorke to participate.”

Huh?

“Apostle Gorke advised his kin until his death. Kekerkker wasn’t a benevolent transcendental being, but merely a friend who occasionally looked after us. Rude-mouthed and petty, not someone you’d want to keep close.”

What?

“That’s right. If anything, Kekerkker was our ‘bad friend’.”

“To call a god a 'bad friend'! That's blasphemy!”

The Pure Race commander shouted, but the Earth Spirit Tribe chief warrior maintained his sorrowful, hedgehog-with-alpecia-like expression.

“The legends say so. Names for Kekerkker include [The Lion with a Foul Mouth], [The Lover of Beating Hands], [The Advocate of Violent Education].”

"....."

My fellow hunters looked at me intently.

Uh, uh.

Their gaze, their eyes, seemed to question and blame me. It's been a long time since I've seen such a look from my comrades.

“King of Death...”

The Black Dragon Witch began.

“You... I didn't think you were that kind of person. Did you go around hitting kids when we weren't looking? I'm a bit, actually quite, shocked.”

“...They say a person's true nature reveals when they become a parent and raise a child.”

The Paladin glared at me with accusing eyes.

“How much must you have tormented those little goblins for such a legend to be passed down? King of Death, there's only so much to hit on a small goblin body. Reflect on your actions....”

“No, no, no, wait a minute! Stop! Wait a minute!”

I frantically waved my hands.

“I'm innocent! I'm not that violent! You know that!”

“Well, you do have a somewhat headstrong side, don't you...? Why else would such a legend exist?”

“I did hit them, but! That was using the [Appearance in Dreams] item. You know, that item! In dreams, no matter how much you get hit or die, no scars remain, so I used it to educate aura....”

“You mean goblins died in dreams?”

The Paladin widened his eyes. The others murmured.

“Not leaving scars on the body and leaving trauma in the mind are completely different. Mental scars can be more serious. Especially with education through beating and death....”

“[The Lion with a Foul Mouth]....”

“[The Lover of Beating Hands]....”

“[The Advocate of Violent Education]....”

“No, wait a minute. Really, it sounds terrible when you put it like that, but it’s not true! I can’t exactly say what’s wrong, but I didn’t go that far! Really! I just tried to ensure the goblins didn’t lose their beautiful culture. Believe me!”

“Typical self-justification...”

“Reminiscent of domestic violence...”

Ah, ah!

My reputation! My image is being tarnished!

Always reliable, trustable, kind, and competent – my precious image!

-Hey, who are you talking about...?

‘It’s me.’

-You’re fucking insane....

While my noble image shattered, on the other side, the coalition army leaders were also looking dumbfoundedly at the Earth Spirit Tribe chief warrior.

“Descendants of salt stones being mad is well-known, but...”

“To treat the god they worship so crudely, are they sane?”

“Clearly, they’re not worth associating with.”

What's going on? The Earth Spirit Tribe's image is also strange.

It can't all be my fault, right? Probably not.

“Ugor.”

The Earth Spirit Tribe chief warrior sighed.

“We've conveyed the council's will. How you perceive us is none of our concern. But remember, we've come to end this war. Whether it's the Mountain Calamity Tribe or any other, we won't stand by and watch complete annihilation.”

“Do you think we'll just let you do as you please?”

“We always live as we please.”

The Earth Spirit Tribe chief warrior turned the lion’s head.

“Be aware. We are just the vanguard. The council chairman is leading the main force. Lions that drink rain and warriors who love fire are coming. You should be rightly afraid.”

The chief warrior addressed his troops.

“Advance, everyone.”

The Earth Spirit Tribe warriors moved as one. The coalition was at a loss – stopping them meant a fight, but fighting a force that was neither friend nor foe brought no benefit. They fumbled with their bows, unable to do anything, just watching the Earth Spirit Tribe’s departure.

“And.”

Then.

“Them?”

Seeing where the Earth Spirit Tribe was headed, the coalition soldiers stirred. The leaders were shocked.

“They’re setting up camp there?!”

Right in the center between the coalition camp and the Mountain Calamity Tribe’s Limepolis.

In a spot where both sides could hit with catapults, the Earth Spirit Tribe boldly set up camp.

“Ugog. The soil's stickiness here isn’t bad.”

“Just sticky enough to feel good.”

“I’m tired from marching. Someone give me a back rub.”

A stream flowed through the plains. About 400 Earth Spirit Tribe warriors deftly kneaded the river's mud. They relaxed, rubbing each other's backs and drawing patterns on their



bodies, creating a peaceful, leisurely scene reminiscent of a holiday resort. A bathhouse had sprung up in the middle of the battlefield.

To an outsider, it looked like they were just having fun.

“This brazenness...”

“It somehow feels familiar...”

“It reminds me of something I’ve seen a lot...”

My fellow hunters alternated between looking at me and the Earth Spirit Tribe.

No. What. Why.

I really only did good things for the kids.

“Move as per the number drawn.”

After the bath, two Earth Spirit Tribe warriors broke away from the formation.

One towards the coalition forces.

The other towards the Mountain Calamity Tribe.

Just two warriors now occupied the pathways of both armies.

“Ugor.”

An Earth Spirit Tribe warrior, carrying a great sword, eyed the opposing soldiers provocatively.

“Come if you dare.”

“Th-they...!”

Recognizing the intent behind the act and gaze, the coalition army leaders were incensed.

“How impudent! A one-on-one duel challenge?!”

“Typical of the Earth Spirit Tribe! Eloquent in speech, but their actions are barbaric!”

“We are knights upholding the sacred will of the Guardian Spirits. How dare these mixed breeds, babbling about 'bad friends', block our path!”

“Send out a champion! We’ll simply counter with our own warrior!”

Soon, a Fairy Tribe champion mounted a white horse and advanced.

“You moldy runt! Today I’ll bury your stench under the ground!”

The champion, uncharacteristically brawny for an elf, charged at the Earth Spirit Tribe warrior.

“My name is Murmu. Descendant of Kekerkker and the renowned warrior Gorke. Ranked 631st in the Fire River Council. What’s your name?”

“I have no name to give to the likes of you...!”

At that moment, the Earth Spirit Tribe warrior hurled his great sword.

Whirling like a windmill, the massive blade flew through the air.

“What?!”

Startled, the Fairy Tribe champion raised dual swords. Clang! A huge sound echoed as he was unseated. He blocked the blade but couldn't negate its force and was sent flying.

“Cr-ack!?”

Failing to execute a proper fall, the Fairy Tribe warrior screamed. Gasping, he tried to rise, but the Earth Spirit Tribe warrior's lion was already upon him. The lion pressed its paw onto the elf's shoulder.

“Hii....”

“Not stating your name and lineage, such lack of manners. Ugor.”

Thud!

The Earth Spirit Tribe warrior simply directed the lion to crush the elf's face. In an instant, the unknown Fairy Tribe warrior's head was obliterated. The lion, growling contentedly, scraped its paw on the ground.

A duel concluded in a blink.

“Hee-hee-hing!”

The riderless white horse neighed, running pitifully towards the horizon. It could have been a picturesque scene, but then,

“Hee-hing?!”

An Earth Spirit Tribe warrior threw a spear, catching the white horse. The plains quieted. The spear-wielding Earth Spirit Tribe warrior hurriedly dragged the horse back. Realizing his impulsive act as the coalition forces stared, he sheepishly bowed.

“Sorry. I was hungry...”

“.....”

“Thought it’d be a waste to let it go. Meat is precious. Anyway, that’s what I think. Keep dueling.”

He casually returned to the Earth Spirit Tribe camp.

His bow was impeccably polite.

“.....”

The coalition leaders were speechless.

“That....”

“Despicable creature!”

“Could there be anyone more ignorant in the world!”

“A dishonorable fight! Throwing a sword in a duel! Is that a warrior’s way?”

“If you’re aggrieved, throw your sword too. Ugor.”

The Fairy Tribe slayer snorted disinterestedly.

“And we’ve always been ignorant.”

“What?”

“Since childhood, our brothers beat us to learn aura. We’re a lowly tribe; if we can’t use aura, we might as well die. They beat us so we’d rather die, but their beatings were so precise we couldn’t. Keep getting hit, and at some point, you comprehend aura.”

“Choosing a brother who beat you and beating them back is our rite of passage to adulthood.”

The Earth Spirit Tribe warrior gazed at the dusk sky.

His eyes, bright and sorrowful, couldn't be expressed in words.

“Can't believe such an ignorant tribe exists, even I, a member of the council, find it unbelievable...”

“.....”

“But it's necessary. It's the best way. There's no more efficient method to learn aura than to suffer near death. This is the teaching handed down directly by Kekerkker to the noble apostle Gorke 600 years ago.”

The warrior mumbled.

“We call this, borrowing Kekerkker's words, [The Damn Aura Inheritance Method]. Truly damn.”

The Earth Spirit Tribe comrades echoed in unison.

“Friendship over idols! Trust over faith! Damn!”



“Damn!”

“Damn!”

The warrior nodded.

“Our tribe’s grief is deep and vast. There are no gods in this world, only bad friends. So we must do well. We have no choice but to do well. Those who were chained together in the past. Stop the war. Don’t lead the Mountain Calamity Tribe to extinction.”

“.....”

“Otherwise, you’ll die by our hands.”

The plains fell silent.

I fell silent.

My fellow hunters did not.

“That’s the King of Death...”

“It’s totally him...”

“King of Death, why are you there?”

“Since when did you grow fangs and paint your skin green,  
King of Death?”

Wait.

What exactly has become of my image?

# Chapter 173: Battle for the Holy Land (3)

---

‘How can this be so unfair...’

Maybe this is the karma one must bear as a parent? If a child does well, it's their own merit; if they don't, it's the parent's fault.

Ah, Raviel. Maybe it's better for us not to have children. I don't think I can handle it. Imagine a child resembling Raviel saying, ‘Daddy, damn it!’...

Wait?

‘Maybe that'd be kind of cute in its own way?’

-Crazy bastard... Maybe there really is something wrong with his brain...

‘Open Earth Spirit Tribe status.’

Imagining a happy future, I reviewed the newly evolved state of the Earth Spirit Tribe.

+

[Earth Spirit Tribe]

Extinction Grade: C (Safe)

Maxim: ‘We are fire.’

Political System: Republic

Description: What an incredible turn of events! The Earth Spirit Tribe has undergone a remarkable evolution. They have established a very special civilization, the [Aura Civilization]!

For the Earth Spirit Tribe, an adult is none other than [one who can use aura]. Politicians, artists, warriors - everyone’s success depends on their ability to use aura.

Once an Earth Spirit Tribe member masters aura, they immediately join the council after the next full moon. The Fire River Council comprises all adult members of the Earth Spirit Tribe, deciding all major and minor matters of the tribe. Those who use aura are [adults], [citizens], and [council members].

The council's ranking is determined by how skillfully one can use aura. The top rank, the one most adept at using aura, serves as the chairman.

‘Damn Aura.’

Simply put, the strongest person leads the tribe!

On moonless nights when darkness envelops everything, the Earth Spirit Tribe gathers. Ugly appearances and evil fangs hidden in the dark, that’s when the Earth Spirit Tribe solemnly discusses the fate of their kind.

‘Chairman. I really don't think that solution is right.’

‘Disagree?’

‘I do.’

‘Then come at me.’

‘I shall.’

Despite everyone contributing to discussions, the Fire River Council boasts remarkable efficiency and speed, possible only because the chairman is the tribe's strongest warrior.

It's unbelievable to have such a primitive battle tribe.

If someone is responsible for creating such a tribe, they might need some time for reflection!

Traits: [Republican Tradition], [Bad Friend Doctrine], [Damn Aura Inheritance Method], [Blood Fire], [Legacy of Records], [Competitive Spirit]

Evolution: Unknown. One evolution remains.

Alias: Hopgoblin, etc.

+

Hmm.

Umm.

Right.

I smiled broadly inwardly.

‘Yay, the goblins have evolved into hopgoblins! That's great!  
So cool!’

-Zombie, is that all you have to say?

‘Damn, how did this happen...?!’

I held my head.

‘All I did was ensure they didn’t lose [Blood Fire], and

somewhat positively redirected [Greed]!’

-Positive direction spun full circle into madness.

‘No, no, it wasn't wrong. Now that I think about it, at least hundreds, maybe thousands, have learned to use aura. Isn't that amazing? Unexpected, but a delightful miscalculation. It's definitely me.’

-A parent who failed in parenting now justifying themselves... This guy...

I looked at the Earth Spirit Tribe's traits. 600 years is a long time. Traits that weren't there in the past had been added.

For instance, [Republican Tradition].

+

[Republican Tradition]

Category: Politics



Origin: [Blood Fire]

Description: The Earth Spirit Tribe has established a republic. This system originated from the Earth Spirit Tribe's unique [Blood Fire]!

Whenever someone died, the Earth Spirit Tribe would gather in underground caves to hold a meeting. The darkness of the caves hid each member's appearance. Though they held funerals to escape the oppression and surveillance of the Mountain Calamity Tribe – unwittingly, they experienced [the veil of ignorance].

In the dark.

The Earth Spirit Tribe freely discussed.

‘How did this person die?’

History.

‘Was this person's life righteous?’

Judgment.

‘How should we respond to this death?’

Ethics.

‘Is Kekerkker a lion bastard or a dog bastard?’

Philosophy.

Over time, the Earth Spirit Tribe began discussing not just the dead but also the living. After escaping the caves, meetings were held every new moon. Naturally, the consensus reached here was regarded as the tribe's will, and the meetings became a council.

Unlike other councils, eloquence is not crucial here.

‘Ugor. It’s a pity. There seems to be a significant difference in perspective between us.’

‘If I smash one of your eyes, the difference in perspective

disappears.'

'An excellent solution.'

Survival of the strongest!

In some ways, the Earth Spirit Tribe's council is still a funeral hall!

\*However, this trait may change depending on the course of history.

+

Mixed.

Something very heterogeneous... got mixed up.

'Strongest survive, but it's not a dictatorship, and the council exists, but ranks are decided by power, not words. What's this? Something is odd...'

-Isn't this all the result of your education?

The Guardian Spirit clicked his tongue.

-Your foreign policy in a nutshell is either [talk first, then fight] or [talk, but still fight]. Exactly like Kim Zombie.

'Is this... my true self...?'

-Of course. Parents learn about themselves while raising their children.

Shock.

Apparently, I'm more of a maverick than I thought.

"Hmm. As befitting the King of Death's tribe, they are quite adept at fighting."

The Sword Saint looked out over the plains.

“It's already the third duel, but without switching warriors, the Earth Spirit Tribe has won them all. There doesn't seem to be a huge gap in martial skills. It appears to be a difference in aura proficiency.”

As the Sword Saint said, the duels continued. Both the coalition and the Earth Spirit Tribe sent warriors in turns. However, every time a duel occurred, the Earth Spirit Tribe's warrior came out victorious.

The Black Dragon Witch muttered.

“It's surprising. I underestimated goblins. Despite their appearance, their use of aura is quite elegant.”

“Ahem.”

“... King of Death, why are you suddenly doing the shoulder dance? It's unseemly to look at. As the person in charge of your fashion, I'm somewhat despairing.”

“Seeing the kids doing so well naturally gets me excited. By the way, Black Dragon Witch, speaking of fashion, why do I have to wear this tightly wrapped black leather outfit? It's kinda like... juvenile. Internet searches on my fashion are so polarized...”

“It suits you. You look good in leather.”

“You’re not just projecting your preferences, are you?”

“Of course not.”

The Black Dragon Witch spoke nonchalantly.

“I objectively coordinated what suits you best. No personal feelings involved.”

The doubts deepened, and the night followed suit.

-Damned moldy bastards!

The coalition’ leadership ground their teeth in humiliation. They were shivering in disgrace. Despite continuously sending warriors all night, the results were disastrously one-sided.

-Four of ours die for every one of them.

The vampire lamented.

-They might be the vanguard, but this ratio is alarming. Even considering they only picked the elite... The discrepancy is too great.

The leadership of the multi-race coalition glared fiercely.

-The Mountain Calamity Tribe is in a similar situation. Damn it. They've planted their eggs right in the middle of the battlefield...

-Are we going to play into the hands of these moldy creatures? We are engaged in a Holy War! We are upholding the will of the gods! We must ignore these moldy creatures and launch a full-scale attack!

-So, you're suggesting we declare war on the Earth Spirit Tribe? That's foolish.

-What? Foolish?

-Charging in blindly, driven by emotion, only benefits the Mountain Calamity Tribe. Didn't the moldy creatures say

they're just the vanguard? The Earth Spirit Tribe's king, the chairman, is leading the main force. According to legends, the king of the Earth Spirit Tribe is a monster capable of altering waterways and controlling flames single-handedly. If they attack us, there's no answer.

The vampire sighed bitterly.

-Mountain Calamity Tribe in front, Earth Spirit Tribe behind... It's a route to annihilation. At least the Mountain Calamity Tribe is probably making the same calculation. It's a deadlock.

-Hmph. So what are you suggesting?

A Ghost Tribe commander hissed. The Ghost Tribe had been oppressed by the Mountain Calamity Tribe longer than any other. Their hatred ran deep.

-We almost captured Limepolis, and now you want us to give up? What about the cost of the expedition? Go back to our homeland without any achievements? That's ludicrous. What will we say to the soldiers who died loyally and to the citizens who contributed? Are you really generals!

-.....



The commanders fell silent.

The next day, and the day after that, duels continued. Occasionally, an Earth Spirit Tribe warrior would lose their head, but three times as many bodies from the coalition and the Mountain Calamity Tribe were severed.

The Earth Spirit Tribe had achieved their goal of [blocking the battle between the coalition and the Mountain Calamity Tribe].

Finally, on the fourth day.

-Ugor.

Hundreds of Earth Spirit Tribe members sniffed the air.

-The wind carries the scent of mud.

In four days, a hundred Earth Spirit Tribe members had died. Slightly fewer warriors than a few days ago, they raised their heads in sequence, looking beyond the plains.

-The familiar scent of earth.

-The smell we rolled in and inhaled through our mouths.

-The fragrance of Guru.

Their sense of smell was accurate.

Shortly after, an army appeared on the horizon.

About three thousand warriors, each mounted on a lion, approached. Not just the warriors, but the lions' bodies were also engraved with strange tattoos. From a distance, it seemed as if wriggling tentacles were moving closer.

-Boo-oo-oo.

The leading warrior blew a horn. Only then did the soldiers of the multi-race coalition and the Mountain Calamity Tribe warriors in Limepolis look toward the horizon.

An army marching with the sun at their back.

-Boo-oo-oo-oo.

The horn's sound continued eerily. Among them were horns made from the Mountain Calamity Tribe's shells, horns from the single horns of the Ghost Tribe, and even horns decorated with the skulls of Pure Humans and the teeth of vampires.

These were the traces of battles they had won.

At the forefront of the army, especially a warrior mounted on a massive white lion.

“Wow.”

Viper commented.

“That's not just a king, that's a Demon King's aura. Hey, King of Death. You've surpassed the Demonic Cult and raised a Demon King. Congratulations.”

The leader of all Earth Spirit Tribe.

The chairman of the Fire River Council led the warriors into battle.

---

-Greetings to all!

Koo-woong!

A building pillar-sized axe embedded itself in the middle of the battlefield. The Earth Spirit Tribe chairman casually stepped on the axe blade. The chairman's aura-enhanced voice shook the heavens and earth.

-Bright and shining lives like stars of this world! I am the 212th chairman of the Fire River Council, Uburka!

A face brimming with dignity. Muscles rippling over his body. As if to show off his experience in slaughter, a large scar marred one side of his face. The chairman spread his arms wide, proudly displaying the essence of his being through his chest muscles.

-Life is full of hardships even today, damn!

His words didn't quite match his imposing appearance.

-Isn't life's harshness experienced by everyone, while its blessings are not, damn? We seven races may look different but share the same damn hardships, making us compatriots, damn it!

The fellow hunters murmured.

“What's with the Earth Spirit Tribe and 'damn' at the end of every sentence?”

“Not sure. Guess it's like 'thingy'. Could mean anything or nothing.”

“King of Death... your teaching methods are...”

I yearned for a child resembling Raviel.

No, I just want to see Raviel. Forget the child. I don't need one...

As I indulged in escapism, the Earth Spirit Tribe chairman's speech grew more passionate.

-Indeed! We are compatriots damn it! In my left pectoral, the soul of the Earth Spirit Tribe resides, and in my right, the love of my compatriots, damn! Behold! My chest muscles swell with soul, love and damn!

His metaphor was awful.

It was a bit too much.

Actually seeing the bulging green muscles made me feel slightly nauseous. What was this muscle pig with muscles in his brain as well as his body? A passing orc would probably involuntarily shout, 'Bro!' at this muscle pig.

"Resorting to such inappropriate flirting..."

"More I see, the more he resembles the King of Death..."

"I am really not like that!"

The multi-race coalition and the Mountain Calamity Tribe quietly watched the chairman from both sides of the battlefield. Despite being enemies, the expressions of soldiers from both armies were similar. They all looked as if they were staring at a madman.

-However! I am! Very sad! Damn!

The madman wore an expression of deep anguish.

-Even if the Mountain Calamity Tribe committed unforgivable sins six hundred years ago, how can exterminating an entire race be the way to atone, damn? It's not right! Not just! Not beautiful! Not damn! And to wage war in Limepolis, a place you call holy. That's not sacred at all! Damn! We define this as a damn situation and hereby declare our participation in the war!

Following the chairman's declaration, Earth Spirit Tribe warriors shook their weapons up and down.

-Damn! Damn! Damn!

-Listen, seven races!

The leader of the madmen spoke.

-It's not bad to have groaned under the Mountain Calamity Tribe as slaves! What can we do if you want to avenge your ancestors? Damn. The Mountain Calamity Tribe isn't bad either! What can we do if they don't want to be annihilated and resist, damn?

The multi-race coalition and the Mountain Calamity Tribe stirred. Comments like, 'What's this madman saying?' or 'With all this talk about moldy creatures, has he really grown mold in his brain, Lime?' They all collectively expressed disbelief.

-Yes! You're not bad!

The following words silenced the seven races.

-What's bad is the Holy Land!

All soldiers looked at the chairman's mouth in disbelief.

-There are no gods in this world. There shouldn't be any holy land. Damn, yet, everyone clings to false beliefs and burns



their convictions in these bottomless pits, pouring their bright lives into nothingness! It's all the fault of the Holy Land, damn it! Therefore, the Fire River Council has decided as follows!

The coalition' leadership was flustered. Regardless, the Earth Spirit Tribe chairman crossed his arms and declared.

-We will destroy the Holy Land!

The leaders fell silent.

-The Holy Land can't be shared! It only leads to more fighting! So, let's all participate in destroying it!

-.....

-If we can't forgive others for having it, then no one should have it. This is natural logic! Let's completely obliterate Limepolis so that no one can occupy it or live there! Come! Seven compatriots! Let's destroy the Holy Land together and create a world of happiness for us all!

Just like descendants following their ancestor's footsteps.

The tribe I raised has returned as complete madmen.

# Chapter 174: My Son is Too Strong (1)

---

-That is our proposal, my compatriots! What say you?

The Earth Spirit Tribe's Chairman, Uburka, laughed heartily.

-Isn't it a perfect solution?

-.....

-It's so perfect that everyone seems to have lost their words. Ugor. I understand! It's natural for human vision to be narrow, focused on immediate troubles, unable to conceive simple solutions. Be grateful! We have descended to gift you with a fresh solution!

Too fresh, almost raw, it's likely to cause stomach trouble if consumed.

Both the multi-race coalition and the Mountain Calamity Tribe, each looked as if they were chewing on plastic trash. A Celestial Clan commander from the coalition scoffed in disbelief.

-Crazy, those ignorant mold freaks are at it again....

-That's alright. We deeply understand your pettiness.

Chairman Uburka solemnly nodded.

-No matter how perfect the solution, it's hard to accept it suddenly. It must feel like a defeat, an involuntary submission. Humans hate to lose, more precisely, they hate the feeling of losing. Poor things.

-No....

-So, we'll overwhelmingly defeat you!

Uburka extended his left arm, and an Earth Spirit Tribe warrior approached to offer a spear.

Closing his eyes, Uburka slowly assumed a stance.

-Hmm.

His eyes snapped open.

The muscles in his left arm rippled.

-Huh!

A beam shot forth.

It was a beam of red light, no other way to describe it.

Enveloped in a bloody aura, the spear was launched – no, shot forth.

Koooung!

A spear throw.

Chairman Uburka's posture was as elegant as an Olympian, but the spear's power was anything but elegant. It was savage and destructive. The spear crashed into the coalition's encampment with a thunderous roar.

Soldiers screamed. A dust storm ensued. No one was injured directly by the spear, but the chaos of soldiers tumbling and trampling over each other ensued.

And it didn't end there.

-Huhup!

Uburka grabbed another spear and this time aimed at the Mountain Calamity Tribe's Limepolis. Leaving a red trail across the plains, the spear hit the city walls squarely. The thick wall was penetrated as if the spear was a screw drilling in.

-.....

The dokkaebi commander who was previously gesticulating stood frozen.

-.....

The Mountain Calamity Tribe soldiers were also flabbergasted.

-I am, in the 600-year history of the Earth Spirit Tribe, the strongest chairman ever.

With his declaration, Chairman Uburka showed his fangs.

-No Earth Spirit Tribe warrior before me was stronger. I have been granted martial prowess by the heavens. My official record is 261 battles, 260 victories, and since adulthood, I have never knelt in defeat. Warriors of our time, lament! Your lives will be overshadowed by my existence.

-Ugor! Ugor! Ugor!

-As you can see, our Earth Spirit Tribe warriors are already significantly overshadowed!

Uburka folded his arms.

-On the next full moon, representatives from the coalition and the Mountain Calamity Tribe should gather here. Come and hold a meeting. We, the Earth Spirit Tribe, will ensure your safety. You can take this as a threat if you like! If you don't gather, I'll launch spears like earlier.

It was not a proposal, but a threat.

-Where my spear will land next, nobody knows. Not me, not you, not even Kerkerkker! It might strike the heads of your commanders, or it might pierce the gates of the Mountain Calamity Tribe, oh compatriots. Please don't push me to extremes. Even I fear my own power...

Ugor, he hefted his axe onto his shoulder.

-Until the full moon rises, we will continue accepting duels. Unleash your anger as much as you want. If you wish, launch a military assault, as long as you're prepared for the consequences!

Then, a voice from the Tower spoke in my head.

[Seven races feel fear towards a single warrior.]



[The leader of the race you guide has ascended as a new Hegemon!]

[An amazing achievement!]

[You have earned 900 race points.]

[You currently have 900 race points.]

My son has grown too formidable.

---

We roamed the camp, gathering information. Useful and useless alike, but if I were to summarize the rumors about the Earth Spirit Tribe, it would be:

[World-class crazies].

They appeared that way to my eyes, too.

According to the soldiers' gossip, the Earth Spirit Tribe lived quietly, tucked away, but would emerge out of nowhere during

"world crises."

A hundred years after the slaves' great escape, when the Mountain Calamity Tribe Empire embarked on a grand conquest, it was the Earth Spirit Tribe that thwarted them.

‘What kind of legendary tribe is this?’

But they were my children.

“That guy, if pushed, might even take us on....”

Viper glanced sideways at the Earth Spirit Tribe's camp with his one eye.

Continuous duels were still happening on the plains. Chairman Uburka hadn't stepped in personally. He just casually watched the duels, arms folded, but his presence was immense. Aura continually surged around him.

"Hey, hey. It's not just a duel. If we're careless, we might be utterly defeated."

I pointed out the fact.

“Didn't you hear him talk? He's said to be the strongest in the history of the Earth Spirit Tribe. His martial talent is unprecedented, probably even higher potential than ours.”

“Hey, hey. But we're like their guardians! It'd be embarrassing to get beaten by our own kids!”

“That's fine, isn't it? We didn't become their guardians because we were stronger....”

“You're calm because they're your kids!”

Uburka.

Maybe, just maybe, I might end up needing help from this child. Thinking this, I said,

“Anyway, there must be a reason why this stage was chosen at this time. We have to figure out the clear conditions on our own since no quest has appeared.... Likely, one of the six races, excluding the Mountain Calamity Tribe, is in danger of decline.”

“Huh.”

Black Dragon Witch nodded.

“That's right. My thoughts are similar. One race, or perhaps multiple races, are in danger of collapsing. Like the last stage was about [whether six races collapse or the Mountain Calamity Tribe does].”

“Indeed. Each stage seems to risk the downfall of at least one race....”

“Yep. And the hunter governing that race will also fall alongside.”

Paladin stroked his chin.

“That makes sense. So, which race is closest to collapse now?”

“Certainly not the Mountain Calamity Tribe.”

Countess folded her fan.

“The snails already fell in the 32nd-floor stage.”

“The Earth Spirit Tribe is out too. Given their current momentum....”

“No, it's not that, Paladin.”

"Uh?"

Paladin tilted her head.

“What do you mean?”

“On the contrary, I suspect it's the Earth Spirit Tribe that's in danger of collapsing.”

We all blinked in surprise.

“The Earth Spirit Tribe? Those muscle pigs?”

“Unlikely.”

“Hear me out.”

Countess tapped her fan handle against her palm.

“They'll likely achieve the 'peace negotiation' they desire. Their military strength is formidable, and both the coalition and the Mountain Calamity Tribe are too preoccupied with each other to attack them. But? What about after the negotiation?”

Countess's eyes narrowed.

“Until now, all races would have united against the Mountain Calamity Tribe as a common enemy. Unity forms when there's a shared adversary. However, after a forced peace negotiation, the common enemy will inevitably change. Think about it. Who would that be?”

I spoke up.

“...The target shifts from the Mountain Calamity Tribe to the Earth Spirit Tribe.”

Frowning, I continued.

“The Earth Spirit Tribe is too powerful. The leaders of each race can't help but feel threatened. They will either disband the alliance and acknowledge the Earth Spirit Tribe's hegemony, or maintain the alliance and engage in a power struggle with them.”

“Oh, that makes sense.”

Countess smiled slightly.

“That's what I think as well. Unless they are incredibly foolish, it's unlikely the alliance will dissolve voluntarily. Probably, they'll conspire in the manner of [The current King of the Earth Spirit Tribe is too strong; let's just wait until he dies].”

“Hmm.”

“Hmm....”

My fellow hunters pondered.

“Right now, the Earth Spirit Tribe is indeed strong. But there's no guarantee they will remain so for the next generation, or the one after that, and so on. Didn't that muscle pig declare? No one in their history has been stronger than him. Maintaining hegemony is much harder than achieving it.”

Indeed.

I was aware of the fact that [at least one race would fall]. I had read the strategy guide before regressing. Countess had pointed out that the Earth Spirit Tribe might be in danger based on my hint.

‘Yes, this is teamwork.’

We complement each other's thoughts.

Feeling happy inside, I asked candidly.

“What should we do, Countess?”



“Simple, King of Death. We must cast a spell to maintain hegemony.”

Countess flashed a feline smile.

“It’s obvious the Earth Spirit Tribe lacks sophisticated political power. They’re headstrong but have a clear direction. Directed power is not violence but authority. Someone will want to seize that power.”

“What do you mean?”

“Hehe. Remember how our guild leaders treated you?”

Countess tapped my shoulder with the edge of her fan.

“You were an unprecedented super rookie. We could have feared you, been wary, and excluded you. But what happened?”

I pondered.

“They used me. More precisely, they bought my name value. In return for cooperation, I demanded equal treatment.”

“That's right. It was a win-win. The Earth Spirit Tribe certainly has tremendous power. If the other races see that power as [beneficial to them], the Earth Spirit Tribe won't face downfall.”

"....."

“Do you get a sense of what to do?”

“Yes.”

I nodded my head.

“I certainly do.”

I had taught the Earth Spirit Tribe how to endure the world.

Now, it was time to teach them how to bestow upon the world.

---

[You have purchased 'Appearance in Dreams'.]

[100 race points will be used!]

[You currently have 800 race points.]

That night.

I immediately used the item and entered the dream of the Earth Spirit Tribe's Chairman, Uburka.

I needed to warn him that the Earth Spirit Tribe might be in danger if the peace negotiation went ahead. They might be acknowledged as hegemonic for now, but they would face a crisis afterward.

-Ugor.

In his dream, Chairman Uburka was sitting in the middle of a mud pond, in a perfect meditative pose.

‘Is he meditating in a dream?’

Sitting above the water surface without sinking, Uburka masterfully manipulated his aura.

‘A martial talent that would make my master drool...’

As I approached, Chairman Uburka spoke.

-Who is there?

Uburka's eyes were closed. He sensed my presence purely through sensation and aura. Truly the demeanor of a peak expert.

-My muscles are twitching. I sense no malice from you, but something significant.

“Detecting hostility with muscles...?”

-Ugor. It is said, mind and body are one. When a person is angry, the facial muscles twitch first. Emotions pass through

muscles and are conveyed by them. Why shouldn't I sense hostility through them?

"....."

What is this guy?

Not only talented in martial arts but also a master at bullshitting?

“Uburka, listen to me. I am Kerkerkker, whom your people revere as the bad friend, the one who led you out of the jungle and subtly helped you leave Limepolis.”

-Ho?

For the first time, Uburka opened his eyes.

His bright red pupils pierced through me.

-You claim to be Kerkerkker?

“That’s right. Earth Spirit Tribe Chairman. I am the one who helped your people escape from the jungle and aided you in leaving Limepolis.”

-Interesting!

The Chairman laughed, Ugor, Ugor.

-According to the tales passed down, the ancient apostle, Gorke, met Kerkerkker in dreams. He got beaten every time. Are you, claiming to be Kerkerkker, here to thrash me?

“No... Uh, kid. You don’t seem the type to get beaten. Honestly, I’m not even sure if I could win in a fight....”

Chairman Uburka furrowed his brow.

-What? If not for a duel, why seek me out?

“I came to warn you that your tribe might be in danger.”

Then I shared Countess's theory. It was plausible, and I

agreed with it, so the story flowed smoothly.

-.....

Initially amused by my presence, Chairman Uburka's expression grew serious as the story progressed.

-So, we might collapse because we are too strong?

“Not collapse, but there is a possibility of decline. No matter how strong you are, you can't handle five or six races alone.”

-Um. Indeed...

“That's why my advice is this. Uburka, don't forcefully demand peace negotiations. You must give the other races a reason and benefit. I think...”

-Wait.

Chairman Uburka raised his left hand.

-Stop right there.

"Eh?"

-Your lack of malice is clear. My biceps and chest muscles are quiet. If there was even a bit of falsehood in your words, my muscles would have twitched.

What kind of horror is this?

Ego muscles surpassing Ego Sword?

-But, that doesn't mean I will take your advice. We, I, don't listen to those weaker than us.

"What?"

-Only those stronger than others can interfere in their affairs.

Chairman Uburka unfolded his legs and stood up gracefully, causing hardly a ripple in the mud pond with his perfect aura



control.

-Attack me!

He beckoned with his left index finger.

-If you defeat me, I'll listen to your advice!

Uh.

Stunned by his absurd proposition, I didn't immediately react, so he stepped onto the water's surface.

-Come at me, or I'll come to you!

“Wait a second. I'm your guardian, your eternal friend, almost like a father, and you really want to fight me?”

-If you're truly Kerkerkker, then you're the one who thrashed your almost-son, Gorke. A father should receive what he has given to his child. I won't complain even if I get beaten by you!

Insane.

But he's not wrong?

-Prepare yourself! Father, or maybe not!

Spouting epochal parricidal lines, the greatest muscle pig launched his fist at me.

# **Volume 8 – Chapters 175-198**

# Chapter 175: My Son is Too Strong (2)

---

“This brat?!”

I hastily grabbed the Holy Sword. There was no time to draw the blade, so I blocked the muscle pig's punch with the sheath itself. Kwaang! Aura clashed ferociously against aura.

-Ho?

I deliberately absorbed the momentum, retreating a good distance. The gap between Uburka and me widened. I used the spatial gap as a temporal buffer, gripped the sword hilt, and assumed my stance, ready to counter any sudden charge.

-Good. Very good!

Uburka smiled contentedly.

-For someone with such delicate muscles, you're quite good. Have you added the weight of your soul to your body's weight?

“I always focus on internal muscles, you rude brat!”

-Ugor? Internal muscles? What is that?

“It means I look slim on the outside, but my inner muscles are solid! They maintain my physique while boosting my strength immensely. Internal muscles are the mark of a true master. Your style of muscles bulging outward is nothing but low-level!”

-Kekerkker is barking like a dog...

Chairman Uburka displayed a look of disbelief, and for a moment, his breathing slowed.

When faced with absurd nonsense, the human brain stiffens.

Seizing the moment of disrupted breathing, I swiftly lunged towards Uburka.

-Hmm!

Uburka's red eyes widened in surprise. He was significantly larger than an average Earth Spirit Tribe member, offering more spots to hit. I wrapped aura around the sheath, swinging it like a club.

“Sorry, kid! I’ll go easy on you!”

Chairman Uburka grinned.

-Ugor.

He looked down at me as I dived into his embrace. Just watching. Without twisting his body or guarding with his arms, he let my sheathed sword strike his torso.

Kaaang-

An unimaginable sound echoed. It wasn’t a thud or a slash, but a clang, as if striking solid metal. My palm tingled from the impact.

“Indestructible Iron Skin?!”

-My body is made of muscles.

Uburka revealed his fangs and chuckled.

-I was born with albinism. Sunlight irritated me, and my poor eyesight was a hassle. I couldn't even smear mud on myself under the scorching sun. I wondered why I couldn't enjoy simple pleasures easily. Then, one day, I realized!

Uburka spread his arms.

-If I covered my body with aura, there's no problem!

Insane.

-Since that day, I dedicated myself to aura training. First, I practiced coating my entire skin with aura, even if just for a second. One second, two seconds, three seconds, one minute, two minutes, three minutes... When I could maintain it for over an hour, I became an adult, and when I reached over a day, I ascended as Chairman. To me, Uburka, congenital deficiencies were but minor obstacles!

The Hobgoblin struck a bodybuilder's pose.

His biceps undulated.

"Ugh."

If I had eaten something greasy, my stomach would have revolted at the sight of such a distasteful and perilous throbbing.

-I trained my muscles to be infused with aura! When muscles tear, aura aids regeneration. Reconstructed this way, muscles become better conduits for aura. By tearing and regrowing, I achieved the ultimate muscles!

Ulk! Bulk!

Uburka's left and right chest muscles took turns bulging.

Remarkable. My eyes and psychological defenses are taking severe damage. He's causing damage without even touching me, a truly peak-level master.



-At last, I gained control over every muscle, from the smallest to the thickest! Muscles and aura! Aura and muscles! This is the Muscle Path I have pioneered!

What a high-level nonsense.

-Strangely, no one else seems to follow it. Poor fools! It's simple if you use aura with the intention of reconstructing your body from scratch.

“Wait a minute... You don't mean to say you've achieved Metamorphosis...?”

-You, who may be our father!

The child who might have achieved the first-ever title of “Metamorphosed Muscle Pig” in Earth Spirit Tribe history, shouted.

-You're stronger than I thought! Excellent! I've found an opponent I can hit without holding back. So, attack me with all your strength too!

“Wow. I feel weird saying this, but Uburka, you really know

nothing but fighting...”

-Heart is Body! Will is Muscle! Knowledge is Flesh!

Firm! His already magma-like muscles suddenly inflated as if warning of a volcanic eruption.

Inflating.

Inflating.

“What, what?”

They kept inflating.

“Kid...?”

Uburka had become enormous.

Not an exaggeration, he was as big as a hill.

He overshadowed me to the point where I was hidden in his shadow.

“Isn’t that a bit too much growth...?”

It wasn’t his physical body that grew.

His [aura] expanded into [an enlarged form of Uburka].

Like a pilot in a giant robot, Uburka's real body would be inside that giant figure.

In other words, that hill-sized figure was entirely, completely made of aura!

-Phew.

Kwoong! The ground trembled.

Uburka moved his foot, and the earth danced to his rhythm.

I looked up at Uburka like Thumbelina.

“T-that’s a serious killing intent. Can you shrink back down? Daddy's getting scared here...”

-This is my true form!

Giant Mode Uburka roared.

-From the joints of my fingers to the impact of my fist, nothing escapes my will! White Lion, self-proclaimed dream! My fist pierces your heart!

“Hey! Hey! This is parricide, I tell you!”

-Good. If the name of victory is parricide, then I gladly become a parricide!

Uburka joyfully shouted his martial arts name. Then, a fist as large as a house cast a shadow over my head and fell.

Damn Aura Fist Technique - Giant Style.

Brutality.

The Crushing Fist.

A name utterly devoid of elegance!

“That’s too much for a martial arts name?!”

-The value of martial arts is proven by power, not by name!

Indeed, he was right. Uburka had exchanged naming sense for profound destructive power.

One strike.

The earth split.

Two strikes tore the ground, and three cracked the underground.

Rain-like fist strikes.

The bedrock shattered. The hot aura, instantaneously grinding the soil, splattered mud on my face. Suddenly, I was drenched in mud like a drenched rat.

“It's hot!!”

I screamed, dodging Uburka's relentless onslaught.

“Brute! A brute that shakes the world! Ah, I didn't raise you like this!”

-Stop the nonsense, zombie. We can't consider these guys as the ones you raised.

As I danced around to dodge, Guardian Spirit spoke.

-In the martial world, parents and children sometimes split and fight. Even a sect that makes family feuds a tradition exists.

“Damn it!”

I drew my sword.

“Now I don’t care anymore!”

-I stopped caring a long time ago!

“You’re proud of that, you brat!”

I gathered my aura.

I envisioned flames.

In the basement torture chamber of a certain mansion.

‘The outstretched hand of the chained child flickers with flames.’

A young, desperate vengeance.

'Fire.'

My heart heats up instantly.

I materialize the emotions that would otherwise fade without a trace, shaping them into the scene of the underground mansion. I expand these impressions into aura.

‘My shadow is the shade of the basement.’

I don’t get engulfed in emotions.

‘My flame is the touch of a child.’

Nor get captivated by impressions.

There are no you and I in fire. Fire is one. Always merging and burning the world distinctly.

Thus, my sword’s tip becomes someone’s fingertip, and my blade becomes our scream.



Demonic Heavenly God Art - Reformation.

The First Form.

Sword of Burning Youth.

-.....!

Burn.

-Uhahaha! As expected!

My aura flickers like a snake's head along the shadows, binding the opponent's wrist. Even though it's just a form inflated by the giant, my impression is more solid. Hotter.

Stronger.

I sever the wrist.

-Indeed!

The opponent resists. With his left wrist severed, he swings his right arm to shake me off. Is he trying to gain distance? To reset his stance?

I press on.

Ducking to dodge his punch, I seize his right arm with shadow flames in the moment his fist cuts through the air. One strand, two strands, dozens of aura strands constrict the giant's fist.

-Undoubtedly!

Burn it.

-Kekerkker!

The giant tries to regenerate both arms. He must still have enough aura. Then, I just need to sever his limbs faster than he can regenerate them.

-Six hundred years later, has our race been blessed again?

Before the left arm regrows, I cut off the left leg.

Before the left leg regrows, I cut off the right leg.

Before the right leg regrows, again, the left arm.

I slice through the giant's illusion.

-The glory of the legend is not lacking! No, correction! The legend was lacking!

I slash relentlessly.

-Amazing! Ugor! Amazing! To 'enhance' oneself, not by strengthening but by 'invoking' others!

I bury the giant in the burning underground.

-Aura, the flame of the soul, can be used like this!

The giant, like burning paper, is consumed by flames.

Gradually shrinking bit by bit.

The giant's aura, also red, resembles a small flame being devoured by a greater inferno.

‘Do they really need to be different?’

I ponder while absorbing the giant's flames.

‘Uburka inflated his arms and legs. Extended them. Aura is a tool to expand oneself. In contrast, I transferred someone's scream. Pulled it in.’

The red aura blazes.

‘Is there a reason why these two can't occur simultaneously?’

Sparks ignite in my mind.

‘I am transferring Master’s Demonic Heavenly God Art to my own. But do I need to scream alone? Can I, alone, bear all karma, and draw all resentment? Should it be that way?’

The principle of aura operation filled my mind.

‘No.’

The solution emerged.

‘Anyone can become a flame.’

I speak up.

“Uburka. Remember.”

-Ugor?

Should I mention the underground mansion?

No.

“Recall the dark underground of Limepolis.”

A closer scene.

“There, you dug holes to live in. In each hole, about thirteen goblins huddled together. Among them were young goblins. Born without ever seeing the sun fully, never felt rain on their skin, never freely smeared mud.”

-.....

“Picture the children.”

I pressed the Earth Spirit Tribe's strongest warrior.

“Every morning and evening, a few fish are rationed in the hole. That's all the food. Mothers carefully roast the tiny fish. Have you pictured it?”

-...I have.

“The narrow hole gets smoky. Mothers cough, children cry. But they can’t go out. The Ghost Tribe guards are watching. Think of the smoky hole, the tender parents, the crying children.”

-There.

“A young Earth Spirit Tribe reaches for the half-cooked fish.”

I fend off the giant's punch with my blade.

“The mother strikes the child's wrist. Holds it. Might even hit. But these young ones, they keep reaching for the undercooked fish. They're hungry. When the mother stops them, they throw tantrums and cry.”

-Hmm.

“Eventually, parents have to give the fish to their children as soon as it's slightly cooked. The child quickly eats it. After eating, they look at the next cooked fish. Asking for it.”

I deflect the giant's wrist with my sword hilt. An opening appears. I swing my sword into the gap, further reducing the giant's size.

“Think of the child's gaze, the mother's eyes watching the child, the child's touch, the mother's hand stopping the child. Draw all the paths in the smoky hole at once.”

-.....

“You can do it.”

-Ugor.

“Capture it.”

The giant swings his fist.

“Imitate it.”

I dodge and counter. The direction of the punch changes.



“Cry.”

I twist the giant's posture.

“Your tribe knows how to sing sorrow with fire. Flames are just fire, but you read emotions from the angle of the flames, the speed of the rise, the amplitude of the descent. Aura is no different.”

-.....

“A single character encompasses the sky. A rhythm sings of sorrow. Why can't aura capture the sky? Why can't aura draw sorrow. Imprint the impression,”

The giant's posture crumbles.

I strike his shin, balancing it.

I raise it.

The giant's punching shadow turns into a forward attack.

“Shout.”

At that moment, flames erupt from the giant's fist.

The flames split into five tongues.

Each splits again, turning into twenty-five touches, flickering.

-.....

Uburka stares blankly at his fist.

Some flames were tender, others were intense.

None resembled Uburka's gestures.

"Hmm."

Still at a beginner's level.

But undoubtedly, it was a strike resembling the Demonic Heavenly God Art.

“Not bad. Truly exceptional talent.”

I nod approvingly.

“That’s how you do it, kid.”

Uburka slowly speaks.

-My father... is too strong.

# Chapter 176: My Son is Too Strong (3)

---

A great warrior keeps winning.

An even greater warrior, when defeated, accepts defeat gracefully.

-I lost.

The Muscle Pig was quite the great warrior.

-I am confident I won't be outdone in the total amount of Aura, but the intricacy of handling Aura is as different as heaven and earth. Ugor. It seems I've been too simplistic in my use of Aura until now.

"Don't blame yourself."

I stroked Uburka's head.

"I didn't figure it out on my own either. I was taught martial arts by my masters. No matter how exceptional an individual's talent is, it's hard to surpass the history of a clan. Behind me stands a thousand years of history of the Demonic Cult's world."

-Kekerkker.

"Mm."

-Dad.

"I don't even wish to be called father, so wouldn't you at least call me something else? Being called dad by someone with such a huge body like you shakes my identity."

-Understood, daddy.

"Ah... Adding just one character changes the feel so much. Well, if that's what you want to call me, go ahead...."

-Daddy, I have a question. Why have you been climbing on my head since earlier?

"Because you're so huge, Uburka. When people see a giant like you, they want to climb on you. Humans have this innate urge to climb, you see. It's very hard for me to resist this urge."

-Indeed. Such an urge exists.

Uburka nodded his head. Shake, shake. As I was on this child's head, I naturally experienced a zero-gravity Viking ride.

This is kind of fun.

"Now that you've lost to me, just quietly listen to my advice. Of course, whether to follow it after listening is up to you. If you have a better idea, say it."

-Ugor.

"Forcing a peace negotiation won't end the chaos in the world."

I scratched Uburka's head.

"The parties involved need to be presented with a convincing negotiation plan. Not just the Mountain Calamity Tribe, but the other five races need to gain some benefits too."

-What benefits can we offer them?

"It's simple. Put your own standpoint aside for now. Think from the perspective of each race. Then the answer will come."

I said.

"The Mountain Calamity Tribe will welcome the peace negotiations. It means they can escape the brink of destruction. However, the solution of [destroying Limepolis to eliminate the root of the conflict] will be hard to accept. Why do you think that is?"

-Because it's a holy site?

"Tsk, tsk. If Limepolis is destroyed, they won't have any city to live in."

I flicked Uburka's forehead.

"It's good to overcome the crisis of destruction, but it's unsettling not to have a guaranteed future. In other words, if we can somehow alleviate this anxiety, the Mountain Calamity Tribe will likely be okay with the peace negotiations."

-A new city. A new place to live.

"Exactly. It'll be painful to destroy the holy site, but well. As you said, [making it so no one can have it] will be a total annihilation. There's some emotional acceptance in that."

-I understand.

Uburka nodded his Viking head.

-We'll promise to protect the Mountain Calamity Tribe if they settle in a new residence we provide. If we set up their residence near the five races, they'll feel anxious, so we should guide them to a place as far away as possible.

"That's right. That's the idea. The Mountain Calamity Tribe has good technology, right? Make receiving some of their



technologies a condition. Then the discontent among your Earth Spirit Tribe warriors will decrease a bit."

-Is that so?

"Specifically, it'll decrease to the extent of dam' hardships."

-Just removing one character changes the feel quite a bit....

The complete elimination of discontent won't be possible.

But within the Earth Spirit Tribe, the law of the survival of the fittest is strong. They will follow the will of Uburka, the leader of the council and the top ranker. With a magical phrase like 'If you have complaints, come at me', everything can be settled.

"Uburka, it's good to have the ambition to prevent the extinction of a race. But if you want to live ignorantly, you can't be ignorant. It's a good thing that's barely achievable even if you rack your brains out."

-Hmm. Daddy. What do the other races need?

"I just said it."

I smiled slyly.

"Think from their perspective, won't you?"

---

-We'll help you too when it looks like you're going to be destroyed!

On a night with a full moon.

Eventually, the alliance and the Mountain Calamity Tribe came to the meeting. Everyone's expression wasn't too great. It was more like they were 'dragged out' rather than just 'coming out'. Unfortunately, there weren't many armies that could withstand the Muscle Pig's red laser beam.

Under the tent where representatives of each race gathered, Chairman Uburka boldly declared.

-Look. Even the empire of the Mountain Calamity Tribe, which boasted the greatest glory since the primeval forest burned, has fallen. Eternal prosperity does not exist. The

alliance is currently in a good position, but someday, one of you will decline. It's an inevitable law of the world.

-.....

-The defeated race will become slaves to the victorious race. The enslaved race will repeat the humiliation from six hundred years ago, and the ruling race will repeat the mistakes that the Mountain Calamity Tribe made over the last six hundred years. It's sad! Either way, it'll be damn, and eventually, the world will be filled with damn!

Uburka really looked sad. In other words, he opened his mouth wide, bared his fangs, scrunched his eyebrows tightly, and twitched his nose.

There weren't many attitudes people could take when the strongest hobgoblin made such a face.

-Hmm. Umm....

The vampire spoke cautiously.

-So, you mean you'll help us in the future, just like you're

helping the Mountain Calamity Tribe now?

-Yes. When you're in danger of destruction. I, Uburka, promise in the name of the chairman of the Fire River Council. If you have any questions, feel free to ask.

-Excuse me, but is there any guarantee that this promise will be passed down through generations?

-There isn't.

-Then, sorry, but this discussion is....

Uburka grabbed his axe handle. Startled. The representatives shrank back like frightened deer.

-There isn't, so let's create it now.

-What?

-Wait here.

Chairman Uburka slowly approached the Earth Spirit Tribe warriors. The warriors had gathered around the tent where the meeting was held.

-Hear me, members of the Fire River Council! From now on, I will negotiate peace in the name of the council. If any of the races gathered here face the threat of extinction, we will help them.

The warriors looked at each other blankly.

Among them, one who seemed to have some seniority spoke up.

-Do as you wish, Chairman.

-This promise will remain valid even after I die.

-Uh? How can that be?

-Because from now on, you will swear [My descendants will never break the promise I made]. If your descendants break a promise with me, they'll be considered disgraceful and full of sins.

-What if we don't want to swear?

-Then beat me.

-Damn.

The experienced warrior cursed and raised his spear.

-I oppose this agenda! My name is Murk. I'm a descendant of the great warrior Gorgir who ran with Kekerkker, ranked 49th in the Fire River Council, and the elder brother of Murmu who honorably died in a duel in this war!

Chairman Uburka casually slung his axe over his shoulder.

-Nice muscles. I'll beat you up just enough not to kill you.

The experienced warrior got nicely beaten up.

-Guuwek!

Uburka's punch landed squarely in the warrior's abdomen, and the warrior exhibited the contents of his meal for the world to see.

The exhibit was titled [Two Fish & A Bit of Centipede Chicken]. A piece notable for its thin gastric juices and thick chunks.

The fellow Earth Spirit Tribe members trembled with emotion as they witnessed this great work of art.

-Still brutally strong...

-What on earth does the chairman eat to be so monstrous!

-A double-digit ranker blown away in one hit. Unbelievable.

-He seems even stronger than before the war...?

-I think this agenda is excellent, Chairman! The Chairman is our tribe's blessing and glory! Long live the Chairman!

-Who was that just now?

-A filthy sycophant.

-Get rid of the sycophant!

Several more warriors stepped forward for the agenda duel. There were those ranked within the top 100 and even the 6th ranker. But none could draw out an axe swing from Uburka. All were knocked out with a single punch.

When the number of nicely beaten-up warriors reached 33, the Earth Spirit Tribe had to unanimously sing in one voice, one syllable.

-Damn...

-Damn...

Uburka put down his axe and crossed his arms.

-Weak. Why so weak? It's almost pitiful to hit you. Pitiful



beings, agree to this agenda before I feel even more sorry for you.

A great warrior keeps winning. An even greater warrior, when defeated, accepts defeat gracefully. In that sense, the Earth Spirit Tribe members were great warriors.

-We agree.

-We agree, Ugor.

-If anyone opposes, shout out now.

Silence.

Only the quiet crackling of campfires here and there. All members of the Huahaping Council, all warriors who went to war, agreed.

Uburka surveyed the surroundings and nodded his head.

-Good. I, as the chairman of the Fire River Council, declare

the agenda [If one of the six races faces extinction, we will help them] unanimously passed. Those who shouted in favor, those who remained silent in opposition, and their descendants, cannot defy this agenda. Everyone, swear upon the sacred earth.

Uburka hit the ground three times with his axe handle.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

The Earth Spirit Tribe warriors also silently raised their weapons and struck the ground three times.

-Hmm.

Uburka returned to the meeting tent and sat down.

The representatives of the six races stared blankly at Uburka.

Uburka, arms crossed, faced the representatives.

-I have ensured our promise will be passed down through

generations.

-.....

-Any more questions?

-.....

The vampire respectfully bowed his head.

-It's sufficient. I have no more questions.

One bowed, and another raised his head high. It was the representative of the Ghost Tribe. The one-horned dokkaebi, displeased about something, wore a fierce expression.

-Hey, moldy. Are you really that strong?

-Stronger than your father.

-This son of a...

-You're mistaken. We're not sons of dogs. Kekerkker descended in a lion's body. Therefore, we are lion's children, and dogs' children would be more fitting for the Mountain Calamity Tribe over there. Disappointing you don't know such basic racial knowledge. Correct yourself to lion's children.

-What? What? Da-, anyway!

The Ghost Tribe representative drew his sword.

-We came here, pouring the grain our people worked hard for. And now, you tell us to retreat with [We'll help you once in a crisis]? No! What about the grains and seeds already lost to the void!

-What do you want to do?

-Compensate!

-We're not exactly a prosperous race ourselves. We take pride in living day by day. Even if we wanted to compensate, we couldn't.

-Then I can't negotiate!

-Ugor, that's not it.

Chairman Uburka stroked his chin.

-What you're really worried about is something else.

-What?

-The problem is returning with no achievements despite massive expenditures. The lords and landlords who were extorted by you will complain, and beyond complaining, they might even revolt. As a result, you'll lose power. If you're unlucky, you'll lose your head. Isn't that what you're worried about?

Uburka artfully recited the words I had taught him in a dream. Caught off guard by the unexpected statement, the Ghost Tribe representative was flustered. -But... that's...

-Just once. If a rebellion occurs in your country, I will personally go and help.

-.....

-This won't be an official agenda. It's a personal commitment. I alone, with one axe and twelve spears, can easily handle a bunch of rebels. How about it? Will you join in destroying the holy site?

Uburka bared his fangs.

-If you still need an excuse, come at me. Saying you were defeated in a duel will serve as an excuse to your Ghost Tribe as well.

-You, you...

The Ghost Tribe representative, red-faced, raised his sword.

-Alright! Let's duel! If you think I'll go easy, you're gravely mistaken!

-If you think I won't go easy on you, that's a real mistake. I'll go somewhat easy.

The Ghost Tribe representative was suitably beaten up. His single horn bent at a suitable angle, his nose broke revealing a suitable curve, and a few teeth fell out, making his appearance suitable. Becoming the embodiment of suitability, the representative of the Ghost Tribe groaned, upside down in a hole (also at a suitable angle).

-Damn... bastard....

Uburka smiled contentedly.

-Now you look like a warrior!

When a person is upside down in a hole, there's not much to say.

That night, representatives of the seven races signed the peace agreement.

# Chapter 177: The Giant's Legacy (1)

---

Let's talk about a city.

Limepolis.

This city thrived on mining and trade.

Renowned as the empire's best rock salt mine, Limepolis boasted its prominence. It was a place where people asking, 'Can you really dig up food or money from the ground?' could be answered with 'Yes, both, actually.'

-Great Caves.

-The Skull of the Earth Mother Goddess.

-We collect the teeth of the goddess.



That was the kind of place it was.

A city prospering from mining digs up glory along with the land. As the land gets excavated more, the days of glory deepen. Then at some point, when you swing the pickaxe, clank! A sound rings out.

You've dug to the very bottom.

[The mining efficiency of Limepolis is deteriorating!]

There was still rock salt left. But it required digging deeper to retrieve it. The work time increased, and the difficulty rose.

[The cost of Limepolis' salt industry is increasing!]

Slaves began to escape. The Mountain Calamity Tribe's skin is weak against salt. They could only swing pickaxes at the mine entrance or manage workers but couldn't crawl into the deep shafts. This was why slaves from the six races were needed. As slaves disappeared, the economy of the salt city rapidly shrunk.

[The control of the Mountain Calamity Tribe weakens!]

The Gill Fishes Race, resembling mermaids, found seawater too harsh for their skin, so they only frolicked in the river called Daeha.

But then, a mutant was born among them. This mutant could endure the seawater, thinking, 'Oh, it's a bit salty.' Those who mixed blood with the mutant could also withstand the sea.

[The Gill Fishes Race evolves!]

The sea was a Demonic Realm difficult for the Mountain Calamity Tribe to traverse, and the ability to live there meant the Gill Fishes Race could avoid the Mountain Calamity Tribe.

Then one day, another mutant of the Gill Fishes Race accidentally tasted the mud in a tidal flat. 'Oh, this is very salty.' It made sense since the tidal flats were washed by seawater. 'Can it get saltier?'

Still harboring memories of their slave days in Limepolis, they had the notion that 'to get salt, you must dig a pit.' The Gill Fishes Race dug a hole in the middle of the tidal flat, stuck in a wooden stick, wrapped it with reeds, and then plastered it with mud. A primitive jar.

A week later, they checked the jar. Seawater had collected in it. They scooped it out and boiled it in a kiln. It tasted very salty. It was self-produced salt. When old notions met new environments, new technology was born.

[A new technology is born!]

[The Mountain Calamity Tribe's competition grows stronger!]

The Gill Fishes Race were also natural sailors. The amphibious mermaids didn't die even in storms. The once-feared sea, the Ocean God, now became their guardian deity. Ships loaded with salt traveled the sea and waterways like their own living room. The production and distribution of the salt industry shifted to the Capable Scribes Race.

[Ideological conflicts arise!]

The Mountain Calamity Tribe couldn't accept this. According to their myth, salt is the 'tooth' of the goddess. The fact that salt from seawater didn't cause stomach upset was hard for them to accept.

When it's hard to acknowledge the opponent, people can take several attitudes.

-Witchcraft.

The Mountain Calamity Tribe chose the easiest attitude.

-The devil is behind it.

-Self-produced salt is cursed food, tainted by the devil's breath.

-The Gill Fishes Race are all devil-worshipping demons!

-Their ability to endure seawater is also proof of devil worship!

Perhaps the Mountain Calamity Tribe could have taken a more arduous path. They could have altered their myth. [Actually, the goddess split in half when she died; half her body was buried on land, and the other half sank into the deep sea].

They could have tried that.

As the empire's territory expands, traditional myths become precarious. Salt, thought to only come from land, also comes from water. The world expands. As the world widens, myths lose their uniqueness, and the characters in the myths become more generic.

Someday, the empire might abandon the 'distinctive regional myths' and adopt a 'universal, odorless supreme deity' as the new faith. [Limepolis] might no longer be just a city's name but could have become the name of the empire itself, like Rome.

-Those who consume salt made by demons.

-Regardless of the reason, they will be punished for blasphemy!

The Mountain Calamity Tribe couldn't do so.

-Salt dissolves in water. Water dissolves salt. How could salt come from water? It's a devil's trick, a wicked scheme to delude people into false beliefs.

They justified their inability to change.

-From now on, all citizens must only eat rock salt produced by the empire. Anyone who mines salt from unofficial mines, turns water into salt, or brings such water salt into the empire will be punished!

-Trade in water salt is forbidden. Block all rivers and waterways. Confiscate and sink Gill Fishes Race ships and vessels carrying water salt!

Old priests supporting the myths advocated this. Slaves and warriors who fought wars echoed it. Citizens who still looked down on the six races cheered. Their advocacy, echoing, and cheering became the nobles' capital for power.

No one could stop priests, warriors, citizens, and nobles at once.

‘Aha.’

‘From now on, I shall serve you as my master.’

The god who could do so had already fallen.

[The Mountain Calamity Tribe destroys the Gill Fishes Race's

port bases.]

[The Mountain Calamity Tribe loots the Gill Fishes Race's trade ships.]

[The Mountain Calamity Tribe forces rock salt trade on other races.]

[The Gill Fishes Race resists the Mountain Calamity Tribe's actions!]

When an old power declines and a new power rises.

When the industrial leadership changes hands.

When one side cannot accept new ideologies and misses the golden opportunity for reform, what must happen, happens.

[A power struggle war breaks out!]

This is the story of the past 600 years.

-Uburka.

There were six wars.

The empire fell.

-Now, according to the peace agreement of the seven races, we will destroy the holy land.

Priests lost their religion. Warriors lost their victories. Citizens lost their peace. Nobles lost their power.

What remained were the glory of 600 years ago and the mined-out rock salt mines. But a sentence in a history book couldn't block the swords of the equator, and the empty caves couldn't feed the people.

By the time everyone realized this, it was too late.

Far too late.

-You have three choices.



Chairman Uburka said.

-First. I alone destroy everything! I can do it. And I want to. The title [The One Who Destroyed a City Alone] is enticing. But I'm not only powerful but also generous. I'll put aside my greed for now.

Uburka posed like a bodybuilder.

His left pectoral muscle twitched.

-Second. Mountain Calamity Tribe, you destroy the holy land yourselves! You can do it. But you probably don't want to. The title [The Ones Who Destroyed Their Own Holy Land] will be shameful. I understand your shame and will let this pass too!

Chairman Uburka's right pectoral muscle quivered.

-Third. All seven races, take up hammers.

Uburka grinned.

-Destroy the city until your anger subsides. Smashing something eases the mind. Soldiers who came all the way here and citizens who suffered during the siege, just smash everything! You can do it. And you will want to.

The last remaining king of the Mountain Calamity Tribe, the Mountain King, asked in a trembling voice.

-Mighty warrior. What if we let you into the city and a fight breaks out?

-Don't worry! Our Earth Spirit Tribe will keep watch. The hammers you hold will only be used to break buildings, not people's heads.

-There are things that must be preserved, not destroyed. We engrave our history on stone pillars.

-Dismantle them and move them. What's so hard about that?

-They're very heavy....

-Only take what can be moved. History too heavy to bear is not pride but stubbornness. Letting go will lighten the burden,

and being light will bring freedom, and with freedom comes strength.

-Limepolis is our last city. Where do you plan to lead us?

-To a place lighter, freer, and stronger than here.

-...Among our citizens, there are those who do not trust you.

-That's good!

Uburka clapped his hands together, exerting strength.

His biceps bulged.

-Encourage them to attack all at once!

944 citizens of the Mountain Calamity Tribe stepped forward. Unable to rush in all at once, the 16 bravest snails led the charge. Despite the fall, they were soldiers seasoned in the ways of war.

-I will bestow upon you the honor of witnessing my true form!

The Giant of Aura descended.

-What?

-What?

-Crazy.

As the soldiers uttered short exclams, Uburka's punch sent the Mountain Calamity Tribe flying. Not just the 16 in the front but also the 28 waiting behind were cleanly home-run.

-Uhahahahaha!

The giant burst into roaring laughter.

-Come at me if you dare! Little ones!

-.....

-My chest is broad! Whether it's 900 or 9000, I'll accept them all! Unfortunately, no milk will come out, but I have enough muscles to turn you brats into adults! I'll be your daddy!

Not many among the Earth Spirit Tribe wanted to be under such a 'father'.

The Mountain Calamity Tribe chose to release their stress by smashing their ancestors' buildings rather than getting beaten up by the Muscle Pig. A wise choice.

-Shit.

-Damn!

For a day and a night, Limepolis was demolished.

As the seven races cursed in unison, the city turned to dust.

The finishing touches were handled by Uburka.

-Hup!

Transformed into a giant, Uburka pounded Limepolis. Thud! Thud! Thud! It went on for more than half a day. The cave housing the city was shattered, and the mountain encompassing the cave collapsed. Rocks poured down as the cave ceiling broke.

-Insane...

There it was, a massive hobgoblin burying a city all by himself.

-Hmph.

Chairman Uburka curled his lips into a satisfied smile, similar to a child who had just trampled a sandcastle.

-At least I've earned the title [The One Who Destroyed a City].

-.....

-I hereby declare the peace agreement fulfilled. Earth Spirit Tribe, pack up. Mountain Calamity Tribe, drag along those worthless stone pillars of yours.

Unprecedented.

A warrior like no other in the history of the Earth Spirit Tribe spoke.

-We return to Guru.

[The power struggle war comes to an end.]

[The multi-race alliance achieves an incomplete victory.]

[The Mountain Calamity Tribe escapes the brink of extinction.]

This is the end of this stage.

[The Earth Spirit Tribe gains the authority of a Hegemon!]

[The prestige of the Earth Spirit Tribe rises.]

[The power of the Earth Spirit Tribe increases.]

[The Earth Spirit Tribe has a greatly increased chance of unlocking new traits.]

[You have gained 9000 race points!]

[Your current race points are 9800.]

Fellow Hunters murmured.

"Man, that's a real monster..."

"Surely not all Earth Spirit Tribe members will keep being born with such size...? That would be unfair to our kids."

"Probably not."



The Paladin shook his head.

"That's a once-in-a-lifetime warrior, a rare gem across ages. It's just a coincidence that such a talent was born in the Earth Spirit Tribe. In another era, heroes from other races will emerge. We just need to persevere until our golden age."

The Tower's voice rang out.

[You can now declare stage clear.]

[Would you like to declare stage clear now?]

"Huh?"

The Black Dragon Witch flipped her hair.

"So, a race didn't necessarily have to fall. Just overcoming the brink of extinction was enough?"

"Who knows? Perhaps some race was on the verge of falling without us knowing."

We watched as the military forces of each race dispersed into the distance.

Eight hundred years since the primeval forest burned.

Although we still reigned supreme like constellations, those children had slowly begun to tread their own paths, no longer just stars in the night sky.

"Hmm."

I began to speak.

"Good work, everyone."

"Was there any hard work? Your race's child solved everything alone. This is the first time a stage was this easy."

The Black Dragon Witch smiled pleasantly.

"I'll declare clear after watching the kids live for about ten days. What about you, King of Death?"

"Then I'll also stay for another ten days. I have something to teach Uburka."

"What else are you planning to teach that monster...?"

"Don't worry. It's something good. Really good."

We agreed to declare stage clear after ten days and parted ways.

Yes.

I still have something to teach Uburka, something to pass on to the Earth Spirit Tribe.

[Purchasing 'Appearance in Dreams'.]

[100 race points are consumed!]

[Your current race points are 9700.]

Uburka, floating above a mud pond, looked at me.

-Ugor. You're back, daddy.

"Yes. Dad's here."

-I guided the Mountain Calamity Tribe as dad advised. Now, praise me.

"Ah, my child. Did you save a race from extinction? Good job, really good job. My child is great! Proud of raising our child! Earth Spirit Tribe is the coolest in the world, and my child is the coolest in the Earth Spirit Tribe! You're even better than me!"

-Ugor, ugor.

Uburka grinned foolishly.

After showering him with praises for about ten minutes, I broached the topic.

"Uburka, there's something I want you to learn."

-Ugor?

"Exactly, I want you to learn it and then spread it widely among your people. So even if you die, even 100 years after your death, and another 100 years pass, this teaching will not be forgotten."

-What teaching?

I smiled.

And raised a red Aura in my hand.

"I will teach you the fire of the world."

The new Demonic Heavenly God Art.

I will pass on my own special technique to the Earth Spirit Tribe.



# Chapter 178: The Giant's Legacy (2)

---

"Uburka, observing how you manipulate Aura, I realized a particular intricacy."

-Are you talking about the Damn Aura Method?

"The linguistic destruction of your people is so tragic that it pains me... But yes, exactly. I saw profound potential in the Damn Aura Method."

I said this while sitting atop Uburka's head.

"It's all about Formation Methods."

-Formation Methods?

Uburka tilted his head in confusion.

-What is that, dad?

Formation Methods.

Before meeting my master, I had barely read a few lines of martial arts novels, but later, I intermittently learned the common knowledge of the Martial Realm from Guardian Spirit.

Formation Methods are, as the name suggests, the methods of forming formations.

"Martial arts are fundamentally about managing oneself. Formation Methods, on the other hand, are about executing them with others."

-Ugor. Is it like combat?

"Similar. But it's different from a mere brawl."

I explained.



"Imagine people from different clans with different intricacies fighting on the same side. That could be a joint attack or a cooperative attack, but it's not a Formation Method. Only when you share the same doctrine and the same way of manipulating Aura does it become a Formation Method."

-Are you planning to teach me Formation Methods?

"Yes, exactly. First, I'll teach you Demonic Heavenly God Art, and then together, we will develop Formation Methods. I haven't experienced Formation Methods myself, so I'm worried about how it will turn out, but what's the harm in trying!"

-I don't quite understand. Why do we need to learn this?

"Hey, hey. My child, if you start questioning the purpose and value of everything from the beginning, nothing will ever get started!"

I playfully tapped Uburka's forehead.

"Just try it out casually! If it doesn't work, we can give up. If it feels right, we'll delve deeper. Okay?"

-Is it really just a casual thing?

"Yes. Just casual."

I smiled broadly.

"But, my child. There's something I want to ask you."

-What is it?

"Have you ever gone hungry for more than a week?"

Uburka blinked.

-Hungry?

That's when I started teaching him the 'casual' Demonic Heavenly God Art.

"Demonic Heavenly God Art consists of nine different

techniques. The first one is the Sword of Starving Death. It's a sword technique inspired by the desperation and struggle of hunger. The reason you're starving right now has to do with this. Ah, dreams are wonderful! Time stretches as you wish, and no matter how long you starve, you don't die!"

-Kill me!

Uburka, who felt like he had been starving for a week in the dream, cried out. Clang. He was chained by the hands and feet. I sat in front of him, eating delicious fruits and fish.

It was the result of fairly defeating Uburka in a duel.

-Just kill me!

"Are you suffering?"

-I'm suffering!

"Does it hurt?"

-It hurts! Every muscle in my body is screaming!

"That's exactly it! My child. You wield the sword with that pain and suffering. I also starved for a week once. But it's not enough just to starve thoughtlessly. Imagine a farmer somewhere in the world starving to death, or their child. You have to starve while thinking of them."

-Daddy is insane!

I continued teaching.

"Dreams are really great. If you think of a snowy field, a snowy field appears, and if you think of a plague, a plague breaks out. It's the perfect environment for learning Demonic Heavenly God Art. Back in my time, we didn't have such things, ah."

-Cold... Daddy, it's so cold...

"That's the Sword of Frostbitten Death! Imagine the heart of a peasant without even a blanket, scraping leaves together to cover themselves."

-I might freeze to death before I can even imagine...

"Don't worry, you won't die. You're the strongest warrior in the history of the Earth Spirit Tribe, aren't you? This is nothing for you, right?"

-For the first time in a long while, I find myself forced to use this word. Damn...

I continued teaching.

"Is it hard to learn? Does burning hurt too much? Okay, I'll burn with you. If we hurt together, it's a bit better. Still not okay? Still hurts? Of course, it's supposed to hurt. But, my child. I can't hear your voice. If your vocal cords are burned, use Aura to speak. Look at me. I'm talking freely without moving my lips. Now, you try."

-This... is hell...

"Ai, as expected of my little one. Quick to grasp! Demonic Heavenly God Art is essentially unfolding the hells of the human world in sequence."

-This... such a dreadful martial art... How did you ever learn it, daddy?

"Indeed."

I smiled wryly.

"I wonder how I came to learn it."

I continued teaching.

[Purchasing 'Appearance in Dreams'.]

[100 race points are consumed!]

[Your current race points are 8800.]

For ten days.

While other fellow Hunters were busy caring for their

respective races, I devoted my time solely to Uburka. In terms of perception, it felt much longer than ten days spent together in dreams.

"Hmm."

I scratched my cheek.

"Well, not bad. Not too bad. A bit disappointing, but I'll be satisfied with this."

-Is that all?

Uburka ground his teeth.

-I've experienced a living hell for ten days!

"No. Uh. That's the thing... I realized something while teaching you. It turns out I was exceptionally talented in Demonic Heavenly God Art. Even with overflowing talent, it's hard to grasp."

-Of course! Who would be crazy enough to vividly comprehend and manifest Swords of Starving Death, Parched Death, Submerged Death, Frostbitten Death, Noxious Death, Plague Death, Contusing Death, and Scorching Death! People can only die once, and once they're dead, that's it! Even I wouldn't have dared to learn it if it weren't in a dream!

"Indeed..."

Our Demonic Cult is indeed a tough place.

-It's odd in the first place for daddy to freely execute such a terrifying martial art! How can you do that? Maintaining sanity while doing so is a miracle in itself!

I smiled.

"Thanks for the compliment. Now, before I bid farewell to this era, let's sketch out an initial concept for Formation Methods."

-.....

"Although you haven't deeply grasped Demonic Heavenly



God Art, you've at least reached the stage of Novice Demon. Uburka. Now you and I breathe in the same way in this world. Since we can share dreams, it should be possible to unfold them as well."

Ahem.

I jumped off Uburka's head.

"Sit down."

-Ugor.

"Formation Methods, unlike martial arts, don't have a well-organized intricacy. They're chaotic. First, there are clans that create Formation Methods at the level of cooperative attacks."

I took several pebbles and lightly summoned Aura. The pebbles began to roll in my hand like marbles.

"Imagine each pebble as a martial artist."

-Understood.

"Five out of six move in a certain rhythm. It's like a kind of music. The opponent becomes accustomed to the rhythm of these five. At that moment, the remaining one charges with a completely different rhythm."

Whoosh!

One of the pebbles suddenly shot out. Uburka, caught off guard, was hit in the chest muscle by the pebble.

-.....

With zero damage but shocked by his inability to react, Uburka looked at me blankly.

"This is a cooperative level of Formation Methods. Humans have intellect, which is the power to grasp rules. Rhythm is also a rule. The core of such Formation Methods is to inversely penetrate human cognitive abilities."

-...Isn't that amazing?

"Indeed. It's the most basic level of Formation Methods."

I grinned.

I felt rewarded for learning various things from Guardian Spirit whenever I had time after inheriting the Demonic Sect's teachings.

"The next level is Illusionary Techniques."

I raised Aura in my palm.

"What does it look like?"

-Like a flame.

"Right. It's not a flame, but it looks like one because I'm imitating a flame with Aura. Uburka, the fact that you seem giant without actually growing is also a kind of Illusionary Technique."

I focused Aura on the six pebbles.

The pebbles ignited.

"Imagine if six people were to burn Aura together. Picture being surrounded by them. There. It would feel like you've fallen into a pit of fire, right?"

-Ugor.

"This is the kind of Formation Methods we'll develop together."

Thump.

I grabbed the marbles from mid-air.

"There are only two of us now who have learned Demonic Heavenly God Art. But what if there are three? Or six? Twelve? Twenty-four?"

-.....

"What if a hundred, three hundred, six hundred people learn

Demonic Heavenly God Art and can all unleash the same technique simultaneously?"

Uburka's eyes slowly widened.

I smirked mischievously.

"Alone, I can only create a small inferno within a radius of five steps. But together, we can extend it to ten or fifteen steps. And if hundreds join...."

-The whole battlefield could be engulfed in flames.

Uburka opened his mouth.

Caught in the imagery I painted.

-Hundreds of warriors burning their souls with the same vision, the same intricacy. The battlefield will turn into hell in an instant.

Exactly.

Not an individual skill, but a collective technique.

My newly conceived Demonic Heavenly God Art will become a Formation Method.

-You called it an Illusionary Technique, but I think differently. When illusion engulfs reality, it becomes the truth.

"How about it? Worth trying?"

-Yes, I'd like to try.

"Okay. Let's proceed step by step."

I smiled.

"For this Formation Method to succeed, we all need to harbor the same image. To sing in chorus, we must memorize the same lyrics. Uburka. Not only will you widely spread Demonic Heavenly God Art among your people, but you'll also disseminate the sceneries we'll share."

-What sceneries?

"I'll show you now."

I drew a mansion on the ground.

"It was when I met children's dolls in a remote mansion---."

And I told the stories.

Of all the things I've experienced.

Of the sceneries I've seen.

The 1st scenery.

The Dolls in a fiery hell mansion.

The 2nd scenery.

The Shadow Demon King in a remote village.

The 3rd scenery.

Peonies blooming in a ruined winter.

The 4th scenery.

The moon robbed of its heart by a mirror.

The 5th scenery.

Tears shed on a rooftop.

Sometimes drawing on the ground, sometimes creating shapes with Aura, I recounted the stories and sceneries I've encountered.

These were just stories for now, not yet taking shape or form to be called Formation Methods.



But someday, they would become the seeds of Formation Methods.

"These are the images I have. Five. There may be more in the future, probably will be, but for now, there are five."

-Is that so.

Uburka murmured.

-Daddy... You've lived diligently. I pride myself on living more fiercely than anyone, but daddy is even busier than me. The density of time you've experienced....

"I've wandered a lot here and there."

-Can I also travel to such places like dad?

"Well."

I stood up.

"Maybe. You've undergone a transformation on your own. You might be able to return to youth. I'm leaving this era, but we might meet again in the next era, and the one after that, and so on..."

-I'll have to live a long time.

Uburka smiled.

-I'll widely share daddy's stories among our race. I'll turn them into plays and stage them. Tell them to growing children. I'll create five stories into five Fire Paintings, and I'll personally demonstrate them every darkest full moon. I promise. Just as daddy cares for our race, we will not forget daddy.

I extended my hand.

Uburka bent down and reached out his large hand.

My small hand was enveloped in the palm of the hopgoblin, and we shook hands.

"Uburka."

-Hmm.

"You're a fine child. Continue to spread your awesomeness across the world."

Uburka grinned, showing his fangs.

-Of course, daddy.

And then.

'I declare, stage clear.'

[Stage Clear!]

[You have cleared the 33rd floor.]

[Reward tallying will be conducted after entering the 34th floor.]

[Sequential layer progression - You will be forcibly transferred to the 34th floor!]

White light enveloped me.

# Chapter 179: The Giant's Legacy (3)

---

The place the light led to was as serene as the light itself.

A place where it seemed as if the horizon itself was cloaked in pure white bedding.

There, someone else had already arrived.

“Oh?”

“Hmm.”

Our eyes met.

The other person, with a feline-like smile, chuckled softly.

"Welcome, King of Death. Right on the dot, ten days as promised. Nothing is more reliable than a young man who keeps his word."

The Countess, holder of the Tower's gold coin and leader of the Merchants Union, was already there.

Dressed in traditional Indian attire, the Countess, despite her immense wealth, wore a plain single-colored sari. However, the fan she held was ornately decorated, perhaps as a counterbalance to her simple attire.

"Thank you. Oh, how are the Fairy Tribe children doing?"

"My, don't even get me started. They've become utterly shameless since I last saw them!"

The Countess flicked her fan. Gold leaf patterns and arabesques glittered as they moved.

"I diligently taught them about money management, given their lack of financial sense. Can't live on leaves alone, right? But then, those kids got so addicted to handling money that now they assess everything based on profitability. It's the end times!"

"....."

The fate of the Elves is indeed peculiar.

Before my regression, they were a bloodthirsty warrior race under the rule of the Flame Emperor. Now, under the Countess's guidance, they've evolved into cunning money-grubbers.

Like parent, like child.

"They're faithfully following the Countess's teachings, aren't they?"

"Oh my. You see me as such. I merely view money as water. It should fall as rain, flow as a river, and be accepted as the sea."

"In other words, you spend money like water."

"Oh my, correct. Can't even show off in front of the King of Death."

The Countess chuckled behind her fan.

"By the way, when are the others coming? Everyone's getting a bit lax with their timeliness these days."

Huh.

"Weren't you always on good terms?"

"We were just acquaintances. Used to call each other best friends and sisters, but things got colder after the Great Purge. They warmed up again after you arrived."

"Heh."

"Of course, some have always been close."

Sisters, huh?

'It's been quite a journey.'



I'm pretty confident about my relationship with my fellow Hunters, but I'm still in the dark about their pasts. The Heretic Inquisitor, Bambolina's childhood, I only recently became privy to.

"Oh, right."

Speaking of the Heretic Inquisitor reminded me of something.

"Does Paladin have a romantic partner? Do you know who it is?"

"Hmm? Why do you ask?"

"Just curious. The Paladin almost always wears her helmet. I was wondering if she wears it even on dates..."

"Impossible."

The Countess laughed as if amused.

"You might not know, but the Paladin is very particular about her hair care. When she takes off her helmet, it's magnificent."

"Really?"

"Certainly. Like wheat bathed in sunlight, it sways beautifully. The reason she always wears her helmet in the first place is....."

Pop!

Just then, a comical sound interrupted our conversation. The Countess and I turned our heads simultaneously.

"Sorry, sorry! Got a bit held up with Tower-related stuff."

The Constellation [The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages] appeared, hugging a pillow. She seemed busy for some reason. She wiped the sweat from her forehead and said, "Phew..."

"Let's see. Oh, cleared up to the 33rd floor. Have you two finished your chat?"

"Chat? We were just waiting for the others."

"Eh?"

The Princess looked puzzled.

"Why wait? The others are waiting for you."

"What?"

"Oh... Ah. Sorry. I've been negligent in explaining. It's been so long since I've been in charge of a stage, I keep forgetting things. Really. Ever since I fell from grace to become a Constellation, my intelligence has been nerfed. Almost to the level of my main body in Zuraqua...."

What's she talking about?

Receiving our bewildered glances, the Princess flicked her fingers.

[The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages announces the

dropout of the 33rd floor stage.]

I turned to the Countess, who also looked back at me in surprise. No dropouts this stage, right? We all got through nicely, didn't we?

The Princess spoke up.

"If you completely give up on sovereignty or fall to a point where you can no longer aspire for it, you're out. Simple, right? The Mountain Calamity Tribe did that on the 32nd floor. And this 33rd floor...."

The Tower's voice echoed.

[The Countess has been eliminated on the 33rd floor.]

My eyes widened in shock. The Countess's mouth hung open.

The Tower reiterated as if hammering in a final nail.

[Announcing once again.]

[The Countess has been eliminated on the 33rd floor.]

"Wait just a minute! That makes no sense!"

The Countess protested.

She was so flustered that even cat ears popped out of her head.

"Why am I eliminated!?"

"Umm, the Fairy Tribe gave up on sovereignty. Since you were in charge of them, it's an automatic dropout. I know you might resent it, but I have to follow the rules too. Sorry."

"That's absurd! Throughout this stage, the Fairy Tribe was quiet! They didn't actively participate in the war, nor did they deplete their forces significantly. How could they possibly drop out!?"

"Well, about that.... Ugh, it's tedious! Just see for yourself."

Boing.

That ridiculous sound effect accompanied the appearance of a projection in the air. Are these sound effects also chosen by the Constellation? If so, that's utterly absurd.

-Hmm.

In the projection, several members of the Fairy Tribe were gathered. True to their Elf nature, all had elongated ears.

-The Earth Spirit Tribe has become a monster.

-Heard legends, but a real monster? Beyond imagination.

The Elf elders murmured, twitching their long ears.

-Thought the general was lying to avoid responsibility, but it wasn't a lie.

-Do you have spies in the expeditionary force? You traitor.

-Who doesn't plant spies? What if our own generals suddenly turn on us? I know you all have spies too. Drop the pretense.

-That's true.

-Indeed.

-We can't blindly trust our kin. Our trust is too precious, our existence too valuable.

-Cute rascals. In our camp, commanders didn't engage in warfare but reveled in espionage. No wonder the holy expedition failed.

Hmm.

This wasn't the noble dialogue I expected from Elves....

-What to do? The funds invested in organizing the multi-race alliance are a pity.

-We intended to enslave the Mountain Calamity Tribe to

break even.

-It's not about breaking even. The Earth Spirit Tribe emerging as a victor itself is problematic. After investing centuries into controlling the Gill Fish Tribe, some random ruffians wreaked havoc. We need to reassess our grand strategy.

Wait.

I looked at the Countess in confusion.

"Merchant Union leader... you didn't...?"

The Countess seemed just as baffled.

"I just taught the kids a bit about money, that's all."

"More like money madness. How did you teach them to grow up as schemers...?"

"I didn't mean to! I told you, the kids grew up weird! No,



more importantly, this is a racial secret. Why are you showing it to the King of Death so casually!?"

The Countess lashed out at the Princess.

This was unexpected.

While I was nurturing the Earth Spirit Tribe with a pure heart, the Countess, behind the scenes, was aiming for an economic victory. If I hadn't seen this footage, I wouldn't have known until clearing the 40th floor.

'Wait, didn't I also move according to the Countess's advice?'

At the time the Earth Spirit Tribe clashed with the multi-race alliance, the Countess advised me to [Negotiate in a direction beneficial to all tribes]. Following that advice, I entered Uburka's dream.

In other words.

"You were aiming to suck the honey through trade all by yourself.... And how exactly did you take control of the Gill Fish Tribe? Crafty as a ghost."

"Damn. It wasn't control, but mutual aid. The Gill Fish Tribe lives in water, so building ships for trade isn't hard. On the other hand, the Fairy Tribe lives in forests and are masters at handling wood...."

"Oh my. You mean the Elves made ships for you to trade salt?"

"More like lent them."

The Countess groaned.

"All trading ships driven by the Gill Fish Tribe are owned by the Fairy Tribe. They pay a ship rental fee every time they come and go. Ships rented from the Fairy Tribe can only dock at ports operated by the Fairy Tribe...."

"How could you do that?"

"Docking at Fairy Tribe's ports gets a 30% discount on the ship fee. Plus, free repair services...."

"Wow."

"And the Gill Fish Tribe, though they can swim in waterways, can't supply salt to towns or cities in water. The Fairy Tribe took care of that."

"Riding Elf ships, using Elf ports, you'd naturally use Elf carriages. As the Gill Fish Tribe diligently produces salt and transports it to the port... the Elves play with distribution margins in the middle? The more the Gill Fish Tribe works, the more money the Elves make for free?"

"Exactly."

I was astounded.

What a ruthless business strategy.

"Sang-Ryun leader, really... truly... you're something else."

"To make big money, you need to control the platform!"

The Countess heated up.

"I just taught the kids the obvious truth about life. Moreover, I don't appreciate that look from someone who raised children to be muscle-brained goblins!"

"No. I just wanted them to be strong so they wouldn't get beaten up anywhere. Pure intentions."

"Pure has frozen and twisted into a mummy. So, you also slightly hinted to the kids about the truths of the world so they wouldn't work themselves to the bone!"

"A child needs some hardship to grow properly!"

"Ha. Hardship just makes life harder, what nonsense!"

"Because of parents like the Sang-Ryun leader, today's children have narrow minds!"

"Because of parents like the King of Death, today's kids are mentally ill!"

"Oh, this woman is really stingy."

"And you're the one to talk, with a name like Kim Gong-Ja."

"What's wrong with Kim Gong-Ja?"

"Isn't it full of scholar-like qualities?"

"This is crazy."

As we bickered, the Princess commented.

"You two are kinda funny.... It reminds me of my mother...."

Amidst this debate over parenting philosophy, the hologram projection continued.

-Let's direct the alliance's blade towards the Earth Spirit Tribe next.

-No, the cost-effectiveness is too poor. The Mountain Calamity Tribe had a holy land, but what does the Earth Spirit Tribe have? What's the point of conquering a settlement filled with mud?

-Mud is said to be good for the skin....

-Get prettier, cutie. Not interested.

-Surrender.

The Elf elders blinked.

-Surrender. We can't win, and there's nothing to gain from winning. Pouring money in is pointless, and gaining anything is futile. It's a losing business. It's over. Let's sell it cheaply.

-You're crazy? To give up?

-Let's lay out a new mat.

An Elf elder spoke.

-Let's become a vassal to the Earth Spirit Tribe. In return, ask for protection.

-Vassal?

-Protection?

-All ships and ports we own will fall under the Earth Spirit Tribe. The whole continent is terrified of the Earth Spirit Tribe. Sailing and trading under the Earth Spirit Tribe's flag will be much safer. We'll be the first to offer vassalage and they'll be pleased. The more they like us, the more they'll trust us. We can almost freely use the Earth Spirit Tribe's name and power. Mutual benefit.

The elders pondered.

-Surrendering willingly....

-If we have to surrender, better do it cheaply.

-It hurts our pride.

-What we lose in pride, we'll gain back in money. As long as we make money, right?

-True.

-We'll pay tribute to the Earth Spirit Tribe annually. If we say it's 10% of our profits, they'll be happy.

-10%? Isn't that too high?

-Actually, give only 1% but lie it's 10%. It's okay. No one in our tribe can't handle double bookkeeping.

-Also true.

I've never heard of Elves using double bookkeeping, but it seemed like common sense to them.

The elders simply concluded.

-Yeah. Surrender.

-Just becoming a vassal, no big deal.



-What does the Earth Spirit Tribe like? Mud? Will they like mud mixed with gold?

-Under what pretense should we surrender?

-From what spies say, they're incredibly stupid. Just pathetically beg, 'We are enamored by your magnificent muscles, and wish to cling to your bulging land. We have some money, but where do we have muscles like yours?'

-Really? Are they that stupid?

-It's truly astonishing that such a stupid tribe exists, but the stupider they are, the easier it is for us to suckle. Let's be thankful to the heavens.

-Thank you, mighty cat.

-Thank you.

-Today, under the guardian's protection, we milk the fools.

-Like today, let us make free money tomorrow, and insert our straws into the workers. Port tax, land tax, logistics tax, distribution tax, warehouse tax, suck all the honey under various names. Thank you.

The elders drew something in the air. It seemed to be a Fairy Tribe's sign of the cross. Their simultaneous bowing was quite solemn.

"....."

I was silent.

"....."

The Countess couldn't help but be silent too.

"Yep. So, they surrendered."

The Princess grinned.

"They had no interest in sovereignty, just happy making

money. Genuinely. Wanted to parasitize the Earth Spirit Tribe forever and suckle the honey... Hmm. Voluntarily gave up sovereignty, so I processed it as a dropout. Any questions?"

"I have a complaint!"

"Sorry. Not accepting complaints."

[The Countess fails to clear the stage.]

[The Countess is eliminated from the stage!]

"It's unfair!!"

The Countess's figure blurred.

She was probably being transferred to the 1st floor.

"It's nonsense! I just taught them how to suckle life's honey, why does that translate to giving up power! Power! Power is the ultimate destination of wealth, why!"

"The Fairy Tribe has always been less greedy. Once they learned the joy of making money, they no longer needed anything else. Maybe they just wanted to suckle honey like you said."

"King of Death!"

The Countess reached out to me.

"Help me! Protest with me! I can't accept this kind of elimination!"

Hmm.

Ummm.

"Sorry, Countess. But honestly, it seems like you made your own grave. Definitely not because you called me a scholar, just saying...."

"No!"

The Countess screamed and vanished in light.

Her desperate scream echoed for a while.

Whoosh-.

Next moment, the Sword Saint, Black Dragon Witch, Viper, and Paladin were summoned.

The Black Dragon Witch looked around.

"...We waited a bit this time too. King of Death, what happened?"

I shook my head.

"Nothing happened. Let's move on to the next stage."

I won't forget your absurd elimination, Countess.

Make a lot of money.

# Chapter 180: Our Children Changed (1)

---

It was impossible to just brush it off by saying, "Nothing happened." Everyone was curious about why the Countess had been eliminated. I roughly shared what I had heard and seen.

"That person is really... beyond pathetic, it's pitiful."

Black Dragon Witch displayed a look of disbelief.

She usually keeps her composure, but once Black Dragon Witch moves her facial muscles, her emotions are blatantly obvious. For instance, just by making a look of disbelief, she can turn the other person into a truly pathetic being. Impressive.

"It was a mistake to choose the Fairy Tribe in the first place. The less greedy you are, the easier it is to be satisfied. By introducing those kids to the taste of money, there's no way they wouldn't get distracted by other things."

"Countess....."

The Paladin looked up into the air, seemingly in pity. It was as if the Countess's apparition was smiling and waving at us. We observed a moment of silence for the Countess's absurd existence.

"By the way, what about the points the Countess had? Are they distributed among us now?"

"Yeah, that's right. But it won't be a honey-sucking situation like with Heretic."

The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages yawned.

"The Countess spent her points thriftily every time they accumulated. So...."

[The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages is settling the points.]

[You have gained 2 points!]



[Your current race points total is 8802.]

"There aren't many points left to distribute among you."

Damn. We all shuddered at the Countess's miserly spirit.

"Ah. There was 1 point left over, not rounding up. I'll give this to Sword Saint. You're the top of our ranking, right? I should take care of you at least. Take it gratefully! It's my mood!"

".....Th-thank you."

"You're welcome!"

Ultimately, what the Countess left us after her elimination were considerations of an absurd existence, the preciousness of a single race point, and the stingy elves gone crazy over money.

Why is it that our companions scatter nuisances across the universe each time they are eliminated? I'm seriously afraid that by the time we clear the 40th floor, our tower's name might change from City of Ascension to City of Idiots....

"Okay, now I'll send you to the 34th floor. Anyone want to buy items before entering? Choose quickly.

"Hmm."

I glanced at the civilization store. There was an item I had my eye on.

+

[Race Evolution]

Rank: Undecided

Effect: Your race can evolve twice. The cost of the second evolution is much more than the first!

Cost: 30,000 race points

Unlock Condition: Your race must acquire at least six traits.

+

I clicked my tongue. It was too expensive.

'It'll be difficult to go for the final evolution for now.'

I want to see our children grow rapidly and conquer the world, but unfortunately, it seems my wish will have to be delayed.

-Crazy bastard, if they grow more from there, what will you do!

'Do you know what happens if Hobgoblins evolve once more?'

-Eh? Let's see. Dwarves? Or maybe Trolls?

'This gentleman really can't grasp it.'

I chuckled inwardly.

'Just wait. Once the kids are all grown up, you'll understand why I chose the Earth Spirit Tribe. Then don't come saying, "Ah, Sir Gong-Ja, ah, I didn't recognize the Earth Spirit Tribe, I'm sorry."'

-Zombie... don't laugh like that. When you laugh sinisterly, it's fucking disgusting.

Such harsh words.

The other companions chose items according to their needs. Seeing that we were ready, The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages nodded.

"Okay. All the items you bought will be reflected in history! No refunds, so please understand. Then, if I turn back time to the next stage.... This time, 300 years have passed!"

300 years.

A thousand years had swiftly passed since the era when the primeval forests burned away.

Before I returned, I remember that from this point on, the

Flame Emperor's unification of the world started in earnest. Elves, who worshipped the Flame Emperor as a fire god, set the continent ablaze.

Well, being addicted to making money rather than burning people is healthier nowadays.

"I'll open the 34th floor now. There was no quest last time, but there will be one this time. However, it's not a joint quest that everyone completes together, but individual quests! I'll distribute a separate quest for each race."

The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages put down her pillow and grinned.

"It's about time for your children to end their childhood. In human terms, [adolescence]? It's when problems build up and explode internally. It's time to experience the growing pains."

Clap.

The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages lightly clapped her hands.

"Everyone, do your best! Scary kids have started roaming around, so be careful!"

Do your best, everyone.

I realized the meaning of those words after a white light enveloped us.

My vision blurred, and the Tower's voice echoed in my head.

[The Earth Spirit Tribe has acquired a new trait 'Noblesse Oblige!']

Apparently, the changes in the Earth Spirit Tribe were reflected as history unfolded.

While waiting for the 34th floor stage to unfold, another voice was heard.

[The Earth Spirit Tribe's trait 'Bad Friend Doctrine' is changing!]

[The Earth Spirit Tribe has acquired a new trait 'Demonic Cult'!]

'What?'

Demonic Cult?

Before I could fully ponder the meaning of that voice, I was transported to the next era.

---

As soon as the transfer was complete, a difference from the previous stages was apparent.

I found myself in the middle of a deserted street, looking around.

"...Black Dragon Witch? Sword Saint? Hello? Is there no one here?"

None of my companions were in sight.

The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages's phrase "Do your best, everyone" meant that we were indeed separated to complete our quests individually.

Perhaps everyone was scattered to the cities where their respective races were established.

-Ugor. Let's have a drink after training this evening.

I, too, had landed in the city of the Earth Spirit Tribe.

-These days, watermelon is in season. Mixing watermelon with alcohol makes for a tasty drink.

-Doesn't drinking alcohol affect the muscles you've worked so hard to train?

-Occasionally soaking the muscles in alcohol actually makes them more flexible.

Groups of Earth Spirit Tribe members were wandering the streets in twos and threes.



Despite the Earth Spirit Tribe emerging as losers in the last stage, the city was surprisingly unremarkable. There were no splendid buildings or dazzling streets.

It resembled a neatly constructed termite mound, perhaps?

Rows of uneven white buildings stretched out.

-Tonight, there's a Cave Fire Drama! Featuring popular actors! Over two years of continuous box office success! Seats are selling out fast, and there are only a few standing tickets left!

In such a city, there were occasionally large circular buildings, which were theaters. Ticket sellers were brightly smiling and selling standing tickets in front of these theaters, and surprisingly, they were all elves.

-Come on, come on! Almost sold out! Hurry!

What was even more astonishing was the title of the play.

-A unique experience for tonight only! With your lover! With your colleagues! Experience [Raviel and Kekerker] presented

by a prestigious theater troupe with 300 years of tradition!

“Pfft!?”

I spat out my drink.

-A love story of the century! A romance of the heavens! Why did the most beautiful princess in the empire leave the Crown Prince for the unremarkable Kekerkker? What sweet words did Kekerkker use to charm the princess? The play teaches us that in life, it's all about sweet-talking. [Raviel and Kekerkker]! Get your insane talking skills here!

“Are these guys serious?”

I rushed towards the theater. At the intersection in front of it, posters drawn with ink were plastered all over. There were portraits of actors playing Raviel and me, and unsurprisingly, they were both portrayed as Hobgoblins.

Hobgoblins chattered in front of the Hobgoblin portraits.

-So beautiful...

-Ugor. Honestly, haven't we seen [Raviel and Kekerkker] too many times since we were kids? I could recite the lines with my eyes closed.

-You don't understand. These days, it's trendy to reinterpret classic masterpieces. In the play I saw recently, Raviel ended up with Goldencup.

-That's nonsense. Isn't that [Silver Lily and Goldencup], not [Raviel and Kekerkker]? That's title fraud.

-Don't dismiss it. It gained enormous popularity in certain circles...

-Right. I heard someone even spent their entire fortune because they were obsessed with that play.

-Fairy Tribe writers are making a fortune.

But that wasn't all.

-A golden opportunity! The best Cave Fire Drama is this one! [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon] is coming to you tonight! Watch the spectacular flames performed by the

16th rank warrior of the Martial Plains Council! For the role of Sword Emperor, especially...

-A unique large-scale Cave Fire Drama! Sixty-six extras involved! [Ester, from Saintess to Witch]! Only the Gamtang Theater in Guru can bring such a play to the stage! Great value for your money, book now and get a free watermelon beer!

Elves were screaming and promoting aggressively.

There were several theaters crowded together just at the intersection. With theaters competing across the street from each other, aggressive canvassing was inevitable. Elves selling tickets even got into disputes, grabbing each other's ears.

-Hey! Using watermelon beer to lure customers? What kind of cheap trick is that? If you're a theater company, compete fairly with the quality of your plays!

-What's wrong with using business strategies! Develop your own products! Losers talk too much!

-Ugor? Are you getting into a fight now?

-Let's watch the play of the ticket seller who wins the fight.  
I'll be the judge, go ahead and fight.

A scene of shock and horror unfolded.

“These crazy people...”

Of course, Uburka had mentioned it.

He would turn my stories into Fire Paintings and pass them down through generations.

But I had imagined something like a grandmother telling stories to her grandchildren, not such full-scale commercialization.

-Could this be the influence of the Fairy Tribe? I heard the elves are crazy about money.

Guardian Spirit chuckled.

-Hey, that one looks interesting. Let's check it out!

He pointed to a theater where [Raviel and Kekerkker] was being performed. I followed Guardian Spirit, half out of my mind.

The circular theater resembled a vast cave. It was dark all around, but the actors freely controlled their aura as they recited their lines. Was it more of a musical than a play?

-Ah, Raviel. I have realized my feelings.

-Silvia.

-A clam nurtures illness in its heart. A white disease. A shining sickness. When the disease hardens into a pearl, it's like my fate. Raviel. I cannot reject this beautiful illness.

A Hobgoblin on stage was delivering a passionate performance. Given that she was called Silvia, this Hobgoblin must be playing Lady Goldencup.

-Silvia, no. Stop. If you say any more...

-It's not the sun of the empire I love, nor my butler. Raviel. Duke. I yearn for you.

-My God.

My God.

-Have you lost your mind, Lady Silvia!

These kids have lost their minds!

-No. I am perfectly sane. Tomorrow, I'll tell the Crown Prince that we're breaking up. He'll be angry, but his anger cannot consume my love. No. Let it consume me! I'll gladly burn.

-Lady!

I watched the Cave Fire Drama, stupefied.

The storyline went like this: Raviel couldn't accept Goldencup's feelings, the Crown Prince and Goldencup broke up, and despite the breakup, the Crown Prince, unable to let go, plots an assassination. Finally, the climax. In an attempt to stop the assassination, Kekerkker, the butler, dies...

“I shouldn’t die, you bastards!?”

I shouted involuntarily.

It's titled [Raviel and Kekerkker], isn't it! Just like what one Hobgoblin said, it's title fraud!

But my voice didn't reach the Earth Spirit Tribe children around me. Instead, after the Cave Fire Drama ended, they murmured as if moved.

-Tonight's fire was splendid too...

-I've seen it four times already, and I'm not tired of it. All the actors use their aura so well.

-Gor. To be honest, I was moved. I want to be on stage one day too!

No.

Something's not right.



I knelt at the intersection in front of the theater.

“What do I do? Our children have become strange...”

Guardian Spirit wore a complicated expression.

-Your children have always been strange, zombie.

# Chapter 181: Our Children Changed (2)

---

“What are you talking about? My children are pure, cute, robust, and sincere... They’re born with all the world’s goodness. What does a blind guy like you know about my kids?”

-Yeah, sure. Overprotective parent. In your next life, you should be born as a goblin.

Guardian Spirit clicked his tongue in disapproval.

At that moment, a voice echoed in my head.

[A quest for the 34th floor has been assigned.]

Was the stage situation vaguely perceived by the Tower? A quest was issued. Letters appeared before my eyes, spreading

like ink.

+

[Theatrical Warring States: Crisis of the Classics]

+

The quest name was ominous.

I looked up at the quest window while remaining on my knees in a defeated posture.

+

[Theatrical Warring States: Crisis of the Classics]

Difficulty: B+

Objective: You have successfully bestowed mythology upon

the Earth Spirit Tribe. The Earth Spirit Tribe grows up listening to your stories, watching your deeds, and learning your beliefs. But the excitement is short-lived. Tired of hearing the same stories for hundreds of years, the new generation of the Earth Spirit Tribe has grown bored of the ordinary 'classics'!

Recently, secondary creations of classics have become popular in the Earth Spirit Tribe society. This trend, which has gone beyond phenomenal popularity to almost a frenzy, now threatens to usurp the place of the original mythology!

'Ugor. I prefer the scheming Kekerkker over the kind-hearted one.'

'Goldencup and Silver Lily belong together. That's the tradition.'

'Constellation Killer and Sword Emperor are good too.'

'You don't know anything. Sword Emperor should be with the Heavenly Demon for it to be classic.'

Disaster!

The Earth Spirit Tribe has started to conflict over which is the real mythology. If this continues, the Earth Spirit Tribe might lose their common mythology. If the common mythology collapses, the Earth Spirit Tribe will be unable to perform Aura Formations!

Noble White Lion. In the Earth Spirit Tribe, what's performed in theaters is the mythology, and the play that garners the most intense cheers is the official history. You decide what the true mythology and real history are! Unify the mythology and establish Aura Formations!

\*However, if you fail to guide them, your race will lose the trait 'Demonic Cult'.

+

"....."

I read the quest window several times.

"So... my stories have been twisted so much that it's hard to tell what's real and what's fake? If I leave it as is, the Aura Formations I devised will be nullified."

-That seems to be the case.

“Hmm.”

I stroked my chin, pondering.

What to do?

Several ideas crossed my mind instantly. But the first thought was,

“Do I really need to fix this?”

I felt like it might be okay to just leave it as it is.

“If I were them, I’d get bored hearing the same stories every day. If the kids are trying out new plays out of a desire for something fresh, I don’t see a reason to spoil their fun.”

-Oh? What about the Aura Formations you ambitiously prepared?

“That's just my ambition. Uburka thought it would be fun and agreed to start it. If the kids of this era find it boring and reject it, well, that's their preference. I don't plan to interfere with their fun and games.”

-Oho.

Guardian Spirit clapped.

-For the first time, you seem like a mature parent.

“I've always been a mature parent.”

-Your nonsense is dazzling. If there were a competition for the most childish parent in the world, you'd overwhelmingly win, zombie.

“Oh. That play over there looks interesting.”

I pointed to a theater across the street.

There were many theaters in this city. The circular theaters

at the intersection were like big corporations, while this one seemed like a small theater company targeting the alley market. However, the advertisement for their play was attractively done.

-The Epic of Kekerkker! Witness the Cave Fire Drama [Sword Dance of Flames] by Kekerkker!

An elf ticket seller shouted.

-[Demon King Ester], [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon], [Raviel and Kekerkker], all stories start and end here! Two companions always together in mythic journeys! Their story!

The poster featured a somewhat frail-looking Hobgoblin with black tattoos and another muscular Hobgoblin.

Both were back-to-back, staring fiercely at the front.

“It’s definitely us, right?”

-It seems so. That's our story.



Guardian Spirit seemed intrigued as well.

We entered the small theater, filled with anticipation. Several cleanly scraped logs were placed around, with Earth Spirit Tribe spectators sitting on them. It was packed, even the standing room.

“Wow.”

The anticipation rose with the surprisingly well-maintained facility.

“It’s small but neat. Feels very elite.”

-But among the stories you told Uburka, was there anything about you and me?

I guess not?

Apart from [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon], there wasn’t much.

“Well, maybe this is also a secondary creation. Ah. It’s starting. Let’s watch quietly... No need for that.”

-It’s kind of sweet that we can chat without others hearing.

“Don’t they sell popcorn here? Watermelon beer? Watermelon rind fries? What’s with these kids and watermelons?”

We chattered and watched the play [Sword Dance of Flames]. The excitement didn’t last long. Our faces, no, our expressions soured in real-time as the play progressed.

“What the hell.”

-Shit?

We both stormed out in the middle of the play.

-Have these bastards lost their minds?

“Crazy.”

-That wasn't me on the poster, it was the Flame Emperor!?

"Crazy."

-Why is the Flame Emperor hogging the scene where the Heavenly Demon and Sword Emperor are dueling!?

"Crazy."

The word 'crazy' kept spilling out of my mouth. Triple crazy. Triple shock. Strike three.

"Now that I think about it, I guess I should clarify what the real mythology is. The children's fun? Of course, it's important. But not the Flame Emperor. Definitely not the Flame Emperor. Crazy. These kids have crossed the line."

-You're right! We need to overhaul this!

Guardian Spirit and I were united in our resolve to complete the quest at all costs.

“Let’s figure out how to resolve this situation.”

I wandered around the city until nightfall.

The result: I realized that this era was facing a critical issue, intertwined with the Earth Spirit Tribe’s newly acquired trait.

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[Demonic Cult]

Category: Religion, Military, Politics.

Origin: [Bad Friend Doctrine]

Description: The White Lion faith has finally established itself as a religion, evolving from [Guru Doctrine] and [Bad Friend Doctrine]!

The first apostle, Gorke, recognized the White Lion as a friend and father to the Earth Spirit Tribe. The second apostle, Uburka, introduced the Earth Spirit Tribe to the myths of the

White Lion.

However, the Demonic Cult is now facing a crisis of identity! There's a proliferation of sects, each interpreting the White Lion's myths differently. These sects accuse each other of heresy, each claiming to be the true heir of the White Lion's teachings!

Earth Spirit Tribe members believing in different myths develop different mental images. Depending on the mental image they hold, the appearance and efficacy of their aura vary greatly! Resolve the issue of doctrine interpretation!

\*However, this trait may change depending on the course of history.

\*Warning! 16 sects are in conflict over doctrine interpretation. If the conflict intensifies, religious schism and possibly even tribal division could occur!

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“Ah, this is troubling.”

I roughly understood how the last 300 years of history had unfolded.

“This seems to be a problem that arose after Uburka's death. If he were still alive, he could have subdued them with force...”

-Exactly. Those who couldn't make a peep under his rule have started to voice their opinions.

“That makes sense.”

Uburka was powerful. Too powerful. With his absence, disagreements among the Earth Spirit Tribe couldn't be resolved by one person's will alone.

A natural conflict.

Like everyone goes through adolescence, the Earth Spirit Tribe was experiencing growing pains.

-Come one, come all! If I can't have it, I'd rather destroy everything! Witness a different charm of Ester!

-This is the traditional Cave Fire Drama! All those fake plays can go away!

-Who are you calling fake? Heretics!

-The Flame Emperor was actually a good person!? This is the story of a man sacrificed to Kekerker's schemes...

...Although those growing pains were evolving in a strange direction.

For the Earth Spirit Tribe, art and religion are inseparable. Whoever performs the Cave Fire Drama becomes a priest, the theater stage is their temple. Which play you attend reflects the sect you believe in.

‘Depending on the image in their mind, their aura changes entirely.’

Art. Religion. Military.

Key areas are intertwined.

Definitely not just an issue of Flame Emperor worship.

As I was solidifying my resolve, a commotion erupted.

-How can this be!?

In a remote alleyway.

In this poor area where Earth Spirit Tribe members lived in dugout holes, a shrill voice echoed. Looking over, I saw an argument unfolding in front of a small, shabby theater.

-I was clearly the best in the audition! My acting was overwhelming!

The protagonist of the argument was an elf, shouting shrilly. A large Hobgoblin, arms crossed, stood before him.

-Then why was someone else chosen for the role, not me? Is it bribery? Nepotism? The stage should be purely based on talent, this is unacceptable!



-We don't take bribes. Nor do we choose based on connections. Poor as we may be, we're a theater company with 130 years of tradition. Don't underestimate us.

-Then why wasn't I even selected for a minor role! Is it because I'm an elf? Ridiculous! This is racial discrimination! I will formally complain to the Martial Plains Council!

-It's not because you're an elf. We follow Kekerkker's teachings of equality. But...

The Hobgoblin theater director spoke solemnly.

-You're... just too weak.

-What, what?

-What is that body?

The director's eyes critically scanned the elf.

-Your waist is bent. Shoulders too narrow. Muscles flimsy.

Arms and legs wobble like spider legs, they seem like they could snap if touched. Thighs... are those even thighs? I wonder how you stand up.

The director shook his head.

-What's the use of good acting? Nowadays, audiences care about muscles. With your flimsy body, you can't even charm a snot-nosed kid. You're not qualified.

-B-but acting is all about the performance!

The elf flared up, but self-consciously covered his body with his hands.

The director continued, exposing his thick muscles.

-No. An actor is a priest who spreads Kekerkker's teachings, a warrior who leads battles, and a combatant who attends the council to duel.

They're still doing council duels? These adorable lunatics.

-That's why the audience applauds actors. They recognize the authenticity in their illusions. Who would be enchanted by a warrior who only talks on stage?

-Ugh. Ugh...

-Your muscles are weak. First, grow your chest muscles four times bigger, then we'll talk.

-I, according to the myths, Kekerkker had internal muscles! I'm also internal! Stronger than I look!

-Ugor.

The director chuckled.

-Then become Kekerkker instead of an actor. Transform into a lion and help your race. At least in our theater, we don't believe in internal muscles.

-Wait, director! Just once more!

The elf fell to his knees, clinging to the director's feet.

-Please let me audition again! I'm confident I can act much better than before. After seeing my performance, you won't care about those muscleheads! I'm a genius in acting! If you choose me for the lead role, or even a Four Demon Lords role in [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon], I'll revolutionize Guru's theatrical world!

-An actor does not kneel.

The director dismissed him.

-Work out. Build muscles. That's all I can say.

-Ah! Damn it! Elves can't grow muscles like you, you ignorant pigs! Is your brain also a muscle?

-No more words are necessary.

The Hobgoblin easily shoved the elf away. The elf screamed and rolled away.

-Ah, I'm dying! Ah! Discrimination against elves! It's hard being born an elf! If I were born a goblin, I'd have debuted on stage long ago! Why am I suffering this treatment just for having big ears! Would Kekerkker allow this!

-Pathetic... Go earn some money.

-I prefer acting over money!

The director sighed and shut the theater doors.

The aspiring actor elf wept.

-O great Cat! Kekerkker! Please grant me the talent of an actor! Let me be on stage just once! Take my soul if you must! Or any demon, take my soul! Take it and debut me! Please!

Hmm.

I stroked my chin.

"I have a good idea."

-What?

“Let’s make a top star actor.”

Let’s show the Earth Spirit Tribe a true play, amidst their faith in false stories.

# Chapter 182: Our Children Changed (3)

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-The bad guys... Those ignorant fools who only know muscles...

The aspiring actor elf sobbed for a while before heading home, crying all the way, bitter about life's unfairness.

-Where have you been wandering around until now?

At home, he received the same scolding.

-Don't tell me you've been hanging around theaters again?

-You've grown old enough but still can't get your act together. Child, all those Cave Fire Dramas and such are just brainwashing by the Earth Spirit Tribe. It's all about worshipping Kekerker. What's so great about drooling over

that?

Unlike the Earth Spirit Tribe, elves lived in grand mansions and indulged in luxury. The family of the aspiring actor was also wealthy. To the merchant-born elves, this aspiring actor was an anomaly.

-That's not true...

Muttered the elf while picking at his dinner.

-There's no Cave Fire Drama about worshipping Kekerkker...  
In fact, they are stories about what Kekerkker worships...

-What are you saying?

-Can't hear. Speak up.

-You're an adult now. We've kept a ledger of all the expenses on you since birth, without considering inflation and interest-free. Pay it back soon. If not, leave the house.



-How can our family think only about money?

The aspiring actor elf retorted hotly.

-Why is our tribe obsessed with making money?

-Making money is fun.

-It's not fun at all! How is swindling those stupid Earth Spirit Tribe members enjoyable!

-It's always fun to take advantage of the gullible. So, will you pay the upbringing costs, or not?

-This tribe is insane.

The aspiring actor stood up indignantly.

-Paying back all the money spent on you since birth is tradition and duty. And everyone accepts it as normal...!

-It's your expense, of course it's normal.

-They even listed the cost of the midwife from the day I was born, along with food and clothing! Are they sick? Does this tribe die if they don't keep ledgers? Enough. I'm sick of this home! I'll just run away.

The aspiring actor left the house in large strides. As he was about to leave the gate, his family called out.

-Hey! Ssonia!

-What?

-Even if you leave, take the debt papers with you! Here!

The family brought out a cart.

The cart was piled high with rolls of papers.

All were debt documents.

-If you run away, you're no longer family, so I'll calculate the inflation and interest. Don't worry too much. I'll only charge the lowest interest rate. Just get a job at any company and work for 12 years to pay it off. Work hard and earn money.

-Damn, these dog-like...

-Each curse word you say now will increase the interest rate by 1%.

-.....

-Ah. I've included the cart's price too. I thought you might run away someday. I prepared it in advance. It's sturdy yet cheap, be grateful. What are you waiting for? Sonia. Leave the house.

With a gloomy face, the aspiring actor dragged the cart.

The cart's wheels clattered sorrowfully as it rolled away.

Guardian Spirit and I watched this sad scene of a young elf.

“Surely there isn’t a single normal race in this world, is there...?”

-Really. I knew your tower had a lot of crazies, but now I'm starting to feel uneasy...

The elf couldn’t afford a shabby inn room due to lack of money. He just crouched next to a theater, using the cart as a windbreak to sleep. Sobs and sniffles echoed mournfully in the moonlit streets.

[You have purchased 'Appearance in Dreams'.]

[100 race points are consumed!]

[Your current race points are 8702.]

And now it was my turn to appear.

“Ssonia.”

I entered the aspiring actor elf's dream and spoke to him.

Unlike Gorke and Uburka's dreamscapes, the elf's was... well, quite vulgar. A luxurious party. Muscular Hobgoblin servants were pampering the aspiring actor elf.

-Sorry, Ssonia the Great Actor. We never recognized the genius of such a great actor...

-Ahahahat! Muscles without acting skills! Hurry up and pour the drinks!

-Ugor. What an honor to fill Ssonia the Great Actor's cup...

Impressive.

The most impressive was the Countess, who had corrupted the subconscious of the Fairy Tribe to this extent. A literal fairy. A bewitching spirit.

“Ssonia, Ssonia, wake up.”

-Huh? What? Why is there a weak human here?

“I am the guide of the Earth Spirit Tribe. What you call Kekerkker. Since your Fairy Tribe joined under the Earth Spirit Tribe's banner, you naturally fall under my jurisdiction.”

-Ha?

“Didn't you wail today, asking for Kekerkker, or even a great cat, or a demon, to debut you as an actor? Be happy. I have descended upon hearing your miserable cries.”

-What nonsense...

A brief moment ensued to establish mutual respect through my fists.

-I'm sorry for my ignorance! Kekerkker!

“I forgive you. Gorke also doubted me at first, thinking I was a demon. But eventually, he realized my sincerity and praised me. One mustn't forget to be skeptical in this harsh world.”

-Yes! Thank you for forgiving me! Kekerkker!

“From now on, when you call me, refer to me as [the Merciful and Kind Kekerkker].”

-What?

Ssonia looked up at me with his knees on the ground. His eyes seemed to say, ‘What kind of new idiot is this?’ I smiled and raised my fist.

“What? Do you have a problem?”

-No, not at all. The Merciful and Kind Kekerkker!

“Now you’re ready to talk.”

I sat on a silk-cushioned chair, sipping watermelon beer. What is this? It tastes like ground cucumber mixed in, with an oddly sweet flavor... Why are my children hooked on such tricky drinks?

“Ssonia, don’t fear me. I just want to grant your wish.”

-Yes, yeesss...

“So, you want to become an actor? I will make you one.”

-I-Is that true!?

“Of course. I, Kekerkker, have never lied to you guys. But before I lend you my power, I need to verify your beliefs.”

Ssonia blinked.

-Verify my beliefs...?

“Lately, false stories have been misleading many children. Kekerkker cannot endure such misery. I ask if you truly qualify to be the third apostle. Answer me.”

I spoke earnestly.

“What kind of person is the Flame Emperor?”



-Uh...

Ssonia hesitated.

-He's a bastard, right? According to the most classic Cave Fire Drama... Kekerkker was living a normal life when one day, he met the worst person in the world and had a great awakening. That person's name was the Flame Emperor. Recently, there's been an increase in portraying the Flame Emperor in a good light, but I don't view it favorably. There are bastards in the world. And while people might change, bastards cannot...

"Ssonia."

Thump.

I placed my hand on the aspiring actor's shoulder.

"You really have a promising future!"

-Really?

I grinned broadly.

“They say you can tell a promising tree by its sprout. Ah, this child is not just any great tree but a talent that can devour the World Tree!”

-Ah... okay...

“How did such a kind-hearted child like you come from a money-grubbing tribe like the Fairy Tribe? A lotus blooming in mud, a black pearl in an oyster. Truly a beautiful fate!”

-I-Is that so? Hehe. You're making me blush with such praise...

Ssonia scratched his head, slightly embarrassed. A warm friendship blossomed between us, transcending race and time.

-But how exactly do you plan to help me?

"It's simple. I'll just borrow your body for a while."

I had already spotted an item in the civilization store.

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[Character Possession]

Rank: A-

Effect: You possess the chosen person. The original owner of the possessed body becomes a spirit and stays by your side. The spirit returns to its body when the person dies, or when you declare the end of possession.

Cost: 2,000 race points

\*However, you can use this item only if the person agrees to the possession.

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This was an upgraded version of the animal possession item.

-Borrow my body... Ah! Don't tell me?

"Kid, I don't know what nasty thoughts you had, but I'm solely devoted to Raviel."

-Ah... Right. I forgot.

"I'm simply saying I'll possess your body. I won't stay long. Just enough to make you a top-notch actor. Even if you want me out sooner, I'll leave."

Ssonia rolled his eyes.

-Do I have to offer my soul or something...?

"Goodness, what would I do with your soul? Even after I possess you, your consciousness will continue to exist in a corner of your mind."

-.....

"If you don't like it, just say so. There are plenty of Earth

Spirit Tribe members who'd love to be possessed by me."

-No, no! Not at all!

Ssonia hastily spoke.

-Please do possess me! Merciful and Kind Kekerkker! I'll do anything to debut on stage!

"Good. That's the spirit! If you want something, you should chase it to the ends of the universe to achieve it."

I immediately purchased the item.

[You have purchased 'Character Possession.']

[2,000 racial points are consumed!]

[Your current race points are 6702.]

"No regrets?"

-Yes!

"Any complaints?"

-None!

"Alright. Since you've agreed, I'll now possess your body."

-Come in!

Swoosh!

A sound like water draining from a toilet echoed, and my vision blurred. I closed and opened my eyes. Suddenly, it was early dawn, and the cityscape filled my view.

"Hmm."

I opened and closed my fist repeatedly.

Delicate hands.

Never held a sword in their life, judging by the softness of the palms.

"A bit awkward, but... better than the first time I possessed a lion. I'll get used to it quickly."

-Oh my goodness. The great Cat.

Ssonia's surprised voice came from within my mind.

-You really possessed me...?

"I said it, didn't I? I never lie to you guys."

-Sorry, I half suspected it was a demon's scam... Lately, there have been rumors about being possessed by demons, seeing strange monsters...

I tried moving aura through the energy channels. Was the Fairy Tribe naturally sensitive to aura, or did Ssonia have hidden talent? After a few times, flames appeared on my palm.

-Wow.

He's surprised, so not much talent there.

-It's unbelievable! The soul's flame this easily....

-Who's loitering around at dawn?

Creak. The theater door opened. The director who harshly rejected Ssonia yesterday stood holding the doorknob, looking like he slept there.

-Ugor? You again.

As our eyes met, the director looked fed up.

-The audition is over. The roles for the next Cave Fire Drama are decided. There's no role for you, so stop bothering us.



You're an elf, so you'll live well without acting, right?

"Director."

I respectfully knelt.

"I ran away from home."

-What?

"Look at this cart. It's full of debt papers my family charged for feeding and clothing me. They threw me out, saying to pay back even the interest. I'm truly desperate!"

-.....

"I have nowhere to go!"

I exclaimed passionately.

"Even a minor role is fine. I don't mind a cameo. Please, just let me on stage! Look at my acting, not my muscles! I swear on Kekerkker, Gorke, and Uburka, I'll repay your faith!"

-Ugor, how did such an elf come to be...

The Hobgoblin director held his forehead.

---Alright. I'll give you one last chance. But I can't just hand you a role. You have to prove you can enchant the audience even with your feeble muscles.

"How can I prove it?"

-Perform an act right here.

The director sat on the ground and crossed his arms.

-A special audition opportunity. There's no greater privilege than this.

Okay.

"What should I perform?"

-Every actor has a role that's like a gateway. How well they perform this role determines their caliber. It's an old piece, but very difficult, revealing the actor's true qualities.

"A difficult role..."

The director solemnly said.

-[Raviel and Kekerkker]. Perform the scene where Kekerkker confesses his love to Raviel, revealing his heart.

Oh.

-Don't complain it's too hard. As I said, you're already receiving a great favor. Some directors only allow Earth Spirit Tribe actors. This is your last chance.

I tilted my head.

"Will that do?"

-As expected of a novice.

The director snorted.

-The confession scene of Kekerkker to Raviel is difficult even for seasoned actors. Kekerkker saw Raviel as a goddess, and had to praise her beauty using all languages, sincerely, as if he would die without her love. It's not easy!

"Hmm..."

-Untalented actors try to get through this scene with tears and sobs. No! Kekerkker isn't begging or clinging to love. He simply wants to enhance Raviel's glory by purely expressing his love. Completely surrendering himself to her. It's impossible without experience.

Really...?

I'm confident I could praise my beloved 360 hours non-stop.

"Easiest task ever."

"Anyway, perform the scene where Kekerkker confesses to Raviel?"

-Right. Though I doubt a stingy elf like you can understand love.

"Understood."

I took a deep breath.

I imagined Raviel sitting in front of me, chin propped, hair like a silver fox about to hibernate, slightly sleepy thin eyes, red irises. 'Sleepy, huh?' Whispering breath. 'Try waking me up, my Gong-Ja.'

Your existence makes me love the world a bit more.

"Raviel. My soul. My eternal red. I didn't know red until I met you. I thought I knew, but your eyes, those eyes. When I look at them beside you---"

I opened my mouth, and...

Exactly 2 minutes later, the director's expression changed.

-Impossible!

The director jumped up in shock.

-This tongue play... this unbelievable love confession... this desperate, chicken-like charm... Everything is perfect! As if you are Kekerkker himself!?

That's right. My dear.

Daddy's here.

# Chapter 183: Rookie Actor (1)

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[Mud and Dust] is an ancient Goblin theater troupe.

To be more precise, it only has its antiquity left. Once prosperous, its glory days are long gone. After the previous director disappeared leaving a will amidst financial troubles, the phrase 'theater with a will' became more of an insult than a compliment.

-Come inside.

"Did I... pass?"

-Of course, you passed, Ugor. Even though you're a puny elf, I can't dismiss such a passionate performance. That would mean I'm unfit to run a theater.

The Hobgoblin director grunted as he led me inside the theater. Creak. As the main door opened, the 130-year-old theater revealed itself. There stood a building, worn out over

130 years.

"Wow."

The dimly lit interior. They called those torches lighting, but it was barely better than darkness. The ceiling and walls were covered in soot. Moreover, Earth Spirits liked damp places, so the floor was covered in what seemed like stagnant water.

A terror to both sight and smell.

"This is a bit..."

That wasn't all.

Spiders, centipedes, various insects.

A whole world of bugs gathered to prove their love for damp places. Thanks to them, even this tiny theater was overflowing with love, life, and above all, spider webs.

"What in the world..."



-You're moved, I see. I understand. I was thrilled too when I first saw a theater as a child.

The Hobgoblin seemed proud, completely misunderstanding my reaction.

-My heart raced, like falling in love for the first time. Looking back, that heartbeat guided my life to this point.

My heart was racing too. My left and right ventricles were pounding at the sight of the sprawling spider webs.

"Director, when was the last time this place was cleaned?"

-Cleaned?

"....."

The goblin's 'What's that?' expression made me lose all hope.

Right. These kids were born loving mud. No point nagging them to clean now. They won't listen.

-Even with my lacking muscles, I really passed the audition! Unbelievable! Amazing! Truly Kekerkker!

By the way, the original owner of this body, aspiring actor Ssonia, became a spirit hovering around me. Unlike the Guardian Spirit, he floated around like a ghost.

Only I could hear their voices, suddenly having two ghosts following me.

‘It’s like two mosquitoes buzzing simultaneously in the summer...’

-What?

‘Nothing. Ssonia, why are you so obsessed with such a shabby troupe? If you're determined to act, why not aim for a better place?’

-I initially aimed for famous troupes like [Flame] or [Fire Horse]...

Ssonia sounded disheartened.

-But well-known troupes wouldn't even interview me. They said a frail elf like me was useless... This was the only place that gave me a chance.

‘Huh.’

Ssonia was a victim of racial, or rather, muscle discrimination. How did my kids end up being a race that only screams about muscles...

-Follow me. I'll introduce you to our troupe members.

I followed the director deep into the building to the dressing room. There, amidst old theater props, two Hobgoblins were sound asleep.

-Wake up, you parasites!

The director smacked their heads with his massive hand.

-What time do you think it is? Still sleeping!

-Ugor... Ugorr....

The Hobgoblins struggled to open their eyes. One was one-armed, and the other one-eyed. They rubbed their faces and glanced at me.

-Woah. An elf here, director?

-Did we hire a new ticket seller?

-I'm tired of your whining. He's not a ticket seller, but a new actor! Didn't I tell you? Some elf keeps pestering to be cast as an actor.

-Ah, the annoying elf...

Only then did the Hobgoblin actors wake up fully.

-Wait, did you really cast him as an actor?

-Why not? I just passed him after the final audition.

-Are you insane? How can he take the stage with such a trashy physique?

That's too harsh.

-Don't worry. I know what I'm doing. His physique may be unimpressive, but this elf's acting...

"My name is Ssonia, director."

-Right, Ssonia. Ssonia's acting surpasses any actor I've seen. Nowadays, the audience only cares about muscles, but seeing Ssonia might change their minds.

The director asserted confidently.

The actors' faces began to show interest.

-Hmm.

-The director speaks so highly...

-Anyway, a junior has finally joined. Show some example, seniors. Will you only sleep in the dressing room? Get up, wash, and assemble on stage.

-Alright, alright.

The actors got up.

Clatter!

Props piled up like Lego bricks collapsed. Surprisingly, not two, but three Hobgoblins were sleeping in the dressing room. The last one was buried among the props, hugging a lion plushie and snoring. Cute.

-Hurry up and wake up!

-Ack? Aaack!

The director dragged the last one by his remaining ear. Even while being dragged, the actor held onto the lion plushie. Adorable.

-As you know, the next theater play, [The Fiery Sword Dance], is in two weeks.

Soon, the actors gathered.

The director paced in front of the stage with hands behind his back.

-Normally living Kekerkker one day meets the universally admired Flame Emperor, whom he always respected. Their meeting starts a new life for one and ends the life of the other. Recently, there's been a trend to reinterpret Flame Emperor as 'actually a good guy,' but we'll stick to the classic.

-Director.

The one-armed actor raised his hand.

-That's too outdated. We should follow the latest trends, right?

-Right. Audiences want something new.

The one-eyed actor chimed in.

-Even if it's cheesy, we need to exchange lines that seem like love-hate. It's what the audience enjoys.

-Ugh, nonsense! True flames don't choose their fuel!

The director's eyes bulged.

-The theme of [The Fiery Sword Dance] is about being disappointed in people and how that affects one's life. Anything else is heresy!

Hmm.

The actors murmured.

-He won't change his old-fashioned ways.

-Are we heading towards ruin...?



-Quiet! Haven't I compromised by adding a few lines due to your complaints? No more. Stretch for 20 minutes. Practice starts soon!

-That's not enough... Anyway, understood, director....

As the junior, I quietly sat in the audience, watching the seniors rehearse.

30 minutes passed.

‘Wow.’

I concluded.

‘This is a complete mess.’

It was utterly terrible.

Cave Fire Drama is about using Aura in acting. When enacting anger, the actor doesn't just spill lines but also bursts out flames of Aura from their body, manifesting anger.

If you're familiar with Aura, you excel in acting. If you're skilled in acting, you become proficient in Aura. Thus, Cave Fire Drama actors naturally become great warriors and Aura users.

It should be simple...

"Why are they so stiff?"

I murmured unintentionally. The words slipped out before I realized. The director, who was coaching the actors, turned to look at me upon hearing my comment. -What are you talking about?

"Oh. Nothing. It just seems like they're using Aura in a very predetermined way..."

In the scene where Kekerkker realizes the Flame Emperor's atrocities and becomes enraged.

The actors focused too much on "anger." Or rather, they failed to focus on it at all. For instance, to express "anger," they would explosively unleash Aura like a wildfire. When expressing "sadness," they would just droop.

As if there's a set formula for Aura.

‘It's flashy but...’

I watched as the Auras dramatically expanded and then diminished in real-time. It was dazzling.

But that was it.

‘It's meaningless like this. Really.’

I spoke up.

"Cave Fire Drama is the art of Aura. And Aura is a power manifested by rooting in a certain will, emotion, or mental image. Emotion comes first. If you prioritize mere physical movements or lines, the Aura loses its vitality. How should I put it? It doesn't vibrate. Right. It lacks impact. It's deflated."

The director frowned, looking like a gangster from his youth.

-What's with this Kekerkker's babbling?

"Is that a goblin proverb? ...No, never mind. Anyway."

I stepped up to the corner of the stage.

The senior actors had stopped their practice and were watching me.

"See, if you have a set motion for every instance of anger, and another set motion for every instance of sadness, that's not going to work. Does everyone shed tears when sad? No, right? Situations vary. You have to be able to adapt instantly in completely different circumstances for Aura to be meaningful."

The senior actors snickered, amused.

-The director brought a teacher instead of a junior.

"Teacher! Show us a model performance!"

"Hmm."

How can I make them understand?

I looked around.

"First, let's extinguish these torches."

I scooped up a handful of dirt from the floor and, infusing it with Aura, flung it. The torches hit by the pebble arrows lost their flames and went out.

The Hobgoblins panicked.

-What?

-How did...

The surroundings darkened in an instant.

"Okay."

Every Cave Fire Drama is modeled after the city of the Mountain Calamity Tribe. A large cavern. Surrounded by walls but with a hole in the ceiling. The Earth Spirits have long forgotten their days groaning as slaves. Yet, time leaves its mark, shadowing their architectural style.

"Please be a bit quieter, everyone."

As the torches went out, only the light from the small hole in the ceiling streamed in. The light of dawn. The slightly shadowed blue light settled on the shabby stage.

"It's not about delivering special lines."

A quiet carpet of dawn.

"You don't even need lines. Aura isn't magic... Okay, let me just show you. Let's say we're expressing anger."

I assumed a push-up position on the stage.

"Any familiar posture is good. Something everyone can recognize. No need for exaggerated expressions. Hup!"

I slowly lowered and raised my chest and waist, maintaining a specific rhythm.

"Normally, this is the speed for push-ups. Ordinary. But, if you change it like this..."

I abruptly heightened my Aura.

Red flames surged around my body. Amidst them, I repeated push-ups much faster than before, at an abnormal speed.

Rapidly.

Mechanically.

Expressionlessly.

"....."

Silence all around.

I stared ahead, silently, doing nothing but fast push-ups. I moved my whole body. Above me, blood-red Aura fiercely blazed.

"...Hoo."

After 30 seconds, I dusted off my hands and stood up.

"See? It's just push-ups. A familiar movement. But how is it? Even with the same action, changing the speed completely alters the feel."

-.....

"If I were sweating profusely, taking an unstable posture, and doing push-ups manically, how would it be? The feeling would change again. If the previous was refined anger, this would be wild, uncontrolled anger. That's what it's about. It's not about reciting special lines or doing unusual movements."

The Hobgoblins seemed to understand, yet they didn't. It was a bit frustrating. Only then did I realize I had met [children with no talent for Aura] for the first time.



"Hey, senior."

I pointed at the one-eyed actor.

The actor playing the Flame Emperor in the play.

-Me?

"Yes. Flame Emperor has a strong ego, right? How would you express the Flame Emperor's egoism?"

-Well...

"How would you express egoism with Aura?"

The one-eyed actor, flustered, picked up a hand mirror from the nearby props.

-Something like this, I guess...

He looked into the hand mirror. A faint Aura emanated from his body, wriggling sneakily like a snake.

Indeed.

"It's not the worst, but it's strange. It doesn't fit."

-Strange how?

"Look. The Flame Emperor is like a self-proclaimed macho man. Would such a guy delicately look into a hand mirror? Would the Flame Emperor carry around a hand mirror? For what? Why?"

-Well...

"You're caught in the notion that 'people with strong egos often look in mirrors.' Plus, you assumed egoism is sly and wriggly, so you shaped your Aura that way. That's wrong. You're just imitating something. You need to root in your own emotion."

-Then, how would you do it?

"The same."

I heaved and maneuvered my Aura.

Like Uburka, I also cloaked myself in Aura. Artificial muscles. I made it seem as if my whole body was bulging with muscles.

"Huff... hoo, huff..."

And then I did slow, deliberate push-ups. I exaggeratedly added heavy breathing.

Not an act of [improving the body] but a [display of a good body].

"Done, right? Simple?"

-.....

The one-eyed Hobgoblin's mouth fell open.

-Who are you?

"A rookie actor, why?"

The Hobgoblins stared at me as if I were crazy. Why, though?

# Chapter 184: Rookie Actor (2)

---

The Earth Spirit Tribe has a very good culture.

The strongest one is always right.

If you have a complaint, talk with your fists, not with your tongue.

"First, let's clean up. Seniors."

And here, I'm the strongest one.

"Look at the state of this theater. What is this? Are cobwebs part of the décor? Are you decorating with mold? Ah, the stench of rot is overwhelming. It's like a garbage can. If a customer walks in here, they'll think they're in organic waste."

-But... However...

"Are you stronger than me? Are you a better actor? Do you handle Aura better?"

-No...

"Then pick up a mop, seniors. We're not amateurs. Practice for the Cave Fire Drama, or whatever it is, comes after the environment is set. The environment reflects the state of your mind. If the theater is a trash can, what does that say about your minds? Now, are you going to pick up the mop or not? Do you want to get hit?"

I wasn't one to make empty threats about hitting someone.

A gentleman doesn't make threats. He just acts.

I provided a punch massage service to the particularly lazy Hobgoblins.

"Do you want to be hit again?"

The actors reluctantly picked up the mops with sullen faces.

'Thought a weak Elf joined as the junior, but turns out he's a tiger,' their faces read.

"Being damp is good. That's an Earth Spirit trait. But who likes rotten water and stench? That's just laziness. And if you excuse it with 'Earth Spirits naturally like dampness' or 'true actors don't care about the environment,' everything around turns into a mess. Are you dogs, seniors?"

-But, junior. Aren't you being too harsh...?

"Ha. Still no words of remorse? So you are dogs. From now on, when I say something, you answer 'Woof.' Understood?"

-Woof...

"Speak up!"

-Woof!

Good. Now, mop in hand, let's clean the theater. While doing so, cleanse your minds of the dog-like thoughts within. Keep cleaning until those thoughts run away. Got it?"

-Woof!

For two days straight, we did nothing but mop.

The one-eyed actor tirelessly moved between the well and the theater with a bucket.

"Senior, don't just mindlessly draw water. Pretend you're a noble's servant. Immerse yourself in the role. What a precious opportunity! Clean thoroughly, drive away the inner dogs, and get comfortable with the role of a servant. Killing three birds with one stone."

-Woof, woof!

The one-armed actor scooped out stagnant water and dug up rotten soil from the theater floor.

"Digging isn't just digging. It's the height of absurdity. Congratulations. You're experiencing the absurdity of a



thousand lifetimes for free."

"Imagine this, you're a warrior who lost an arm in battle. The war is so fierce that even with an arm lost, the commander doesn't let you rest. You have to keep building barricades and digging moats. Keep digging, even doubting whether you're still a warrior, and amidst that doubt, dig vigorously."

-Waaah, digging...

The one-eared actor followed my instructions perfectly.

"Did you throw out the trash?"

-Woof, junior.

"Now, let's make new chairs out of logs. Ready?"

-Woof

"Chairs for guests. Let's say the Cave Fire Drama lasts an

hour. Guests won't stare at your face for an hour straight, but their butts will be on the chairs. In this theater, the only thing serving the audience from start to finish is the chair. If the chair is uncomfortable, so is the play."

-Woof. I understand the importance, junior.

"Let's make some spanking new chairs together today. While we're at it, let's make both regular and special seats.

-Woof woof. Loyalty.

And then,

The director became adept at catching spiders.

-Now... Ssonia, I may be just the director, but...

A very severe curse.

-Upon reflection, it's wrong to have bugs roaming around!  
I'll clean them up right away!

[The members of the troupe 'Mud and Dust' submit to your authority.]

[The troupe 'Mud and Dust' recognizes you as the real power!]

Even after the big clean-up, I didn't stop.

Guided by the voice of the Tower, I thought of more improvements.

-Um, Ssonia...

"Yes?"

-May I ask what you're doing with that ladder? Or should I say, may I inquire?

I climbed up the entrance with a ladder, radiating Aura from both hands. Right in front of me was a signboard engraved with 'Mud and Dust.'

"As you can see, I'm changing the signboard."

The Hobgoblin director was startled.

-Changing the signboard?

"Yes. A 130-year tradition is great, but frankly, our troupe is at the very bottom. We need a name that actively appeals to the audience, rather than something seemingly cool like 'Mud and Dust.'"

I flipped over the worn-out signboard.

The blank backside.

I etched letters into the wooden board with my Aura-infused nails.

"Okay. Looks cool."

I admired the new signboard I created.

[The Dog Noise Troupe]

-.....

The Hobgoblin looked back and forth between my face and the signboard.

-Um... Ssonia?

"Speak."

-Still, Dog Noise? We have a 130-year tradition...

"I've heard from the seniors. Director, you owe quite a bit to the elf trading companies, right?"

The director flinched.

"Every fortnight, at least one elf comes to press for debts."

-Those bastards, telling everything to the junior...

"Tradition isn't always admirable. You need to take responsibility for your people first. You're the owner of this troupe. You need to attract customers, gain popularity. The actors shouldn't be sleeping in the dressing room; they need proper lodging. Right?"

-.....

"I'm an elf. I know business better than the goblins. We need to attract even one more customer right now. If we continue like this, the troupe will collapse."

I walked out onto the streets, flyers in hand.

"The Dog Noise Troupe! Next Saturday evening at the Dog Noise Troupe, witness the fiery sword dance!"

-Woof.

Passing Hobgoblins chuckled.

Even Elves from other troupes promoting their plays laughed.

-What's that? Dog Noise?

-Who's this kid?

Good. A reaction. Better than complete indifference.

Now the tide has turned. It's my role as the promoter and ticket seller to steer this in a positive direction.

"Woof! Woof! Come witness the banquet of Dog Noise, unseen and untasted anywhere else in this city! Tired of 'Flame Emperor was actually a good guy'? Think bad guys should be truly bad? Come on over! Ah, there's no bigger bastard in the world! The true scoundrel is coming to you!"

-The Hobgoblins strolling the streets chuckled at me.

-.....

The director, who had followed me, stared at me blankly.

When a small crowd gathered, I decided to unveil my secret weapon.

"Listen up, brave warriors! This isn't your everyday Fire Drama!"

I snapped my fingers.

Ding-!

A lively sound echoed through the air, startling the passersby.

-What was that?

The source of the sound was simple. I had sent two streams of Aura to collide with each other, creating a piano-like note through the vibration of the air and Aura.

Quite a complex Aura manipulation, but not difficult for me.



"Expect great things!"

I continued to create sound waves with my Aura.

Even I, a music novice, could imitate this tune - Chopsticks March.

"Look! Even an elf ticket seller like me can manipulate Aura like this! The Dog Noise Troupe! How extraordinary must their Fire Drama be to go to these lengths!"

Under the bright sky, in the sunlight-filled streets, I played the melody with nothing but my fingers.

It was effective.

-Is that a sound coming from hitting air?

-Incredible. How can that be?

-Is that sound really made with Aura...?

Finally, the passersby stopped and focused on me. Not just the bystanders, but also the ticket sellers from other major troupes were stunned.

"At the Dog Noise Troupe's performance, there will be no dialogue! Flame Emperor, Kekerkker, no one will speak a word! Fire doesn't talk, it just burns! Witness the first-ever no-dialogue Fire Drama!"

-No dialogue...?

The Hobgoblins gawked at my flamboyant hand movements.

-Can a Fire Drama really exist without dialogue?

-Well, not saying a single word seems...

People were astounded by the Aura performance and suspicious of the no-dialogue advertising.

[How can he do that?] and [That can't be true] - the best two emotions for advertising mingled in the air at the crossroads.

"If the actors utter even a single word, we will give a full refund! One word equals a full refund! Two words, double the ticket price! Three words, and I'll give away all my wealth!"

I cheerfully handed out flyers to the people.

"This isn't your everyday Fire Drama! Bring this flyer and your companion enters for free! One free companion per person! Free admission available! Not just a show, but a chance to earn money! Thank you! Yes, thank you!"

The people had no strength left to refuse the flyers I handed out.

They absent-mindedly received them, as if intoxicated by a strong scent.

The flyers quickly ran out.

"Thank you! Until the day of the actual play, I will perform here every day! Of course, the concert is free! Oh no, our theater director is deep in debt to the trading companies! He's desperate!"

I grabbed the director's hand firmly.

He was a bit surprised but willingly accepted it. As the crowd's attention focused on us, he even managed a forced, awkward smile.

Good.

"Is there any better actor than one driven to the brink of bankruptcy! There's no better acting than from those who are homeless! Talent inversely correlates with one's financial situation! Dog Noise Troupe, I'll be performing too. Next Saturday evening. Next Saturday evening is the show! Thank you. Dog Noise! Next Saturday evening!"

I bowed to the crowd.

The director, whose hand was still in mine, naturally bowed as well.

There was no applause or cheering, but the atmosphere wasn't bad. It was great, in fact. I scattered my salesman's smile, taught by the Black Dragon Witch, and quickly left the street.

-Wow.

The Guardian Spirit behind me muttered.

-Aren't you embarrassed?

‘What's there to be embarrassed about when doing my job?’

-You're the Vice-lord of the Demonic Cult.

‘The Demonic Cult was established by farmers and miners who were driven out or fled. What's wrong with handing out flyers on the street? This is also work.’

-Really... You could be dropped in the middle of a jungle or desert and still survive. The Flame Emperor did well to release someone like you into the world.

-Kekerkker...

The elf Ssonia, now just a soul, seemed unable to decide how to react.

A mix of admiration and self-deprecation, like a half-and-half chicken.

-You're amazing, but, how should I put it, so different from the Kekerkker I imagined... Or is this more like the real Kekerkker...?

Exactly.

This is me.

Later, after leaving the street, the director spoke up.

-Are you serious?

"About what?"

-About the no-dialogue Fire Drama. How can you not speak a single word on stage?

"Of course, I'm serious. Do you think I would lie to prospective customers?"

-But...

"Don't worry. I'll do everything in my power to make it worth the entry. If it doesn't work out, I'll take the stage alone. You don't have to worry about lying to the audience."

-.....

"Besides, we have work to do. By now, new chairs should have been installed in our theater. Please select only the VIP seats, mark them clearly, and set the price at twelve times the regular seats."

-Twelve times?

The director was astonished.

-Isn't that too expensive?

"Expensive, yes. But only those who don't mind the price will buy them."

Ding.

I lightly produced a sound with my Aura.

"From what I've seen, proud warriors will want to watch my performance up close to learn from it."

-.....

"[A show's attendee] might find it too expensive, but [a warrior seeking to learn Aura] will find it a fair price. We attract the former for free and earn from the latter. Trust me, director, and set the price high."

The next day.

From noon, several Hobgoblins began to loiter around the theater.

-Is this the Dog Noise Troupe?

-I heard there's a show next Saturday. I want to reserve front



row seats.

-Is that elf in the play? I want tickets to a play featuring that elf.

Despite the price, the Hobgoblin warriors easily bought the seats.

After selling VIP tickets to four individuals, the director looked at me in disbelief.

He had never seen such a thing since opening the theater.

"How about that?"

I smiled warmly.

"My words were right, weren't they?"

Two days later.

All VIP seats were sold out.

# Chapter 185: Rookie Actor (3)

---

-Special seats are all sold out!

-Has this ever happened since we joined the troupe?

The actors were thrilled.

-Never. We were lucky if half the seats were filled....

-Are we becoming blockbuster actors?

-Our youngest is a real gem! Ugor!

Even for a third-rate theater in an alley, or rather because of it, the news of VIP seats selling out was a cause for celebration.

But their expressions changed upon hearing the next performance's plan.

-Perform without a single line of dialogue?

The seniors were shocked.

It was unimaginable.

-How on earth....

"Think of it in the opposite way."

I spoke calmly.

"You may not know, but Fire Drama originally had no dialogue. No script either. It was all about moving the flames with Aura. That's the origin of Fire Drama."

-Really?

-Hmmm.

The seniors pressed their upper lips to their philtrums, looking uncertain.

'Well, of course.'

It's obvious for me since I've seen it, but not for these kids.

'It's a story from 900 years ago.'

It's closer to a thousand years than nine hundred. The original form of Fire Drama is beyond the knowledge of today's Earth Spirit Tribe.

I'm the only one in this era who can say this with certainty.

"Seniors, within you, within the Earth Spirits, lies the ability to be immersed in sorrow just by looking at flames. You know? That's a wonderful sensitivity. I believe you can awaken that sense."

-.....

"Dialogue only gets in the way. The reason your acting is poor isn't because you are. It's because you treat Fire Drama as [someone else's story]!"

I looked at each Hopgoblin.

One-eyed.

One-armed.

One-eared.

Actors who had lost something were there.

"Seniors, you all have shining gems in your hearts. They're just buried. A gem or a pebble, it makes no difference if it's buried in a sand dune. I'll take you to that sand dune. And I'll help you love acting sincerely."

-How can you say such embarrassing things so casually.

I nodded.

"It's the truth."

-.....

"In the next seven days."

I infused Aura into my hand.

Then, I carved a large [7] on the theater wall.

"I'll teach you how to use Aura without sleeping for the next seven days."

That night, the special lessons began.

---

"Sit comfortably. As relaxed as possible. Stretching your legs is fine."

The actors comfortably sat on the stage.

"Good. Anyone with stiff shoulders? Any discomfort, let me know. I'll massage it out. No one? Okay. Let's start."

I spoke in front of the seniors.

"Now, usually, Aura is dismissed as something mental. [Manifest your will] or [Awaken your spirit]. Just a bunch of indecipherable words. Seniors, try to manifest your will and raise Aura."

-Uh....

The actors tried to raise Aura, somewhat bewildered.

A faintly wavering mirage.

No clear shape or direction.

Compared to Uburka, the legendary warrior, one could say they had no talent.



"Not working well, is it?"

The actors looked embarrassed.

-Uh, well. Sometimes it works ...

"Right. There are days when it [scratches well]. Good condition, emotions flowing, and Aura coming out smoothly. But that's not enough."

-Not enough?

"From now on, you should be able to pull out Aura freely whenever you want."

-Ugor.

The seniors laughed awkwardly.

If only it were that easy.

A smile rooted in life's resignation.

I too smiled.

"Let me suggest something. Let's not use the word [will] here. It's true that Aura moves with will. But the activation of Aura is not due to will."

-Hmm?

"Aura is activated by [memory], not [will]."

That was my conclusion.

A truth learned in the world of the 'The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon,' from my master.

"Seniors, you need to learn [how to recall memories well]. Not some vague notion like [strengthening your will]."

-Recalling memories well....

"Yes. As vividly as possible."

I earnestly looked into the eyes of the Hopgoblins.

"Seniors. Think of the [sea]."

The actors closed their eyes.

-Hmm.

"Did you think of it?"

-Yes.

"Okay. Let me guess. You imagined a horizontal line stretching on both sides, right? Like a painting on canvas. Pretty blue. Right?"

The seniors all nodded in unison.

I grinned.

"That's the most basic level of memory. A memory association to be avoided when using Aura."

-Ugor?

"You didn't think of the sea. You just recalled the word [sea]. Such basic memory can never fully unleash Aura. Now!"

I clapped my hands.

"Stand up!"

The actors got up uneasily.

"Now imagine standing on a sandy beach. The feeling of sand around your ankles. Imagine it. Ssshhh. The seawater flows between your toes. It covers up to your ankles and then retreats. Ssshh."

-.....

"What's the color of the seawater? Blue?"

-No. It's clear.

"How does the water feel between your toes? Hot?"

-Cool.

"Refreshing, right? And the seawater? Just clear?"

-No... there are muddy particles.

"The waves bring in the mud. Okay. Now imagine sand getting stuck between your toes, and tiny dirt particles clinging to your ankles."

-Hmm.

"I personally dislike that feeling. It's scratchy, right? The grains mixed with salty water feel sticky."

-Right.

"You went into the sea and got your calves soaking wet. The saltiness feels uncomfortable. What will you do now? What's your next move?"

The actors each had a response.

-I'd go to a well and wash my feet first.

-Since I'm already at the sea and wet, might as well swim....

-Are there any clams?

Okay.

"That's a much [stronger memory]."

I said.

"Seniors, from now on, when you try to recall something, never start from a word, like [sea]. Start from a very specific sensation, like [the feeling of your feet submerged in seawater]. Your memory will naturally assist you."

I looked at the one-eyed Hoptgoblin.

"How was it when you first thought of the [sea]? It was just a simple blue, like a simple canvas painting, right?"

-Ugor.

"But how about when you imagined dipping your feet? It's clear, right?"

-Yes.

"Not just clear, but you also recalled the uncomfortable sensation. You even thought about what to do next. That's it."

The proper way to recall a memory.

Like the feeling of a grain of sand caught between toes, recalling the most specific sensation.

If you can do that adeptly, Aura naturally intensifies.

"---If any of you have a memory of [almost dying in a fire]."

Fwoosh.

A flame easily ignited in my hand.

"With your Aura, you could even depict a hellfire. The brink of death forces a memory onto a person."

-.....

"There might be people born with natural acting talent. Just naturally exuding sad emotions, acting vividly as if in the midst of a real battlefield. You seniors might envy those actors. Even feel jealous. Seniors, want to know the secret of how they acquired such talent?"



I spread the flame wider in my hand.

"They have memories."

Trauma.

"How can they act as if they're really in the middle of hellfire? Simple. To them, the world itself is hell. Always, every day. They're trapped in the shadow of memories they can't escape no matter what."

-.....

For example, Uburka.

Even the strongest warrior in the history of the Earth Spirit Tribe was the same.

He suffered severely from albinism.

Sunlight, a blessing for others, was a hostile blade for Uburka. Walking under the sun was like battling and

overcoming enemies. Naturally, the boy surrounded himself with Aura.

"The play we will perform next week, [The Fiery Sword Dance], is about Kekerkker's disappointment and anger towards the Flame Emperor. You are not Kekerkker. Nor the Flame Emperor. But, don't you have experiences of being disappointed by someone?"

I looked at each actor in turn.

One-eye. One-arm. One-ear.

I saw the children, each broken in one way or another.

"Ever disappointed someone?"

-.....

"Unlikely you haven't."

I extinguished the flame.

"We've all experienced being scumbags, and we've all been scumbags to someone else. Any of you seniors can be Kekerkker. The Flame Emperor... Ah... that's a bit more difficult. His very existence is a challenge. So, I'll take the role of the Flame Emperor in the next play."

Even with special lessons, there's a limit of time.

Among us, I'm the only one who can embody Yoo Soo-Ha.

The remaining three actors looked up at me with six eyes.

-So...

-Who will play Kekerkker?

-Who's going to take the role?

"One of you."

I answered.

"The one with the highest achievement over the next week will get the lead role."

In other words.

"The one who's been most profoundly disappointed by people, who is still feeling that disappointment, will take the lead."

The seniors fell silent.

---

-My father gambles.

The one-eyed actor's name was 'Arika'.

-He's been like that since I was a kid. He started working in a forge when he was young, got into gambling following his colleagues. Turned out he had a knack for it.

There are a few worlds where those without talent are more miserable than those with it.

Gambling is one of them.

-Some days he'd win a mountain of gold coins. On such days, he'd buy villas, even had me live there. Hired expensive tutors, housekeepers. Got anything I wanted.

"How long does it last?"

-At most 2 years. At least 3 days. Usually about 2 months...

The one-eyed Arika muttered.

-When he wins at gambling, he starts a business. Hostels for gamblers, lending money to swindlers. Sometimes it goes well. But when business falters...

Business always has its ups and downs.

If riding the wave during good times is skill, enduring the bad times is a talent.

-He always tries to cover losses with gambling.

Arika's father simply lacked the ability to endure.

-This is how it is. If the daily revenue is 3 gold coins and it falls short, he makes up with gambling. He says it's business, an inevitable trade strategy.

The one-eyed Arika sighed.

-I don't have a home. It's always been villas or inns. No place I stayed long enough to call home. The most intense gambling cities, then to slightly less intense, then to even worse...

The one-eyed Arika slowly wrapped his head.

-One day, a woman came to the inn. My lifestyle was a mess, so even long past noon, I was sleeping in my inn room. Someone knocked on the door. I opened it with a scowl.

「Are you Mr. Arika?」

-At a glance, she seemed significant. I thought my dad had caused trouble again. Occasionally, people who lent money to my dad would come, or maybe it was someone from the inn.

「Is your father here?」

「No.」

-I had just woken up, looking a mess. My expression completely wrinkled. So, I held the doorknob, ready to close the door if necessary.

「Who are you?」

「.....」

The woman didn't answer.

She mumbled something and left the inn.

The one-eyed Arika closed the door, feeling puzzled. In the evening, he mentioned the woman to his father.

-That woman was my mother.

"....."

-She left when I was three. I didn't recognize her.

Arika's eyebrows furrowed under his hand-covered forehead.

-It's okay. But I keep thinking about the expression I had then. I was annoyed. Looked at her as if she was a huge bother. Held the doorknob. I hate that. I don't understand.

Arika looked down at the floor with his one eye.

-But why did my mother call me [Mr. Arika]? Why [Mr.]? I don't understand. I heard my name was thoughtfully chosen by both my father and mother. But why [Mr. Arika]? I don't get it.

His muttering flowed out.

-Damn.

Next.



The one-eyed actor left, and the one-armed actor entered.

White tattoos ran across his torso, stopping at his right shoulder.

-I'm a drug dealer.

The one-armed actor's name was 'Yumar'.

# Chapter 186: Flame

## (1)

---

-I was born in a pathetic little village.

The one-armed Yumar said.

-In the countryside, there's nothing to do even as you grow up, so I just hung around with kids my age. Sometimes watching for tigers coming down from the mountains, collecting tolls from merchants passing through the village... It was a village as poor as dried-up tree bark.

Yumar scratched his forehead.

Green frown lines creased.

-Have you ever killed someone?

“Yes.”

-So, quite a few, I see.

The one-armed actor nodded.

He didn't seem too surprised.

-Where was the first place you saw blood? On the battlefield?  
Or...

“It was on a hunting ground. I killed with an ambush.”

-Ah, not exactly a warrior's feat.

Yumar lifted the corners of his mouth.

Anyone confessing to murder smiles at least once during the conversation.

Everyone does.

It's not about laughing or talking about murder. It's mocking oneself for bringing up such a topic, for the act of confessing. They subtly hope that others will join in their mockery.

“Yes, right. I was no warrior.”

That moment is crucial.

That's when you must not join in their laughter.

I asked calmly without changing my expression.

“What about you, senior?”

-.....

The smile faded from Yumar's lips.

-...A few years ago, I think it's been 13 years. The village chief kept going to other villages. At first, I thought he was visiting friends, but he went too often. After 7 months, the chief came back looking triumphant.

「I've created a business for our village. You fools.」

The business the chief learned from the neighboring village was drug manufacturing.

-At first, he gathered the loafers in the village. There were about six of them. Villages like mine had plenty of aimless young men like me. Um, it was called [Dogwood Flower]. The one that kills your Fairy Tribe instantly. They extracted it and solidified it into pills....

“You're not just a simple drug dealer, but the head of an organization, senior.”

-.....

The one-armed Yumar shut his mouth.

-How did you know?

“I can tell just from a little conversation. Senior, you're smart. Exceptional memory. You remember that the village chief lurked in the neighboring village for 7 months 13 years ago, right? You're good with numbers.”

I poured tea into Yumar's cup on the table.

Thanks to my direct training from Raviel, my tea ceremony skills had improved dramatically.

It's a pity that this troupe only has cheap tea leaves.

“You even know how to manufacture drugs. You remember everything about the village chief, so you're not just a henchman. Either a boss or at least a deputy. You were a core member of the organization.”

-...You're quick-witted.

Yumar gave a bitter smile and lifted the cup with his one arm.

He took a sip of tea and looked slightly surprised.

-Damn. Why does it taste so good?

“Then what was it really like?”

-...Yeah, right. I was the head of the village organization. Turned out I had a knack for managing the kids. Also had good luck.

It was more than just luck.

He was a genius.

Yumar's [business] expanded rapidly.

-I had a talent for business.

He gathered the village youths to form a militia and swallowed the neighboring village to expand his organization. Boss Yumar personally supervised the drug manufacturing process, ensuring quality.

Yumar's drugs were recognized as top-quality and spread

along the waterways of the Elf ports.

「 Essence of Saintess. 」

「 Scholar's Powder. 」

All were hit products initiated by Yumar.

Despite lacking special talent in Aura, Yumar commanded a hundred subordinates. His men called him [a warrior among warriors].

Just when his group was about to grow from a hundred to five hundred, Yumar had an intuition.

-I felt it coming. If I continued like this, we'd be screwed.

It was instinct.

-The Fire River Council is lenient. They don't mind if you sell drugs to non-goblins. Rich elves, for instance. But if those street thugs number 100 or 500, it's a different story.



Yumar's organization had grown too well.

-No evidence, no suspicion, but I just felt it. It's now! If I don't cut ties now, we'll all be doomed.

Yumar gathered his friends.

Let's end the business.

The friends who used to extort tolls together in the village had become organization executives, with their fangs grown.

-Those bastards nodded in agreement in front of me.

“So, you ended it?”

-Not at all. That very night, they all barged in and tied me up. Threatened me to reveal the drug manufacturing method. The daggers they wielded were even ones I bought for them, threatening my life. Those motherfuckers.

Yumar spilled his know-how while crying.

He swore never to touch the business again, nor seek revenge.

His childhood friends admired Yumar's oath.

-My right arm was gone.

But he saved his life.

The boss of the organization became 'the One-Armed Yumar'.

-I didn't join the troupe with any acting ambitions. Just roamed the streets, and the troupe leader took pity and took me in. That was 10 years ago. All in the past. Well, acting turned out to be fun.

“What happened to the organization?”

-.....

“It collapsed.”

The one-armed Yumar quietly looked at his tea cup.

-Not long after I was ousted, it was annihilated. I heard the Council sent 13 of the top 100 to handle it. All five hundred members were killed.

“What happened to your childhood friends?”

-Dead. They were executives.

Yumar sniffed.

“You think it's your fault, senior.”

-.....

“You think it's wrong because you were too outstanding, because the organization grew too well. If the business had just rolled on or failed completely, those village people wouldn't have died. You blame yourself for not stopping the village chief back then.”

-Damn.

The Hopgoblin gulped down the rest of his tea.

-Good riddance. Those idiots.

Next.

Finally, the one-eared actor entered.

Holding an old lion doll in his arms.

-I used to be a servant in a prestigious family....

The one-eared actor's name was 'Sakum'.

-Saw the master of the house sleeping with someone, not their spouse. Well, I didn't actually see it, heard it through the wall. Wasn't even trying to listen. Didn't feel anything about it. But because they knew I heard their moans, they cut off my ear...

The one-eared Sakum muttered expressionlessly.

-Isn't that too much?

The one-eyed Arika.

Son of a gambler.

The one-armed Yumar.

Former drug boss.

The one-eared Sakum.

Former servant of a prestigious family.

"Yes."

I nodded in front of the actors.

"Let's dance. Seniors. We have a week."

In one week.

The day of the play arrived.

The house was full.

---

-Is this the 'Dog Noise Troupe'?

-Strange. I've been here before, but it didn't have this name...

The audience started gathering 30 minutes before the play.

Spectators who saw the street performance and came, those who heard rumors, and those who just wandered in seeing the crowd. Not only the VIP seats but also the standing areas were packed.

-No watermelon beer? What about watermelon fries? Ugor,

unbelievable.

-Does this theater even want to make money...

-Really. There's one Fairy Tribe member working here who is amazing. They can manipulate Aura at will, making sound out of thin air. No, really! Why would I lie...

-Ugor. If someone doesn't come clean about touching my butt, you'll witness not a Blood Flower but a bloodbath.

-It's a play without a single line of dialogue.

-Just an exaggerated advertisement.

-They even offer refunds?

-There are too many people!

The place was bustling like a market.

Backstage, the seniors peeked at the audience.

-Damn.

The seniors were tense.

Especially the one-armed Yumar.

-I saw it! In the VIP seats, someone with red tattoos, that's definitely Morcan, ranked 21st in the Council. Damn.

"Who's that?"

-A madman who adds a centimeter of tattoo for every enemy head he takes on the battlefield. Look at the tattoos all over that guy!

The one-eared Sakum also muttered anxiously.

-Actors from the troupes 'Flame' and 'Fire Demon' are here too.



-Ugor. Where?

-There... the two wearing masks in the VIP seats. I can't see their faces, but I recognize them. One is Sormakunda, the ace of 'Flame,' and the one next to him is Jamahan, recently popular in 'Fire Demon'...

-Why are they here to see us!?

-Not here to see us.

The one-eyed Arika spoke.

Arika kept checking his makeup in the mirror, seeming uncomfortable.

-They're here to see Ssoniya.

There was nothing special about the makeup.

Bare body. Just a cloth tied around the waist and black tattoos all over the body. That was it.

-Right. It's incredible. Isn't our youngest just a rookie, debuting after only a week of selection? This is their debut performance. Filling the house on their first stage is unprecedented among elf actors.

-Even including our tribe, it seems unprecedented...

"Let's start soon."

I opened my mouth.

The seniors, who were chatting to ease the tension, suddenly fell silent.

"We've practiced hard for a week. Don't worry. Even if your body doesn't move or your limbs don't cooperate, it's fine. Just relax."

-Are we going to fail...?

"I'll control your bodies with Aura. Don't resist needlessly."

-That's impossible... No, it must be possible. Damn.

The four of us joined hands.

I lightly sent out Aura.

"Relax."

Red Aura flowed through the seniors' arms.

They twitched, their shoulders moved.

But maybe because they got used to my Aura during the last week's special training, the seniors soon inhaled deeply and calmly accepted the Aura. I massaged their muscles like the whole body, relaxing them.

-Uhm.

-Ugor....

Their expressions relaxed.

Definitely less tense than before.

"You don't need to worry. As you know, no one out there expects much from this Fire Drama. Expectations are at rock bottom. Just doing what we practiced will be a hit for the audience. Okay?"

The seniors nodded cautiously.

Okay.

"Let's begin."

I rolled my foot.

Kwoong!

My footwork vibrated the air with Aura.

-What's that?

-What's happening?

From the other side of the stage, the audience was surprised. Startled by the sudden sound, the Hopgoblins stopped their chatter and looked around. I kept moving my feet, undeterred.

Kwoong, kong! Kong!

The sounds of my feet were not just rhythms. Each footstep carried a pitch.

-Aura?

The audience too noticed the specific pattern in the sounds, showing surprise in a different sense. The most astonished were those sitting in the front row of the VIP section.

-My goodness. It's not a voice but a sound made solely from Aura?

-Right. It's Aura. I told you, even in the street performance....

At that moment, the one-eyed Arika burst forth.

On the dimly lit stage.

Arika ran with his legs spread as wide as possible, like a sprinter, infusing each step with a vast stride. Naturally, the audience's gaze was drawn.

Thud-

The focus of the audience wasn't just because of the appearance of one character.

Boom-

Every time Arika's feet touched the stage, a new melody embroidered the air.

What was a single melody line expanded into a complex one.

Before the audience could fully settle their surprise, the one-armed Yumar and the one-eared Sakum, one after another, burst onto the stage.

The same was true for them.

With every actor's step, rhythm flowed throughout the theater.

Three melodies. Three strands intertwined, finally starting the music.

-Good heavens.

The auditorium became quiet.

Not a few spectators opened their mouths, but not intentionally. They were unwittingly murmuring, mouths agape.

-Could they really be producing all that...

-Using Aura to create sound?

Yes.

Not dialogue, but music.

Not a play, but a dance.

I was conducting a one-man orchestra through Aura.



# Chapter 187: Flame

## (2)

---

In the dark space, the sound of drums echoes.

Doom...

No, it's not the sound of drums. Thud. It seems like footsteps, but since no one is moving their feet, it's not that either. Thud. Thud. Thud. The actors – one-eyed, one-armed, one-eared – who were already isolated on the stage, swiftly turn their heads towards the direction of the sound.

I am there.

Wrapped in flames, I crawl onto the stage.

-Wagar...

Flame Emperor.

The actors shiver.

-Kar...

-Ke.

-Karkasa...

A fearful trembling. The actors, like snakes hidden in the shadows, whisper among themselves, vibrating the hollow stage with their tremors.

-Shi.

-Lak.

-Gur.

This is not a language of the present. It's from a time long ago, under primitive trees, when voice and speech were indistinguishable. The actors murmur in whispers from that era. Shi. Lak. Gur. Shi. Lak. Gur.

-.....

The ominous whispering has silenced the audience.

The Hopgoblins could not understand the language murmured by the ancestors in ancient times.

But it's not about understanding.

The audience holds their breath. They can feel the eeriness and unease that the green-skinned creatures naturally exude in their vocal cords.

-Shi.

-Lak.

-Gur.

The actors circle around me in fear. Shi. Each step they take resonates with my Aura, playing music. Lak. As their steps slow, so does the music. Gur. As their steps approach me, the music intensifies.

-Wagar.

My flames spread across the dark stage.

[Yes.]

I move on all fours like a beautiful savage.

[I am the Flame Emperor.]

A growling moan escapes my lips.

The approaching actors hesitate and flinch.

[I am the fire of the world.]

My voice transforms into Aura.

A beast-like growling emanates from my mouth.

[I am the successful one.]

The stage floor shakes, and the air in the dark audience area trembles.

Aura smelling of blood.

The melody is strange, and the rhythm is odd. Shi-lak-gur. Bizarre music plays. Shi-lak-gur. With a mocking laughter that insults the world and ridicules humans, the audience in the front row shudders.

[Envy me. Be jealous. Worship me.]

What comes from my mouth is merely a hiss, a flick of the tongue. No need for more words. I speak not with words but

with sounds of Aura.

[The world is just kindling to burn me a little more.]

Shi.

[I find your jealousy tiresome. I want you to recognize my annoyance. Fire cannot burn alone. You, insignificant beings, must exist as endless fuel around me.]

Lak.

[I laugh at my success. Thus, I laugh even louder at your failures. I mock your attention. Therefore, I mock you even more for not receiving attention.]

Gur.

[I am humble.]

[I observe everything with indifferent eyes. With a calm face, I look upon all life. Even my success loses its heat before my

eyes. But since I am more successful than anyone, I constantly remind you of my success.]

[Indifferent eyes.]

[With a calm face.]

[Thus, your success is not success before me. Your struggles become worthless because you have not succeeded. From your greatest hardships to your smallest successes, everything is insignificant before me.]

I step forward.

Flames rise.

The actors scatter in shock. They are fleeing.

-Wagar!

Laughter clings to my teeth.

[You act like humans.]

[But there is only one human in this world.]

[The name of the only human, it's 'I'.]

The flames grow fiercer.

My fire envelops the stage and swallows the audience.

-Gasp

Groans echo among the seats.

Some spectators instinctively release their Aura to counter my fire.

I laugh deeper, and the music plays louder.

[Only I am human.]



My flame easily twists and captures the audience's Aura.

And then, gently strokes the necks of the audience with six tongues of flame.

-....., Ugh....

A spectator in the front row convulses. Was he the 21st ranked warrior? His eyes bulge as he sweats profusely.

The theater is now a hellfire.

[I introduce my success and say 'it's nothing.']

[Then what are you, who haven't even achieved nothing?]

[Less than nothing.]

[Merely dust that failed to become anything.]

The laughter of the Flame Emperor.

The movements of the Flame Emperor's arms.

I look around the stage with the Flame Emperor's smile.

The actor, the one-eyed Arika, flinches as our eyes meet.

[I love beasts that expose their tender necks.]

I charge.

The one-eyed Arika screams and runs away.

[The purity of trusting someone. The innocence of exposing oneself.]

[These are soft enough to swallow in one bite!]

Flames rise where Arika tries to escape.

The one-eyed Arika shrieks and turns to run in another direction.

I block him again with a curtain of fire.

I corner the prey.

-Save me!

Arika's mouth moves, but no sound comes out.

Just as Aura can create sound, it can also block it.

I snatch Arika's scream midway, crushing it.

[Why run?]

-Save me, please....

[Do not run. I am your father.]

Arika screams until his throat is hoarse.

-Please! Save me, don't kill me... Don't kill me...!

But his voice does not reach the audience.

To them, Arika merely mouths silently and struggles desperately.

-.....

The audience watches in breathless silence as the mute death throes unfold.

[My child.]

I slink towards Arika.

[I will not harm you.]

I imprison Arika within a curtain of fire.

Closing in, narrowing his space to move.

Arika collapses like a child trapped in a small room.

-Don't kill me...

[It's okay.]

-Please....

The one-eyed child sheds tears.

-Save me, mom...

At that moment.

I open my jaws wide and bite Arika's neck.

My fangs do not pierce the flesh.

Instead, Aura, filled with murderous intent, slices into the flesh.

-Aaaaaaaah!

Arika struggles.

He screams, engulfed in agony.

I no longer contain the sound. I let his screams burst out and resonate through the theater.

-Aaaah! Aaaaaaaah!

The audience, who until now had only witnessed silent struggles, flinched at the sudden eruption of screams. What unfolded before their eyes couldn't be dismissed as mere 'acting.'

-What...

-That, that....

Some swallowed hard. Some groaned. A few in the back rows, mistaking it for reality, got up and ran out of the theater. But most of the audience, mesmerized by the flames, stared blankly at the stage.

[I am the fire of the world.]

The hunt doesn't stop.

In the midst of the inferno.

I become a beast intoxicated with blood, chasing the next prey.

The one-armed Yumar and the one-eared Sakum scream and flee.

-Save us!

The music flows.

-It's chasing us! The monster is chasing us!

I am not at fault.

If there is any fault in me, it's the fault of the world that birthed me. It's the fault of the world that made me this way.

People just flow in the shape the world has bent.

If they live as they were made, where is my fault in that?

[Let's dance!]

Shi, Lak, Gur.

[The whole world is my stage!]

Shi. Lak. Gur.

[Do not resent me. I am just like you. Merely a being born of



this world.]

[I am just stronger.]

[It's nature's law that the weak are eaten by the strong. So, should you not blame the world, not me?]

Scattered flames.

I become wild, running rampantly.

Spewing fire at will, freely gnashing my teeth.

-Aaaaaah!

The one-armed Yumar falls. The one-eared Sakum is downed.

It's okay. They are mere beasts.

To humans, beasts are nothing more than meat, so this is not murder, but merely slaughter.

Doom!

The drumming intensifies.

Doom!

Blood-red flames incinerate the theater.

After all three actors collapse, my roar shows no sign of stopping. Shi! Lak! Gur! The audience trembles, watching the fiery dance writhe on the stage.

-Ugh...!

A young spectator faints. Frothing at the mouth, he collapses onto the shoulder of the person next to him, who is too stiff to help.

Doom!

Finally, the music reaches its climax.

A group of guards burst into the theater, slamming the doors open.

-Everyone stop! We are the law enforcement under the Fire River Council!

Burly Hopgoblins swarm in, surrounding the audience.

-Everyone, stop! Stop everything!

-We received reports of mass murder and arson happening here! Anyone who moves against the warning will be arrested as a suspect! That was the breaking point.

The tense atmosphere snapped like a string.

Only then did the audience begin to breathe, having held their breath till now.

-Gasp

-Guh... Oh, Huh...!

People collapsed here and there, as if shedding their skins.

Their strength drained, sliding off their seats.

"Uh."

I too break out of immersion, frowning at the law enforcement officers. I wonder how serious the report was to barge in like this, but the Hopgoblin officers were on guard in all directions.

-Start the rescue!

-Where's the arsonist!?

-There are people down on the stage!

The Hopgoblins rushed towards the actors. The one-eyed Arika, the one-armed Yumar, and the one-eared Sakum. They mistook the actors lying on the stage for 'casualties.'

Of course, there were no actual casualties in the performance.

-No... wait a minute.

-No need to help me up. I'm fine!

The actors waved off help, rising one by one.

-Any injuries? Head wounds?

-No, I'm totally fine!

-We heard there was a mass slaughter here. Where did the perpetrator flee? Were you taken hostage?

-What...

The one-eyed Arika looked incredulous.

-What mass murder and hostage? That never happened.

The one-armed Yumar shouted.

-We were acting! In the middle of a performance!

The officers hesitated.

-...Acting?

-Yes! During a performance! We are a troupe! Dog Noise Troupe! This is a theater, and we were in the middle of a play!

-.....

Meanwhile, I was being held by officers who had misunderstood the situation. I could easily break free if I wanted, but I went along with them, astonished by the absurdity of it all.

The officers slowly turned to me.

-We received a report of a fire...

I nodded.

Whisk.

Aura flared from my fingertips.

"It's my Aura. It resembles fire."

...We heard a beast was savagely attacking innocent people.

"I was playing the role of a bastard, and those senior actors were playing the victims. Naturally, I took them down during the play."

In short.

"It seems the acting was so realistic that someone reported it."

-.....

Realizing their mistake, the officers' expressions changed from alert to embarrassed.

The audience already began to stir.

-What's this.

-Who reported it...?

Reactions quickly escalated.

-What about the play?

-Don't tell me it's over like this?

-What's happening!

-These stupid law enforcement runts!



-Always barging in first and thinking later!

Buzzing all around.

The chief officer's face quickly soured.

I grinned broadly and approached him.

"What now, sir? Seems like today's performance is ruined."

-Uh...

"Sorry, everyone! Due to an unfortunate incident, today's performance ends here! Following the law enforcement's 'cease' warning, our Dog Noise Troupe stops! Everyone, please exit orderly following the officers' guidance. Oh, but..."

I smiled widely at the officer.

"Will you cover the refunds for the performance?"

-.....

The audience exploded.

The city's theater scene also exploded that day.

Because of a play that was "too realistic and resulted in a police report."

# Chapter 188: Flame

## (3)

---

In the Earth Spirit Tribe, there exists a word for 'everything'.

About 1000 years ago, a word encompassing all human emotions – from the tenderest joys to the deepest wounds of life – was born. Whenever the Earth Fairies felt joy or sorrow, they would invariably utter this one-word phrase.

-Damn!

Today was a day many people used that word.

-It was going so well! It was really, truly great! Those damn bastards, as worthless as dog shit!

The one-eyed Arika spat out vulgar curses.

The other actors also vehemently expressed their outrage.

-Right. How can they interrupt us, especially at the climax!?

-It's not just about refunding the audience. We should get refunded too. How much we've been beaten up for today's performance. All our efforts have been trashed because of this.

The senior actors grumbled.

Their irritation about the interrupted performance, and more than anything, their anger over the broken 'immersion,' was significant.

-But, we had to move upon receiving the report....

The Hopgoblin law enforcement officer sweated profusely.

It must have been frustrating for them too. Who would have thought? In a world where crazy reports are commonplace, to receive a report mistaking a play for reality.

-It wasn't just one or two people. Exactly five people simultaneously made the same report.

And it was a report with high credibility.

-Five reports of arson and indiscriminate murder at the same time, how could we not respond...

-So, you're saying it's our fault?

-Well, maybe if you had acted a little less realistically...

-Is that some kind of joke?

Hearing such a remark from the Dog Noise Troupe, the officer looked wronged.

"Alright. I understand the situation of the law enforcement," I said.

We had come to the police station for an investigation.

Though it was clear we were not guilty, an investigation had to be conducted for formalities' sake.

In one corner of the police station building hung a sign that read, "Prevention is better than cure." Maybe a motto for the law enforcement?

"Still, we'll be claiming compensation. We have to at least break even. We can't just live off dirt. I know you law enforcement officers didn't know, but our troupe is really in a tough spot. If this performance had failed, we were close to shutting down."

-Ugh...

The officers looked dismayed.

They had already completed their investigation about me.

Everything from [Can you really manifest Aura resembling flames?] to [Do you have the skill to flip a theater upside down with Aura?] and [Is it true that you can freely play music with Aura?].

Of course, it all turned out to be true.

I had demonstrated Aura myself at the police station.

The officers' gazes at me were mixed with astonishment, as if wondering, 'Where did this monster drop from?'

"But," I smiled slyly.

"As I said, I understand your position. So, if you agree to just one condition of ours, I'll only take a minimal apology fee."

-A condition...?

"I'll give you complimentary tickets to the VIP seats. Please come to our next performance."

The senior actors turned their heads sharply to look at me.

-Junior! What kind of nonsense is that!

-To give away VIP seats for free when we should be milking every penny!

-I think that's not quite right, Junior.

Ah, these seniors really don't know how to do business.

I grinned.

"Ahem."

-.....

Thud.

The actors who had been grumbling fell silent. Then they sneakily glanced at me. After a week of hellish training, the seniors had learned when to press and when to hold back.

"Where was I? Oh yes, inviting to the VIP seats."



The officers looked at me with a strange expression.

Grown Hopgoblins, calling a delicate elf 'Junior! Junior!' - it was like watching a mafia don with his henchmen. Definitely not a normal sight.

"We invite the law enforcement officers to our troupe. Formally. I know you're all very busy, but if even four or five of you could make the time to come, we'd be grateful. Then we'll really take only the bare minimum of the apology fee."

-Why...

The officer seemed confused.

-I mean, that's fine by us. But why would you formally invite us?

I slightly lowered my eyebrows.

Trying to look as pitiful as possible.

"It's just... seeing you officers getting scolded by the audience at the theater, it broke my heart."

-Ugh? It broke your heart?

"Yes. You were just fulfilling your duty as law enforcement. Thinking about how you might be getting scolded everywhere else, I wanted to do something for you.... We are actors, after all. I thought it would be nice if you could come and watch the performance and find some comfort...."

This was the killer expression that Raviel praised as "like a wet puppy's eyes, subtly tickling the edges of the heart." I even got my head patted four times for it.

Sure enough, the Hopgoblins were moved.

-This is unbelievable.

-What kind of elf is this? Is he an angel?

-We stopped such a young actor's performance. Our fault is great!

You guys trust people too easily.

I'm starting to worry about this dad.

-Troublesome... you rascal....

'What? Why?'

-...Nothing. Right, I have nothing to say to you.

Guardian Spirit, sighing deeply. Why is he like that? Do ghosts get senile?

Anyway, the officers happily accepted the invitation. They might not bring many due to their schedules, but they promised to show their gratitude.

On the way back to the theater from the police station.

-I didn't know our Junior had such a commendable heart....

Yumar, the one-armed actor, muttered.

We were dragged out in the middle of acting, so we were still in our theatrical attire. Walking down the street, only wrapped in cloth around our waists and covered in black tattoos, passersby glanced at us curiously.

-Right. It was a bit unexpected.

-I always thought our Junior was a demon who came out of Kekerkker's disguise.

-We were just angry about the interruption of the performance.... But after seeing Junior, I felt ashamed.

Tsk tsk.

I clicked my tongue.

"Really, don't you get it? Seniors. We've received a huge compensation."

- Ugor?

"Money is something we can earn by performing a few more times. We can even do another show tomorrow. But, what we've created just now is a [bait]."

The three senior actors tilted their heads in unison.

-What's that, Junior?

Come on. They're so cute.

Reminded that the Earth Spirit Tribe is the cutest in the universe, I calmly explained.

"We have the skills and the works to perform. All our troupe needs now is public attention. And probably by tomorrow, everyone in the city will be talking about what happened today."

「The law enforcement rushed in after receiving a report of a fire.」

「 But it turned out to be just a play. The Aura was so lifelike that the audience mistook it for a real fire and reported it. 」

"This is exactly what bait is."

In other words, a topic of conversation.

"Every person in the Earth Spirit Tribe is a potential customer. Everyone, young and old, watches fire dramas. If they hear [The Aura was so realistic that they mistook it for a real fire], wouldn't they be intrigued?"

I added the final piece of bait.

"And if the rumor spreads that our troupe, which suffered damage, invited the law enforcement to the VIP seats?"

-Ugor....

-Indeed.

The actors looked intrigued.

-So, more audience will flock to us?

That's the idea.

"Of course."

But that's not all.

"Besides, I am an Elf. The seniors might not think much of it, but if I continue to succeed like this, surely there will be Earth Spirit Tribe members who'll secretly envy me. Definitely."

Blood plays are an intrinsic part of Earth Spirit Tribe culture.

But imagine a sudden Elf newcomer capturing popularity?

Positive responses would be difficult to come by.

"If they start making up stories and causing trouble, it's better to have the law enforcement on our side. We are actors selling our performances. Being on good terms with law

enforcement can only be beneficial."

-.....

"Who knows? Maybe later, when trouble arises, they might subtly take our side. At the very least, they will now blissfully ignore any ridiculous reports."

-That's impressive....

The seniors admired.

-Sometimes you don't seem like an Elf, but with such cunning, you're definitely an Elf.

-Junior is a talent with the heart of Earth Spirit Tribe and the mind of an Elf.

-If only you had more muscles, it would have been perfect....

You guys can keep your muscles.



Unless Raviel suddenly develops a taste for beefy men.

'Gong-Ja.' Raviel whispers in my ear. 'Wouldn't it be nice if you put on a little more weight?' Softly. 'Just a bit more.' Whispering. 'I would like to see your arms thicker than they are now.'

Hmm.

I should get training from the best trainer on the first floor of the Tower right away. What? Internal muscles? Nonsense. Throw it away.

-Junior is grinning foolishly....

-Sometimes he just smiles for no reason.

-I don't know what he thinks about.... Honestly, it's creepy....

-It's scary... It feels bad....

Quiet.

Do you guys know love?

Even if you know love, you wouldn't know Raviel, so essentially, you don't know love. My children.

-There they are!

Just then.

-Ah!

-The actors are back!

A considerable crowd had gathered in front of the theater. One audience member pointed at us. The Hopgoblins loitering around the gate rushed over.

Thud! Thud!

Dozens of Hopgoblins with hill-sized bodies converged.

-What, what's this?

The seniors got nervous.

-What's going on...

-When is the next performance!

One Hopgoblin shouted.

-We paid for the tickets! We are the victims unfairly deprived of the show!

-Exactly!

-We have the right to sit in the seats first at the next show!

-Tickets! Give us the tickets!

It was like a swarm of ghouls.

The seniors were dumbfounded.

-Wait, wait a moment...!

Someone squeezed through the crowd. It was the troupe leader. He had deepened wrinkles as if harassed by the audience while waiting for our return.

-Huff. These people, even when I say we'll surely refund them...

-We don't need refunds!

The Hopgoblins shouted.

-Exactly! We're not asking for refunds!

-Just give us tickets for the next show! There will be a show, right?

-Can the special seats be upgraded to VIP? I heard it's six times more expensive than the regular ones. Can we pay more

to upgrade? Just tell us how many VIP seats are left!

The troupe director sweated profusely.

-Ah, the schedule hasn't been set, I tried to tell them, but they are stubborn. There's nothing I can do....

I currently hold the real power in the troupe.

The director did his best by not hastily promising another performance and dealing with the audience until now.

"Everyone."

I smiled brightly and bowed.

"Thank you for loving Dog Noise Troupe's performance. Did you enjoy it?"

-It's not about fun! Ugor!

-That kind of Aura, I've never seen before. But it wasn't just the Aura...

-Anyway, it was amazing! It was intense like fire! There was something!

The audience was excited.

I thanked them again with a bow, but the seniors reacted differently.

More dramatically.

-Our performance...

-.....

Yes.

For one-eyed Arika, one-armed Yumar, and one-eared Sakum, it must be the first time they received such attention.

Like children who saw Santa's gifts for the first time, they didn't know what to do.

"The next play is still being scheduled. Unfortunately, we didn't plan to perform [The Fiery Sword Dance] again."

-That's nonsense!

-It's the tyranny of the law enforcement!

"However, hearing your praises makes me want to repay you, even if there were no plans."

I displayed a business smile (created by Black Dragon Witch).

"Next Saturday, we will perform [The Fiery Sword Dance] once more!"

-Ohh!

"Wait, there's more! Dog Noise Troupe always prioritizes our audience! We will not open tickets to the general public, only

to those who attended today! A special performance just for you! A secret performance!"

The audience who missed the climax of the blood play erupted in excitement.

"Thank you for your passionate support! Now, those who want a tattoo, please come in order. We will apply it for you."

In the Earth Spirit Tribe, there's a culture of signing on the skin.

Instead of signing on paper, popular actors imprint tattoos on the skin with soft clay.

Hence, fans of popular actors often flock to theaters with the same tattoo.

"But!"

I grinned.



"To receive a tattoo from us, there's one condition."

-What is it?

"Shout 'Yoo Soo-Ha, the bloody dog,' before getting the tattoo."

The audience laughed.

They probably thought I was joking.

But I was serious.

-Yoo Soo-Ha, the bloody dog. Like this?

"Yes, thank you."

-Yoo Soo-Ha, the bloody dog!

"Thank you."

-Yoo Soo-Ha, the damn dog!

"Oh my. No need for such words. You're wonderful, sir."

The audience giggled, thinking they were joking with an actor, and happily left with tattoos on their shoulders, chests, and backs.

By the way, the tattoo I drew was a dog.

Promoting Dog Noise Troupe and imprinting the fact that Yoo Soo-Ha is a bloody dog, a truly double-purpose tattoo.

-Troublesome... you rascal....

'What? Why?'

-...Nothing. Right, there's no point talking to a madman.

Guardian Spirit sighed again.

This ghost has gone senile. Definitely. Poor thing.

[The power of the heretical sects decreases among the Earth Spirit Tribe!]

[The 'Return to the Ancient Ways' begins to gain popularity among the Earth Spirit Tribe.]

[The possibility of a renaissance opens for the Earth Spirit Tribe.]

[Progress in the quest 'Theatrical Warring States: Crisis of the Classics'.]

[Current Heretical Erosion Rate is 86%.]

There.

Even the Tower is cheering for my actions.

I smiled at the troupe leader and seniors.

"Are you ready to become a hit troupe?"

If not, get ready now.

When daddy starts something, he runs to the end.

# Chapter 189: Prima Donna (1)

---

-Sold out! All seats sold out again!

The response to the dance drama was nothing short of explosive.

-The legendary Fiery Sword Dance, so lifelike that even the law enforcement was dispatched! Followed by Burning Grave! Even with the Demon King Ester! The myth of sold-out seats continues!

-The actors' expressions and the dance unfold in the dance drama!

-Board the trend of a new era!

The scale of the Dog Noise Troupe expanded rapidly.

We hired ticketing staff and added more actors.

Even then, unable to keep up with the demand, we could only scream in joy.

-Welcome!

[Current Heretical Erosion Rate is 44%.]

-Where every gesture turns into ecstasy, and every movement becomes temptation!

-Until every life becomes a dance!

[Current Heretical Erosion Rate is 32%.]

-Celebrate the fire of Aura!

I trained the actors even more vigorously.

"Keep your chin up! Always stay relaxed! Anger makes fists clench, and disgust furrows the brow. Your body must react according to your emotions. The more your emotions align with your body, the more naturally your Aura manifests! Ready!"

Clap!

At my clap, the troupe members simultaneously executed the movements.

"Good! Next!"

Clap!

The actors moved their limbs following the choreography I devised. Hefty breaths of the actors flowed on stage. Sweat droplets fell from their foreheads.

"Next!"

Body movements commonly used by Earth Spirit Tribe in primitive times.

Martial techniques accumulated over countless hours by  
Demonic Heavenly God Art.

Blending these two origins, I taught the troupe members the  
choreography.

"Okay! Next!"

Thump!

With the most primal rhythm and the most lethal moves,  
the Hopgoblins stamped their feet.

The three original members led the way, and the newly  
joined actors supported them. In total, twenty-four members  
danced in perfect timing.

[Current Heretical Erosion Rate is 28%.]

I smiled.

"Good. Take a break."



-Ugor!

-I thought I was going to die!

-So tired... Junior's training is too harsh...

The Hopgoblins collapsed, groaning here and there. Yet, the actors' faces were far from gloomy.

A satisfied expression of sweating pleasurably.

A smile that only those whose daily life isn't disconnected from life itself could wear.

'Hmm.'

Is this good enough for now?

'I think I should retire soon.'

-What?

Ssonia was startled.

Ever since he was possessed by me, Ssonia had been floating around as a spirit, delighted every day as his body earned fame as a renowned actor.

-Kekerkker, retire?

'Yes, retire from your body. I came to this era for a mission. Now that the mission is nearing completion, I should return your body to you.'

-No! I mean, that's impossible!

Ssonia jumped.

-You've come this far, and now you talk of retirement! Kekerkker, you're the top actor of Guru, a legend in Earth Spirit Tribe's history, and the first Elf in history to achieve great success in a blood play! Retirement is impossible! Impossible!

'Good.'

I grinned.

'Wasn't becoming a successful actor your dream? Well, you've succeeded. Now enjoy your successful life to the fullest.'

-But, but!

'Are you scared?'

-.....

Ssonia fell silent.

I shrugged.

'Understandably so. Although you've always wanted success, this isn't your own doing, but something I single-handedly created. If I suddenly leave, you'll be overwhelmed, right?'

-Err... Errr....

'Retire, then.'

I suggested the simplest option.

'Legend of an actor, appeared like a comet but disappeared like one too! Announce retirement and say [I've reached the top, so I have no more interest]! Sure, it'll cause a stir. But maybe it'll even garner more admiration.'

-.....

'Sounds cool, right?'

From the outside, it does.

'If you don't appear on stage, no one will know you've changed. You've earned money, and your fame is tremendous. Enjoy a glamorous retirement.'

-That... seems fine.

Ssonia hesitated, then glanced in the direction the ticketing elf ran off to.

Time passed.

[Black Dragon Witch successfully completes the quest!]

News from my teammates, who had been quiet for a while, began to come in.

Unlike last time, each of us were working on our quests separately.

'Black Dragon Witch finished first.'

Though she lost her rank to me, she still reigned as the top hunter in the strongest guild in the Tower.

'Such experience.'

As I marveled inwardly, a well-groomed elderly vampire visited as a client just two days later.

"Hello."

I was as usual training the members.

Though we surely had closed the theater doors for practice, somehow the elderly vampire managed to enter easily. He then looked at me with a beaming smile.

‘Could he be a stalker fan?’

I had started to notice this sort of fan recently.

However, the vampire's attire was a bit too grand for a stalker fan. A bit too conspicuous, perhaps? A black suit, leather boots, a cane with a gold-plated handle, and silver rings jingling on his shirt.

“Ah, sir. Sorry, but it's not showtime now. If you want to see the actors training, you should make a reservation with the guide....”

“Hmm.”

A deep voice came from the old man.

“We need to make reservations to meet, huh? I didn't know that. Should I apologize for not knowing?”

Wait.

His voice was like a cool elderly voice, but somehow the way he spoke... felt familiar?

"....."

Without him noticing, I raised my Aura to wrap around the old man, but it stopped as if blocked by a transparent barrier.

To stop Aura like this required a profound mastery of its use.

A black aura slowly seeped from the old man's cane.

“Wait, could it be....”

“Hehe.”

The unfamiliar-faced old man chuckled in a familiar rhythm.

I instinctively pointed at him, my mouth agape.

“Black Dragon Witch...!?”

“Exactly. I knew it was you.”

The vampire smiled like a child who had succeeded in a secretive prank.

“Why, how did you....”

“If people hear that the King of Death has possessed an elf, they'll love it.”

The troupe members, engrossed in their practice, glanced over here. Sensing danger, I quickly took the vampire to a dark corner of the theater.



“How did you know it was me? And, didn’t you clear your quest?”

“Yes, I cleared my quest, but I haven’t declared stage clear yet. I didn’t want to be left waiting alone in case you guys didn’t clear in time. Thought it’d be boring, so I came to see what others are up to.”

“Wow....”

Amazed, I observed the vampire, no, Black Dragon Witch.

Somehow, his attire seemed flamboyant, just like Black Dragon Witch's taste.

“You look fantastic in your elder years...”

“Thanks.”

Black Dragon Witch smiled gently.

A smile I had learned to emulate.

“You should take a picture and show it to the Duchess. She’ll love it.”

“I’ve been dying to see Raviel recently....”

“Sounds like that's a recent thing. By the way, I knew you were the King of Death because I asked if there was anyone who suddenly became famous in the largest city of the Earth Spirit Tribe.”

“That's all you needed to guess it was me?”

“Well, who else could it be? The King of Death. You have a knack for monopolizing all the craziness in the world.”

“This girl really knows how to flatter.”

“Anyway, I'm here to see.”

Black Dragon Witch peered out to look at the stage.

“Huh. You really are running a troupe. Dance?”

“Yes, something like that.”

“You dance well? I didn’t know that.”

“It’s called dance, but it’s actually a martial dance. I adapted martial movements into choreography. It’s tough, but I’m managing with my Aura.”

“Modesty is...”

Black Dragon Witch watched the troupe members practicing and then suddenly said.

“I want to see it.”

The vampire's eyes sparkled with curiosity.

“The Fire Drama?”

“Yes. I’ve heard a lot about it. How amazing must it be for the whole city to be ecstatic? When is the next performance?”

“It’s not scheduled yet....”

“Eh.”

“I have a repertoire ready. Um, this is a bit embarrassing, but do you want to see just the beginning of ‘Burning Grave’? It’s set in the 10th floor of the Tower.”

“That would be great.”

“Okay. Find a comfortable seat.”

I went on stage and clapped my hands.

The Hopgoblin troupe members practicing choreography looked at me.

“Alright. Last practice for today. Start with the group choreography from the beginning of Burning Grave. Everyone remembers, right? Good. I’ll play the music, and you start.”

I slowly played the background music with my Aura.

The members demonstrated the choreography, familiar with the movements.

Burning Grave, or [Hellfire Mansion], depicted children frolicking around.

Sometimes flashy.

But always following the movements once cherished by the primitive Earth Spirit Tribe.

The first part of the blood play ended with the choreography of children running around to escape from a slave trader.

“Great work, everyone! Dismissed! Feel free to stay and practice alone. Let me know if you're staying to practice. Yes, great job. See you tomorrow!”

After bidding farewell to each member, I headed to the audience seats.

In the middle sat the elderly vampire, Black Dragon Witch.

“How was it?”

"....."

Black Dragon Witch was silent.

Lost in thought?

She just leaned her chin on his hand, looking at the now-empty stage.

“.....That’s amazing. Why didn’t anyone think of this before?”

“Huh?”

“I’ll come back tomorrow.”

Black Dragon Witch stood up abruptly.

“Black Dragon Witch?”

“Just wait. King of Death. Even if you clear, don’t declare it! Absolutely not! Ah, try to stay here tonight. It’s annoying if we miss each other.... Teleport!”

Black Dragon Witch disappeared. I felt her Aura presence above. Looking up through the hole in the roof, I saw Black Dragon Witch’s figure floating, but soon she disappeared too.

Left alone, I wondered, “What was that...?”

The next day revealed everything.

[Paladin has successfully completed their quest!]

Thirty minutes after hearing Tower's voice.

Whoosh-

Black Dragon Witch’s signature teleportation was activated.

And the sight before me was surreal.

“You! Why are you in such a rush!”

Splash!

An odd sound echoed in the dirt and stone theater. Water. Splash. Where the sound came from... there was a [bathtub].

Yes, a bathtub for bathing.

“Mermaids cannot maintain their energy without water! How many times have I said this! You shouldn’t just throw me into an aquarium and transfer...!”

In the tub, a gilled mermaid splashed, furiously thrashing her tail. Black Dragon Witch, seemingly unapologetic, casually said, "Yeah, sorry, sorry" while comforting the mermaid in the tub.

Mermaid.



Could it be.

“Paladin...?”

Pause.

The mermaid slowly turned her head, meeting my gaze.

“Paladin, right?”

"....."

The mermaid's tail, which had been splashing furiously, slowly submerged in the water.

But it was a bathtub, so everything was clearly visible.

Her limp tail in the water... Yes, it resembled the flapping tail of a flatfish in a fish tank at a restaurant.

She was fully clothed.

Only her flatfish-like tail flapped in the aquarium.

"Sorry."

In the heavy silence pressing down on the theater, Black Dragon Witch casually spoke.

"I know you don't want to show yourself like this to others. But there's something you really need to see. You'll be surprised why nobody thought of this before. You studied music, Paladin. Among us, you're the closest to being an expert...."

"Black Dragon Witch."

"Uh-huh?"

"Die."

Splash!

That was when Black Dragon Witch got doused in tub water.

# Chapter 190: Prima Donna (2)

---

"So."

The splashing of the Mermaid in the tub was fierce.

The bathtub water drained in an instant, and Black Dragon Witch had to refill it, following Paladin's order.

"Anyone would think I did something wrong. I even helped with the quest clearance," grumbled Black Dragon Witch.

Paladin sighed at his shamelessness, seemingly used to it.

"Why have you brought me here? Do you need a [Lie Detector] or something?"

"No, that's not it. I don't need your skill. I need your musical

talent."

"...My musical talent?"

Paladin furrowed his brow.

Black Dragon Witch nodded earnestly.

"Yes. You used to play a lot before joining the Vigilante Corps, right? You earned way more than you do now with your Vigilante salary, right? To exaggerate a bit, you practically raked in the money, didn't you?"

"That's ancient history... Before I even got my Alias, a story from a very long time ago."

I was perplexed, listening quietly.

Paladin. Ranked seventh.

The Vice-Captain of the Vigilante Corps, responsible for the security of the City of Ascension.

With Sword Saint declaring retirement, Paladin effectively took over the duties of the Corps leader.

I knew he was a refugee from Venezuela and graduated from a music college, but that was all.

Like the other comrades, Paladin seldom talked about his past, so I knew almost nothing about the deputy commander.

"Raking in money? What's this about, you two?"

"It's nothing. Just a worthless past..."

"An untold story. This guy used to earn by playing in jazz concerts."

Despite Paladin's attempts to evade, Black Dragon Witch bluntly interrupted. Paladin glared at him, but Black Dragon Witch just shrugged.

"When we first entered the Tower, there really wasn't much to enjoy. Most people just drank or used drugs for fun. But when Paladin held a concert, hunters flocked..."

"Black Dragon Witch!"

"She gets angry whenever I bring that up. Picky, isn't she? Oh, what was Paladin's nickname back then? Something like 'Diva of the Nigh...'"

"Speak one more word, and it's a declaration of war!"

"Alright, alright. Sorry."

Huh.

This was news to me.

Before regressing, I was quite a fan of famous hunters, though not as much as Flame Emperor. I collected every magazine with Black Dragon Witch, Saintess, or Heretic Inquisitor on the cover. But...

‘There was hardly any information about the early days of the Tower.’

There are stories I don't know, like this one.

I tried to recall.

‘Right, Paladin never appeared in any photo books...’

Not even as a magazine cover model.

Despite being one of the hunters considered the conscience of the Tower, along with Saintess and Master Alchemist.

‘A secret backstory? Could it be that wearing a helmet all the time isn’t just a fashion statement but hides some secret?’

My fan instincts, dormant for years, started to flutter.

I was on the verge of intruding on privacy, so I held back.

"....."



Paladin, noticing our gazes meeting, cleared his throat loudly.

"...I haven't heard why I was called here yet. Black Dragon Witch. If you just wanted to show the King of Death my mermaid form, then I'm willing to expose your dark history too."

"Oh my. What dark history could I possibly have?"

"What you write anonymously and publish in your spare time....."

"King of Death! I want Paladin to see the performance too."

Black Dragon Witch hurriedly interrupted.

What secret? Why am I the only one left out of these secrets? It's so intriguing.

"What do you write anonymously?"

“Sir Gong-ja.”

Black Dragon Witch grabbed my shoulder.

It wasn't a joke; dark Aura was swirling around his body. Even a subtly menacing smile twitched at the corners of his mouth.

“Everyone has a secret they don't tell others. Isn't that right, King of Death? You often brush things off with excuses like being a prophet or something.”

"Uh."

Did she know that was a bluff!?

“But I don't pry too deeply. Because you are my comrade and fellow warrior. True friendship is proven not by what we say to each other, but by what we don't say to each other.”

“That's well said.”

“Sir Gong-ja. We're friends, right?”

I nodded awkwardly. If only the fingers digging into my shoulder were a bit gentler, I would have nodded easily.

“Yes, yes. Of course, we're friends.”

“Yes. My most cherished close friend.”

Suddenly, I became close friends with Black Dragon Witch.

“I thought it would be nice to show Paladin our fire drama.”

I complied with my friend's request.

How could I ignore it?

"....."

Throughout the performance, Paladin remained silent.

The troupe members, who came early in the morning for practice, were slightly taken aback. It was distracting to have a large bathtub in the audience and a mermaid splashing her tail in it.

“.....Indeed.”

Unperturbed by the troupe members' glares, Paladin murmured.

“Remarkable. King of Death, did you invent this yourself?”

“No. Fire Dramas have always existed.”

“Really? A play combining dance and music has always been there?”

“Ah. Not exactly. Choreography and music like this... I thought it would be good to introduce them...”

Paladin's eyes sparkled.

“Why did you think so?”

Fire Dramas originated as an art form of Aura. If they learn dance moves based on martial arts, they'll become more familiar with Aura, and if they learn to play music with Aura, they'll become even more innovative.”

“Ah, I see. A completely different concept!”

Paladin's mermaid tail fluttered on the water's surface.

As if excited like a dog, according to the dog's interpretation method.

“King of Death. Do you realize how exciting your discovery is?”

Paladin looked at me with sparkling eyes.

This was the first time I'd seen Paladin like this.

“What, what is it?”

“You’ve founded a comprehensive art form through Aura.”

Paladin spoke with excited breath.

“Usually, operas and musicals are considered comprehensive art forms. But among these, [music] has always been an unresolved issue. No matter how naturally it's inserted, no matter how much effort is put into making it seem natural, music fundamentally remains detached from the actors.”

“Uh....”

What is she talking about?

“It means the actors can’t interfere directly with the music.”

Paladin explained excitedly.

“Whether you play background music or hire an orchestra, the music that fills the theater isn’t created by the actors. In musicals, they can sing, but it's limited.”

“Hmm...”

I just nodded along.

“Audiences, knowing that the music they hear is actually coming from speakers, still forcibly accept the illusion that it's part of the story unfolding on stage. It's a tacit agreement. But in your fire drama... the actors themselves perform the music! Through Aura!”

Paladin raised his hand.

“This is a significant advancement!”

Paladin flicked his fingers.

Complex and agile melodies infused with Aura resonated in the air.

"Wow."

I was honestly amazed.

Is this what a specialist is capable of?

“Oh, right. I want to learn music from Paladin. I want to play for Raviel...”

“No! That's not the point right now!”

Paladin thumped her chest in frustration.

[not the point]

That was a bit harsh.

"You need to understand what a fantastic discovery you've made! King of Death! People immersing themselves in music recorded by someone else and dancing or acting is meaningful, but being able to pull music, dance, and acting directly from within themselves is amazing! It's innovative! Imagine figure skaters not only performing but also creating music with Aura. How incredible would that be...!"

"Could you summarize that in a sentence, please...?"



"It's freaking awesome! Are you satisfied now?"

So it was a compliment after all.

Then just say that.

"Thank you. It was nothing much."

I grinned sheepishly, scratching the back of my head.

"...Unbelievable."

Paladin seemed frustrated about something, looking up as he pounded his chest.

"The very person who made this discovery doesn't understand its significance... King of Death. This could potentially spark a trend in [Aura Art]. It's a tremendous thing."

"Come on. It's not that big a deal."

I thought Paladin was exaggerating.

"Aura is commonly used to enhance voices for singing, right?"

"I'm not saying you created something that didn't exist in the world. I'm saying you connected things that existed but were never paid attention to."

Paladin sighed deeply.

"Everyone saw Aura only as [for combat] or [for physical enhancement], but you discovered Aura can also be a [transparent instrument]. Now actors can bring forth inner music without relying on props or devices. Not just actors, but musicians, dancers, singers, everyone....."

"And."

Black Dragon Witch naturally joined the conversation, grabbing Paladin's shoulder.

"We've got something to boast about to the outside world now."

Black Dragon Witch smirked.

"People in the outside world always criticize us. When we fight, we're seen as barbarians who know nothing but fighting. If we don't earn money, we're beggars. When we start earning, we're labeled as crude beings who only care about money. Now, if we achieve incredible success in art, I wonder what they'll call us? Wealthy artists? Would that be an insult?"

"Black Dragon Witch..."

It was disheartening.

"I shouldn't be the one to say this, but you're too competitive with the outside world. It's sometimes pitiable."

"Quiet. You have no idea how much our Tower is underestimated."

Her words were harsh, but her expression was soft.

Black Dragon Witch's gaze at me was like looking at a treasure.

She placed a hand on both Paladin's and my shoulders, wearing a contented smile.

"King of Death."

"Yes?"

"Paladin."

"What is it, so ominous."

"I want to push this as a national project."

Black Dragon Witch smiled like an angel.

A smile she never showed to comrades, only in interviews or for magazine photos.

"I did some checking, and King of Death here adapted his experiences into Fire Dramas. Isn't he our Tower's proud rookie and top star?"

"....."

"If we take this and perform it in the Tower, film it, and spread it to the outside world, it would be really good. I wonder if the outside world's artists will be shocked, trying to master Aura and rush into our Tower?"

"Umm....."

Paladin, initially hesitant, gradually changed his expression.

"It's true that I've received several movie offers, but I rejected them all. I was afraid they'd distort our King of Death's image."

Movie offers?

That happened too?

"Now that I see it, Fire Dramas seem much better than movies. Right. Our own art form from the Tower, telling the story of our top star. How good is that?"

I was bewildered.

The conversation was becoming too big, beyond my imagination!

"Wait, just a moment. I didn't really..."

"Certainly."

Paladin slowly nodded.

His mermaid tail fluttered as well.

"Our Tower is poor in terms of art. There's some entertainment in jazz concerts and novels, but there's hardly any large-scale performances."

"That's what I mean. I tried forcing it a few times, but all failed. We keep showing movies from the outside world, and the royalties are astronomical. They charge us more just because it's our Tower. Isn't it annoying?"

"Hmm."

"Let's strike back. Aura is unique to us, the hunters in the Tower. Now we'll move from being a cultural importer to an exporter."

"Not bad..."

Wait.

Black Dragon Witch and Paladin were both staring at me.

"....."

"....."

They nodded to each other, then grinned.

"King of Death, you're amazing."

"Right. It's clear you're a genius for thinking of this."

Wait, what?

"Please... just stop... I'm getting dizzy..."

"King of Death! So glad you're my comrade. I'm so proud!"

"Right. I'll be remembered as a legend just for climbing the Tower with you."

"Please....."

"Amazing!"

"Incredible."

"Absolutely phenomenal!"

"King of Death. He's a legend..."



"I always knew it!"

"I can't believe it!"

I can't breathe.

"Thank you. I appreciate the compliments... but that's enough..."

"We're thinking of creating a separate art guild and appointing you as the guild leader. Would it be okay if we just borrow your illustrious name for a while?"

"Sure... as long as you stop... I think I'm going to die..."

"Don't worry, I'm planning to join as vice-guild leader. Just lend your name, and we'll handle the rest. We can't trouble someone as great as you."

"I'm really dying....."

"Here's the seal."

Guild leader?

I stamped the seal Black Dragon Witch handed me, not fully understanding.

"Thanks. King of Death. You might suddenly see a lot of money in your account, but don't be surprised."

"I'll use it well."

As my head spun, I heard Paladin's sigh from afar.

-Tsk. Such an easy kid...

-.....

And Ssoniya looked at us with an indescribable expression.

# Chapter 191: Prima Donna (3)

---

The Black Dragon Witch and the Paladin were in perfect harmony, as if they had never been at odds.

"King of Death. Let us participate in this performance too."

"I may have given up on composing a long time ago, but my head is full of musical scores. I'll incorporate the music of our world. Just imagining it is exciting...."

Why are these people so enthusiastic?

Their eyes are sparkling.

It feels strange to see them like this.

"Your music is quite excellent too, but if you appoint me as

the music director... no, the assistant director, it will be even better."

"Then I'll take charge of the scenario. Since it's a dance drama, should I say a director rather than a scriptwriter? The chief director? Hmm. It's a new art, so we probably need a new title."

"Huff."

I took a deep breath to calm myself.

Somehow, I managed to calm down.

Though my head was still buzzing.

"Alright. Your help will certainly elevate the level of the performance. After all, it will be a cultural heritage that enriches the lives of the Earth Spirit Tribe children...."

"Right."

The Black Dragon Witch smiled faintly.

It was a smile like the watercolor hues of a sunset.

"I like that aspect of you."

"Me?"

Was she about to bombard me with compliments again?

I looked at the Black Dragon Witch with eyes full of suspicion.

Then she chuckled.

"You always set the answer first and then reap the benefits. Always."

"What do you mean?"

"It means setting up a flag first and then gathering sand. It seems a bit risky from the sidelines, but well, I guess your soulmate will handle it well enough."

Her words were cryptic.

Seeing my expression, the Black Dragon Witch laughed again.

"Let's decide on the name of your guild."

"Good idea."

The Paladin chimed in.

"Names are important."

"Hmm, if I remember correctly, there are only a handful of art guilds registered in the City of Ascension. About thirty jazz performance guilds?"

"There are 26. One chamber orchestra and 11 string quartets.

Including the guilds that have ceased operations, it doesn't exceed fifty in total. Most of their members are enrolled in multiple guilds."

"It really is a pitiful number..."

The Black Dragon Witch sighed.

"Do you have any good name ideas?"

"Well..."

Ah.

"How about [Raviel] for the troupe? It seems to fit perfectly."

"Hmm. Nothing comes to mind..."

"Coming up with a name is always hard."

"How about Black Dragon?"

"No good. How about Order Watch?"

Wait. Did they just smoothly ignore my suggestion?

It was so natural that I almost didn't realize I was being ignored.

"The sound of Raviel is really nice..."

"If you keep that up, we might end up with [Kim Gong-Ja] as the name."

"Let's seriously consider the name."

The three of us brainstormed together.

Several suggestions came up: Tomorrow, Sound of Ink, Babel, Aura....



"This won't do."

As the naming discussion seemed endless, the Black Dragon Witch made a decision.

"At times like this, it's customary to derive the name from the founders. Let's combine the names of the Black Dragon Witch, the Paladin, and the King of Death into something impressive."

"Is that possible?"

"Yes. We can base it on the language used by the King of Death. He's the founder, so we should show him this much consideration."

The Black Dragon Witch inquired about the language of my hometown.

We each spoke Ukrainian, Venezuelan, and Korean, but it was translated automatically by the power of the tower.

We had to ask and confirm with each other to understand how each other's aliases sounded.

"Okay."

After hearing my explanation, the Black Dragon Witch nodded.

"Taking [Heuk] from Black Dragon Witch, [Gi] from Paladin, and [Sa] from King of Death, we get [Heukgi-sa]\* which translates to [Black Knight]. Simple."

\*They took a letter each from the respective Korean spellings to make that name.

"Wow."

I felt a chill run down my spine.

"Black Dragon Witch. Hey, Black Dragon Witch."

I tapped the shoulder of my comrade and close friend, feeling a thrill down my spine.

"Can you see my hand?"

"...I can see it fine. Why?"

"It's all twisted and bent right now. Can you straighten it for me?"

"Okay. That's easy enough."

The Black Dragon Witch grabbed my fingers and twisted them in the opposite direction.

"Aaaaack!?"

"Done?"

"That's so messed up!"

I jumped up.

"Who names a troupe Black Knight? It's embarrassing! It's humiliating!"

"King of Death. Your alias is King of Death. [King of Death], you know. I'm sorry to say, but do you still have any face left to lose?"

"No, [Black Dragon Master], you shouldn't be saying that to me!"

"Don't translate it into English!"

The Black Dragon Witch grabbed my collar.

"Do you want to die!?"

"You started it, Black Dragon Witch!"

"Don't do it if I say don't! And to the English speakers, my alias is translated to Queen, not Master!"

"Ah, so you're not Black Dragon Master but Black Dragon Queen. Must be nice. Is the abbreviation BDQ? Sounds like a name that would deliver chicken in 30 minutes."

"Fine. I get it. We'll go with [Kim Gong-Ja]."

"Black Knight sounds cool."

I admired it.

"Just listening to it feels sophisticated. It rolls off the tongue. There can't be a better candidate for a troupe name. Black Dragon Witch, you're the best. Not only is your guild the best, but your naming sense is unmatched. Black Knight, it's good. Let's go with that."

"Should've surrendered earlier."

Watching our petty quarrel, the Paladin had a bittersweet smile.

The mermaid's tail gently rippled in the water of the bathtub.

"They really get along well.... It's quite fascinating."

The Black Knight Troupe.

I will be the guild leader, and the Black Dragon Witch and the Paladin will be the deputy leaders.

It's an unprecedented luxurious lineup with the second, third, and seventh-ranked members collaborating.

'Even in arts, with such members.'

My lips curled up.

Once the guild officially launches, it's going to cause a stir.

I was starting to find this quite interesting.

"I'm curious about how people will react."

"Right? Isn't it exciting?"

The Black Dragon Witch grinned like a mischievous child.

Even with the face of an aged vampire, her playful smile suited her.

"I guarantee it'll turn many heads. Ah. Of course, it's a secret from the others. Let's invite the Sword Saint grandpa to our first performance. Really, I wonder what expression he'll make?"

Suddenly, I wanted to see the Black Dragon Witch with her original face wearing the same smile.

For some reason, I thought that smile would be incredibly cool.

"Alright."

I smiled too.

"That's good."

We talked all night about the next performance.

The play was decided to be [Raviel and Kekerkker].

Following the Black Dragon Witch's argument that Kekerkker sounded too odd, the performance's name was changed to [Silver Heart].

"The protagonist must definitely be Duchess Ivansia. There's no room for disagreement. Let's not focus on casting characters but instead express Duchess Ivansia's psychological changes through choreography."

"The moment of falling in love must be depicted dramatically. We'll use [The Ballroom] as the stage background. We'll cover the stage with countless white live flowers, and let the actors dance on them."

"Ah. That will be beautiful!"

Everyone was excited.

Around us, several empty bottles of wine were rolling about.



We had been drinking while planning.

"Hmm. The moment Duchess Ivansia falls in love, the flowers crushed under her feet will turn from white to red. One flower, two flowers, three flowers... and thus, a red stepping stone path will be laid upon a white sea. The King of Death will only step on the flowers that have turned red, stepping on them, crossing over to Duchess Ivansia."

The Black Dragon Witch stood up.

"This won't do. It's too good. Let's test it right now!"

"Is it okay without a flower shop here?"

"Just teleport and fetch them. Let's go!"

The Black Dragon Witch and I entered the Paladin's bathtub and held each other's hands. The three of us teleported somewhere. We didn't know where we were headed. It didn't matter.

Somewhere, where white flowers seemed likely to bloom.

We teleported, gauging the slopes of mountains and following the scent of flowers. It was night. The flowers under the night sky were fragrant. There were valleys where yellow flowers bloomed and hillsides full of purple flowers. We set out in search of only white flowers, our laughter lost in the night air.

"It's nice."

Laughter kept escaping me, as if I were drunk.

"Do you know we're flying in a bathtub right now?"

"If you upgrade a magic carpet, it naturally becomes a bathtub. People are born from water, after all."

"You're out of your mind..."

"We're drunk. This is a big deal. If the people of the tower see this..."

We landed on a flowerbed.

Bending down, the ground was covered in full bloom, white.

As soon as we landed in the flowerbed, the Black Dragon Witch quickly got out of the aquarium and kicked off her shoes.

"This is perfect! King of Death!"

"Haha."

"I've turned into a fool, Paladin!"

"Indeed."

With a resigned face and a faint smile, the Paladin raised both hands.

Her fingers, well-shaped, descended.

Slowly.

Even more slowly...

As her fingertips approached thin air.

The Paladin's face had already become expressionless.

\_\_\_\_\_.

The melody playfully stirred the night sky.

The Paladin's fingertips tapped on the air as if there were invisible piano keys spread before him.

The petals trembled. Each time her long fingers touched the invisible white key, the night sky's Aura vibrated.

"You haven't lost your touch!"

"Quiet."

"Your jealousy over your lover is really something."

"That's even more embarrassing."

The melody intensified.

The piano sound buried the voices.

The chatter subsided, and only the laughter of the vampire spread over the tune.

"Fool! It's been too long since we played Libertango!"

The Black Dragon Witch stepped on the white flowers with bare feet.

The petals she stepped on turned black.

\_\_\_\_ , \_\_\_\_ , \_\_\_\_\_.

The Paladin's hands stirred the night. The Black Dragon Witch's feet wounded the flowers. Black ink, colored Aura, flowed like blood from the petals scratched by her small toenails.

One melody, one dance move.

One gesture of the hand, one gesture of the foot.

Black and red ripples spread over the white flower field.

"King of Death!"

"Beautiful..."

"You're such a fool!"

"I like white..."

"Ah, idiot. Too fast!"

"Quiet."

The sounds of our laughter, music, and steps seemed to merge and dissolve. We were three children dotting the night sky on a white canvas. The Paladin hummed a tune.

"I love the tower so much!"

The Black Dragon Witch laughed, intoxicated by the dance.

"If only it had existed a little earlier. Then my father could have lived with us..."

"I also love the tower."

"It's too late, King of Death."

The scent of the black flowers was dizzying.

"It's always too late."

"That's right."

"Can we live well?"

"Yes."

"I want to be happy. Forever..."

"We're friends."

"That's right!"

"Everything will turn out well."

"Of course."

The aged hand of the vampire held my fingers.

"Let's dance, Kim Gong-Ja."



If life is just a game, perhaps we were simply looking for someone to play with.

We danced in a circle.

The white flowers trodden by the Black Dragon Witch were painted black.

The petals crushed under my feet turned red, deeply red.

As we danced, black and red ripples formed on the path we took, and the white garden was drenched in black and red.

"\_\_\_\_\_."

The Paladin played the piano and quietly opened her mouth.

Lascia ch'io pianga

mia cruda sorte, e che sospiri

la liberta---.

e che sospiri

la liberta---.

The tower swallowed the Paladin's song once and did not let it go again.

It was just left in the night air.

We became three abandoned in the night, playing with the white flowers, falling down in a trance.

-.....

It was broad daylight when I woke up.

Blinding sunlight.

The Paladin was lying in the aquarium, gasping for air, and the Black Dragon Witch was asleep with her nose buried in the flowerbed. They were the epitome of drunkards.

"Uh..."

Holding my throbbing head, I stood up.

Standing quietly in front of me was Ssonia.

"Huh?"

-Kekerkker.

Her voice was serious.

"What... why...? Wow, my head really hurts. Was the drink bad...?"

-I want to act in the next performance.

I looked up at Ssonia.

Some nameless desire lurked in her blue eyes.

-Like you... no.

Ssonia said.

-I want to live like you all.

# Chapter 192: Prima Donna (4)

---

Words of resolution.

I was just waiting for those words.

"Hmm."

I circulated Aura through my body.

The drunkenness gradually peeled away.

'My mind is clearing up.'

In our tower, there is an unconventional convention: [It's impolite to sober up alone with Aura while everyone else is drinking].

Although I love this alcohol ceremony, it's even ruder to listen to Ssonia's serious talk while drunk.

'What about my clothes... What? Why is my top all messed up?'

How drunk was I last night?

Maybe it's because it's been a while since I've had a drink.

"Sorry, Ssonia. Can I wash up quickly and then start the conversation? I want to hear this story with a clean body."

-Ah. Um, you don't have to...

"I do."

Anyone who confides a significant resolution to me deserves respectful treatment.

"There must be a stream nearby. I'll wash up quickly, so can you wait a bit?"

-...Yes.

Ssonia replied with a somewhat shrinking voice.

I went to wash in the stream. It was a place I had briefly seen last night while flying in the bathtub. Immersing myself in the cool pool, the mental waste washed away cleanly. After mentally reviewing the Demonic Heavenly God Art from the first to the seventh form, I stood up.

"Let's sit and talk."

-Yes.

I sat facing Ssonia.

"Do you want to try acting in the next performance?"

Ssonia nodded vigorously.

"So you want to continue being a Fire Drama actor without retiring."

-Yes.

"If it's okay, can you tell me why?"

Ssonia pondered. She was seriously choosing her own words.

Watching her earnest face, I suddenly thought of something completely unrelated to the current situation.

'I'm just like the director. Me.'

Whenever a child tried to confide something, the director always prepared carefully. First, by calming the body and mind. In my actions, fresh from waking up, dispelling drunkenness, and bathing, the director's influence was deeply ingrained.

"....."

That's right.



I patiently waited for Ssonia.

-It's not that I hate being treated this way.

As my hair dried in the sun after being wrung out with Aura, Ssonia began to speak.

-Rather, I'm really happy to enjoy such a windfall for free. Yes. My family and kin can no longer ignore me. And the gold in my warehouse is tremendous. Thanks to Lord Kekerker, I could live a pleasant life forever...

Ssonia turned her head slightly.

In the flower garden, the Black Dragon Witch and Paladin were sleep talking. The Black Dragon Witch muttered incomprehensible words like "Uh" "Ah" "I'm starting up slowly..." The Paladin groaned things like "No" "It's a misunderstanding" "Not that".

What the start-up or misunderstanding is about remains a mystery.

My colleagues, such amusing friends...

-Yesterday, I was certain.

Ssonia alternately looked at us.

-While you all were drinking, chatting, telling stories... dancing, playing music, singing, I felt life. I thought, 'That's life'. No, I wished that could be life.

Ssonia's hands on her lap clenched tightly.

-Why does life seem to exist only in your laughter and breath? I don't know. But I want to be part of it too. I'll go on stage. Like you all... I want to become beautiful.

I nodded my head.

I have been in the same situation as Ssonia.

Therefore, I knew what the most crucial words for Ssonia were at this moment.

"I'll help you."

I opened the Civilization Store.

[You have purchased 'Appearing in Dreams.']

[100 race points consumed!]

[Your current race points are 6602.]

"You have been watching me closer than anyone else until now. You've learned all about my choreography, stage, and Aura utilization methods in real-time, like a lesson. There's nothing more to teach theoretically, so what's left is experience."

-Yes!

"But before I help, just one question."

I smiled kindly.

As the Vice-lord of the Demonic Cult and the successor of the Demonic Heavenly God Art, I must possess what's called

grace.

"How many days have you gone without eating, Ssonia?"

Silence fell.

The fairy of a rich merchant family tilted her head.

-...Hmm?

Good response.

It didn't take even 30 minutes for Ssonia's cute expression to turn into a scream.

---

After going through hellish training, the day of the performance finally arrived.

For me, it's the last performance I'm directing in this world.

But for Ssonia, it's going to be her thrilling debut stage.

[Quest 'Theatrical Warring States: Crisis of the Classics' is progressing.]

[Current Heretical Erosion Rate is 11%.]

The quest's progress on this stage is very smooth.

The Blood Fire Drama, my creation, has already spread throughout the city.

Not only [Dog Noise], but other troupes are quietly joining the trend.

Now, if I just leave it be, the quest will complete on its own.

"Aha. This is my first time watching as an audience."

I smiled contentedly.

Below, guests were filling the seats, buzzing with excitement.

"It feels new again like this. How about you, Black Dragon Witch? Aren't you nervous?"

"What nervousness..."

The Black Dragon Witch swept her side hair back. She looked relaxed. But her other hand was clenching her fingers.

She seems nervous despite her appearance.

I restrained my laughter and turned my head.

"How about you, Paladin? You look totally fine."

"Uh. I've been on stage many times and even ran a jazz bar. I'm somewhat used to it. Not that I don't feel nervous."

"Oh? You ran a jazz bar?"

"It's an old story from my second year in the tower."

The Paladin gave a wry smile.

"I once wanted to live playing jazz. Fortunately, people liked my music."

"Heh."

By the way, the Black Dragon Witch was no longer a vampire, and the Paladin was no longer from the Gill Fish Race. They were floating in the air in their original forms, looking at the stage.

All three of us had escaped from [Character Possession].

"I boldly opened a jazz bar in the outside world, a dream I couldn't fulfill. It was a wonderful experience in many ways."

The Black Dragon Witch tilted her head.

"You said not to bring up those times. Why suddenly talk

about it to the King of Death?"

"I changed my mind."

"Hmm. Anyway, you're also quite back and forth... What was the name of that jazz bar? I can't remember."

"Little Venezia."

"Ah, right. Venezia. You went totally bankrupt with that."

The Black Dragon Witch chuckled.

"You rashly borrowed money from thugs and ended up deep in debt. I heard it while drinking with the mafia. Some S-rank sucker walked right into their trap and hit the jackpot or something."

"Managing money has always been difficult for me...."

"Fix that. It's why the Vigilante Corps is always strapped for funds. Well, thanks to that, you met a good connection...."



"Ah."

I pointed to the stage.

"Shh, looks like it's starting."

The Black Dragon Witch and the Paladin immediately shut their mouths and watched the stage. The Black Dragon Witch wrote the script, the Paladin composed the music, and I choreographed the dance. The direction was a collective effort by all of us.

Our first collaborative work.

The actors adorned the dark stage with their dance.

"....."

The Black Dragon Witch trembled anxiously.

She didn't even shake when giving a speech to soldiers on the walls of the Aegim Empire. Maybe she gets unexpectedly

nervous in situations like this.

I gently grabbed the Black Dragon Witch's arm.

".....King of Death."

"Yes."

"Why are you grabbing my elbow...?"

"Holding hands would be the norm, but I'm only allowed to hold hands with Raviel. Holding hands between friends feels somewhat embarrassing. And if I put my hand on your shoulder, it might come off as condescending, right? So I compromised with the elbow."

"Hah....."

The Black Dragon Witch gave a small laugh.

"You're really crazy."

“I'm aware there's a minority opinion of that, Black Dragon Queen.”

“Really... ”

The Black Dragon Witch sighed. Her face relaxed while watching the performance. Her feet no longer trembled.

The dance continued on stage.

“...Oh no. Seems like everyone is still inexperienced with Aura.”

“That's already quite skilled. We can't expect them to be at our level.”

“Seems hard to play music and dance at the same time... No, but the music is actually not bad. It's not unbearable to listen to.”

We murmured among ourselves.

Whispers also came from the audience below.

-Ugh. Isn't it worse than usual?

-Is it? It's my first time, and I think it's great.

-Not sure, but the Aura feels a bit weak...

-Subtle.

As expected.

'The audience can tell right away.'

It was the impact of my absence from the performance.

Until now, I've been coordinating the actors from the center of the stage. I filled in where Aura was lacking, intensively fired up the weaker parts, and conducted the music.

But in this performance, all actors were involved in Aura, dance, and music.

My absence was felt by the audience.

-Huh.

-Huh...!

Arika with one eye, Yumar with one arm, Sakum with one ear, all danced their best, barely managing to produce their assigned melodies.

And of course, Ssonia too.

I could see every drop of sweat shed by the children.

‘It’s okay.’

I clenched my fist.

‘It’ll work out. Our kids.’

You’re ready to succeed.

‘Hang in there.’

The murmurs in the audience grew louder. The regulars, who were fanatically devoted to Dog Noise Troupe, felt a deep disappointment.

What is this? Something’s off.

Such remarks were openly made.

"....."

The three of us silently swallowed our saliva.

The climax was approaching on stage.

-.....

The actors suddenly stopped all movement.

The music, played by vibrating Aura, also ceased.

The dark theater was engulfed in silence, and just as the confusion of the audience was about to grow, Raviel Ivansia, portrayed by Ssonia, opened her lips.

-Lascia, ch'io pianga---.

The orange skirt, imbued with red Aura, resounded majestically.

As the song barely leaked from her lips, the audience twitched.

Ssonia, as if coughing up blood, recited the song he had learned through blood and sweat.

-mia cruda, sorte....

It was impossible to teach them to use Aura at my level in such a short time.

So, the three of us brainstormed a minor direction.

Introducing a scene where [an actor sings alone] for the first time in our troupe.

"Good."

Surveying the audience's reaction, the Black Dragon Witch whispered.

"It's working, hey! It's catching on."

Our troupe's Fire Dramas were famous for having no dialogue.

Occasionally, actors made sounds while dancing, but they were meaningless like "Oof!" "Huh!" or just primitive, distorted pronunciations.



None in the audience expected an aria from an opera.

-la liberta....

A gap in expectations, not unpleasant but pleasurable, was filled by Ssonia's skill.

Solely focused on training and teaching for this moment.

A lone elf sang in the still darkness.

-la liberta....

The hobgoblins watched the aria in a daze.

From their eyes, we sensed our success.

“That’s a relief.”

“Yeah. A bit of a trick, but...”

“It was a situation that called for a trick. Even if the overall level drops, if the climax is worth its weight in gold, it can somehow be mitigated. We’ve caught our breath...”

We watched the performance continue with satisfaction.

[Current Heretical Erosion Rate is 10%.]

[You have successfully reduced the Heretical Erosion Rate to below 10%.]

[Quest Clear!]

Just then, the tower's voice announced the completion of the quest.

I looked at Ssonia and the other actors, then stood up.

“Shall we go?”

“Already?”

“I'm satisfied seeing the kids do well even without me. If I watch them getting applause, I might end up crying. Let's leave now.”

“You're surprisingly tearful, aren't you?”

“Not as much as the Black Dragon Queen who bawled on the 11th floor....”

“You really want to get hit?”

The Black Dragon Witch and the Paladin also stood up.

It was a bit early, but we applauded silently for the actors.

The aria ended on stage, and the dance resumed.

‘It'll be fine.’

I watched Ssonia, sweating and performing passionately.

‘Take care.’

And then.

“I declare stage clear.”

The three of us announced simultaneously, without delay.

[The Black Dragon Witch declares Stage Clear.]

[The Paladin declares Stage Clear.]

[Stage Clear!]

Just before my vision turned white, Ssonia’s eyes scanned the air.

In my direction.

It was impossible, but I thought Ssonia and I made eye

contact.

[The 34th floor has been cleared.]

[Reward tallying will be conducted after entering the 35th floor.]

[Sequential layer progression - You will be forcibly transferred to the 35th floor!]

White light enveloped us.

# Chapter 193:

## Unintentional Act

### (1)

---

The light that filled my vision faded.

The three of us were dropped into a stark white space.

The Black Dragon Witch, the Paladin, and me.

“Hmm. It was good to have unexpected gains in this stage!”

The Black Dragon Witch stretched. It was a sight, hands locked and leaning from side to side, reminding one of badminton club uncles warming up behind a village hill.

“I can’t wait to go down to the City of Ascension and establish the Black Knights...”

“It will be difficult. We have to conquer up to the 40th floor continuously.”

“That’s true.... Ah, really! If word gets out that the [Diva of the Night Sky] is making a comeback, there’ll be more than a few who’ll lose their minds! There are quite a few who miss the Paladin’s piano.”

“It’s not entirely decided yet.”

The Paladin gave a wry smile and tapped the Black Dragon Witch’s shoulder.

“Ah. Why?”

“Didn’t I tell you not to call me by old nicknames? Anyway, my return to the stage isn’t confirmed. I need to seek understanding and permission from my person.”

“Permission? More like [Imperial Consent], I suppose.”

The Black Dragon Witch clicked her tongue.

“Talking about your lover... That's also a disease. Too obsessive. Isn't it absurd to always have them only show their face to others while wearing a helmet?”

“It's valid. Such possessiveness is what makes it endearing.”

“Look at this. Sick, this is sickness...”

It was at that moment when the Black Dragon Witch sighed.

[Viper leading the Ghost Tribe declares Stage Clear.]

[The Sword Saint leading the Pure Humans Race declares Stage Clear.]

Our colleagues who did not join us started to arrive.

It seemed they had already cleared and were waiting for others to declare their clearance.

Paaaat, light spread.



After a moment, the one-eyed swordsman and the elderly swordsmaster stood there.

“Yo. Long time no see.”

The Celestial Guild Master, the Viper, waved his hand languidly.

A typical dashing swordsman's demeanor. However, having read the inner thoughts of the Light Novel Emperor, even his casual greeting of "Yo" couldn't be taken purely by me anymore.

Sad, indeed.

I wish I hadn't known....

“All of you declared clear as if it was planned. Hey, you three didn't secretly form a federation or something, did you?”

“Hmm. We made something much more intriguing than a mere federation.”

“Oh? Really? What is it?”

“It’s a secret.”

Viper prodded with curiosity, but neither the Black Dragon Witch nor the Paladin were easy targets. If a [Poker Face Acting Contest] was held in our tower, these two would undoubtedly vie for the trophy.

Eventually, Viper, unable to glean anything, fumed in frustration.

“Damn it. What’s with you three suddenly getting so close? You guys are known for being aloof. Damn, I feel left out.”

"....."

Meanwhile, the Sword Saint looked at us with an incredibly complicated gaze.

Surprise? Regret? Remorse?

The emotions were so mixed that even I found them hard to read.

[The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages appears.]

While we chatted, the Constellation responsible for this stage silently appeared. The Princess, as always, had a drowsy look as if she had just woken up from a nap.

“Is everyone here? No one is missing?”

We nodded our heads.

“Good. Well done, everyone. So, to get straight to the point, there were no failures in this stage. There’s no one who didn’t clear the quest. Usually, there’s at least one dropout per floor...”

That’s a bit troublesome.

The Princess muttered to herself.

“I don’t like to fuss over minor things, but Mula... the Tower Master values aesthetics a lot. Sorry, but I have to pick the one with the worst performance among you and eliminate them. Let’s see. It’s obviously not the King of Death....”

“Wait.”

The Paladin raised his left hand.

“Does one of us have to be eliminated?”

"Yes."

“For what reason?”

“There are various reasons. I’d like to tell you as much as I can... but I’m restricted here. Hmm. Normally, I could access up to security level 6, but now it feels like I can only mention up to level 3.”

At that moment, the Princess’s eyes turned towards me.

"In truth, I shouldn't be doing [this kind of work]."

"....."

Indeed.

I remember the Princess's true identity.

'An existence with higher authority than the Constellations.'

A pillar of the tower.

I have faced these pillars before. When I accepted Preta as my ally. And when I acquired the skill [A Certain Returner's Love] for Raviel.

A secret unknown even to the Sword Saint, known only to me.

"The theme after the 30th floor is self-awareness."

One of the pillars spoke.

The Black Dragon Witch, who adored the tower more than anyone, instantly reacted.

“Theme? Self-awareness?”

“Alright. I’ll answer one question per person.”

The Princess smiled brightly.

“It’s your reward for clearing the 34th floor. Since you’re unique kids, I guess you’d prefer this kind of reward over race points?”

The eyes of my fellow hunters sparkled.

We live in the tower, yet we know little about it.

Why did the tower suddenly appear in the world?

Why is each floor of the tower structurally different?

Many hunters were burning with curiosity but couldn't find answers. There was no one to answer their questions.

Now, that someone appeared before us.

"You can ask in order of lowest rank. Ah! No consulting each other. If it's something I can't answer, I'll honestly say so. Don't worry. If that happens, you can ask something else."

"....."

Silence ensued.

We exchanged glances. The condition of 'no consulting each other' sealed our lips. The Paladin looked at each of us, then nodded.

"What is the purpose of the tower's existence?"

"That's too broad a question. The tower is a world unto

itself. If you ask why a world exists, I can only get philosophical. Hmm, is that what you want?”

“...No.”

“Then refine your question.”

The Paladin pondered deeply.

“.....I want to know how the tower is established. Our world has a tower. But there are worlds without one. [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon] was such, and so was [Tales of Sormewin Academy]. How are towers created?”

“Ah-. Straight to the core. Should I say it? Hmm. I guess I can.”

The Princess reached towards the white floor. Swoosh. The ground split like tofu, and a pillow emerged. Holding a peach-designed pillow, the Princess slowly opened her lips.

“Live the life of the most miserable person in that world.”



“What?”

“Bear with me if my answer seems vague. As I mentioned, my security level has been downgraded. But anyway... there is a master who established the tower. That master lives the life of the most miserable person in each world. The worlds where towers are erected are those where the master has already lived and passed through. Worlds without towers are places the master hasn't visited yet.”

"What....."

“Next.”

The Paladin tried to ask more, but the Princess decisively shifted her gaze away.

Next in line was the sixth-ranked hunter, Viper.

Viper frowned with his one eye.

“The most miserable person? Can such a thing even be determined?”

“That’s true. It’s a difficult task. Misery is relative, after all. Sometimes, there are ambiguous candidates who are hard to judge.”

The Princess smiled.

“So, they have to live multiple times.”

"....."

"Next."

The Countess and the Heretic Inquisitor, ranked fifth and fourth respectively, had already been eliminated. Thus, it was the Black Dragon Witch’s turn.

After hearing these unexpected answers, the Black Dragon Witch glared sharply at the Princess.

“What do you mean by the theme you mentioned earlier? To beings like you, is the tower just an amusement park, and we are merely struggling spectacles within it?”

“Ahaha!”

The Princess burst into laughter.

“Ah, if only it were that simple! Life would be so much easier for me. But no, absolutely not! A theme is simply like the intention behind a test.”

“The intention of a test?”

“Yes. For example, people grow themselves throughout their lives, right? It’s often said that they raise children, but in raising children, they are also growing themselves. It’s about understanding oneself. In that sense, the theme after the 30th floor is self-awareness. That’s all.”

“Why put us through such a test.....”

“Next.”

The Princess’s gaze turned to me.

“What will the King of Death ask?”

I looked at the small Princess in front of me.

‘Before my regression, such a being did not exist.’

More precisely, did not appear.

Before my regression, no matter which strategy guide I looked at, the name [The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages] was not seen. There was no mention of her.

‘The appearance of the Princess is probably because Hamusutra is no longer a constellation.’

Hamusutra was said to be a fairly high-ranking Constellation.

She must have descended to fill the void left by Hamusutra’s fall.

‘And since Hamusutra’s fall was because of me... It’s highly

likely that the appearance of the Princess is entirely my fault.'

Then.

I decided on my question.

"Why do you show particular favor towards me?"

It was curious.

The Princess often sleeps. She doesn't seem to enjoy working.

And yet, the Princess, who herself said she shouldn't be doing [this kind of work], the cause of which was me, had been approaching me with favor. Even though there was no reason for her to have positive feelings towards me, as I was the cause of her predicament.

"Umm."

The Princess seemed troubled.

It was as if she received a question she didn't want to answer.

“...There are too many people listening right now. I'll answer you separately later.”

“Huh?”

“Next.”

“Wait, just a moment---”

“Ne-xt!”

The Princess forcefully moved on. I had no choice but to close my mouth.

“Hmm.”

Finally, it was the Sword Saint's turn to ask, being the last with the right to question.

“What lies at the very top of the tower?”

“Ah, all the memories you have gathered, shining like beautiful treasures.... Sorry. Just kidding. Anyway, I can’t answer that question. If I do, Mula-Gaga... Nail!”

The Princess tightly clenched the pillow.

“Really! Anyway, the tower’s master would be furious.”

“I understand. Then, who is the strongest swordsman you know?”

For some reason, the Holy Sword tensed its shoulders.

Shiny also shivered, seemingly signaling something. Is it sending Morse code? L... e... f... a... n... t...

However, mercilessly, the Princess mentioned a completely different name.

“The Absolute Sword Master.”

It was an immediate response.

“If we only consider the strength of a swordsman, no one can match The Absolute Sword Master, Zaku.... No, isn't this restriction too severe? Anyway, They're the duke of a kingdom and a noble with the right to kill anyone other than royalty without being punished. In other words, they're strong enough to kill anyone, right?”

“How big is the gap in skill between them and me?”

“It's meaningless.”

The Princess bluntly stated.

“Such a gap in skill can only be discussed when there's a comparable level.”

The Sword Saint's eyebrows twitched.

“...You mean I'm not even worth discussing?”



"Yes."

"....."

"Don't be hurt in your pride. The Absolute Sword Master is the First Duke, a monster who has lived for over two thousand years. Oh, I shouldn't call him a monster.... Anyway. They're like a natural disaster. You're unlikely to ever meet them, so don't worry."

Squeeze.

The Sword Saint clenched his fist.

Not only I, but the other colleagues also seemed slightly shocked.

‘Incomparable.’

He was an elder who abandoned all wealth and status in the outside world to plunge into the tower. He had honed his skills with only his sword, but now he was disregarded to his face. Though he maintained a poker face, it was clear his pride was wounded.

“Okay, then. While I give my answer to the King of Death... the rest of you wait a bit.”

Snap.

The Princess clapped her hands softly.

Then, my colleagues were enveloped in light and disappeared in an instant, transported somewhere. In the white space, only the Princess and I were left.

"....."

The Princess awkwardly glanced at me.

Why would such a high-ranking being, surpassing Constellations and even becoming a pillar, act like this towards me?

“What’s wrong with you since earlier?”

“Um, uhhum...”

The Princess put down the pillow.

"Sorry!"

And then, suddenly, she bent over and started hitting her head on the pillow.

I was taken aback.

"What are you doing right now....."

"I'm really sorry! King of Death!"

With her head still against the pillow, the Princess shouted.

"It was me who gave the skill to the Flame Emperor!"

What?

I froze as I was about to help her up.

“That, you mean the golden skill the Flame Emperor has?  
The one you brought...”

Could it be.

“Are you talking about [Returner’s Winding Clock]?”

“Yes. Right. That one.... It was actually a skill I gave.... ”

What?

“How did that happen?”

# Chapter 194:

## Unintentional Act

### (2)

---

“So what happened was... actually, how about I just show you? Yes, that would be better.”

The Princess, still with her head buried, clapped her hands. It was quite a bizarre spectacle. As she clapped, the space, which had been purely white, started to color vibrantly.

It was as if a landscape unfolded around us like in VR.

“Huh?”

But this scene. Somehow it felt familiar.

“...This is the second floor hunting ground, isn't it?”

“Right.”

It was unmistakable. Before regressing, when I was struggling as an F-rank hunter, I roamed this place daily. It was also where Yoo Soo-Ha, before rising as the Flame Emperor, had obliterated.

A familiar voice echoed in this familiar space.

-Ah, fuck. How long do I have to keep grinding here?

A man with a ponytail, his black hair tied back.

Yoo Soo-Ha.

Every time he opened his mouth, he spewed curses as if his tongue would sprout boils otherwise, masterfully weaving together a symphony of curses at the end of his sentences. Just listening made one want to cleanse their ears of the vulgarity.

-Damn. What's there in life? Just gotta step on those who can be stepped on, fuck.

The VR-rendered Yoo Soo-Ha started chasing a slime.

-Hey! Dude! Don't just stand there!?

The slime scurried away as Yoo Soo-Ha gave chase. His hunting style reeked of inexperience. He couldn't have been more than F-rank at best.

“...How old is this Yoo Soo-Ha?”

“Very old. In your terms, it would be [before regression].”

The Princess, still with her head buried, answered.

“At this time, the Flame Emperor was like you, roaming only the second floor. He hadn't awakened his skill. But then...”

Before she could finish, a blonde girl appeared in the VR. It was [The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages].

The VR Princess strolled through the bushes, humming a tune, walking as leisurely as if on a stroll.

-What? Why is a brat like this here?

Yoo Soo-Ha, too, noticed the Princess and approached her.

-Hey, kiddo.

Yoo Soo-Ha walked up behind the Princess and abruptly grabbed her by the collar. Despite the Princess's childlike appearance, it was extremely rude. However, Yoo Soo-Ha lifted her as if it were the most natural thing.

-What are you doing here?

As their eyes met.

-Congratulations!

The Princess beamed, holding up a sign with both hands.

On the sign, written in crooked letters, was [Golden Goblin Lottery].



-The first person to find and catch me gets a golden skill! You're really lucky. Today, you are the luckiest person in all the towers!

-What, what? What's with this crazy kid....

-Just check your status now, and you'll see the golden skill. Bye!

With that, the Princess vanished as if her task was done.

Only Yoo Soo-Ha remained in the bushes.

-What is this....

The VR illusion ended there.

The space I was standing in returned to its blank, white state.

The Princess, looking just as she did in the vision, was still burying her head at my feet.

"....."

I stared down at the back of the Princess's pretty head.

"I don't understand. Explain, please."

"I sometimes hold a [Golden Goblin] event. It's kind of a game. I appear in any tower and wander around thoughtlessly, and the first person to find and catch me..."

"You can't possibly give out a golden skill, do you?"

"Yes. That's exactly what I do..."

"This is insane."

It was unbelievable. My mind went blank.

What came to mind, strangely enough, was how the Flame Emperor scowled whenever people asked him the secret to success.

「Flame Emperor! Please define the secret to success in a single phrase for aspiring people!」

「It's destined for those who are meant to be.」

The Flame Emperor never elaborated.

「That's it. No more questions, don't follow me.」

Until now, I thought his response was nothing but arrogance.

But what if he really caught a [Golden Goblin] by chance and obtained an EX-grade skill?

No one would believe it if he told them. He'd just be branded as crazy.

It's literally a life of 'destiny for those meant to be' based on sheer luck!

“Why, why would you do such a thing?”

“There are two reasons: a very personal one and a very public one. Which one do you want to hear first?”

“Let's start with the public one.”

“There are two factions among the pillars: the observers and the interveners. I'm from the interveners. I'm in favor of actively intervening in the lives of those climbing the tower. Holding various events like the Golden Goblin is part of that activity...”

“And the personal reason?”

“It's fun.”

“Bury your head deeper, please.”

“Yes...”

Now I understand why I've been favored by the high beings of the tower.

I was a victim murdered by Yoo Soo-Ha, the Flame Emperor. And the skill [Returner's Winding Clock], which led to the Flame Emperor's success, was a technique whimsically given by one of the pillars. In other words.

“Compensation for the victim...”

“There wasn't entirely none of that.”

My head began to hurt.

“It was always strange why someone like Yoo Soo-Ha had such a great skill. But even so, this is more than just a prank that killed a frog with a thrown stone...”

“Really sorry.”

“Tsk.”

I sighed.

“So, did you descend to be punished? You, a pillar?”

“Yes. Mula... the Tower Master ordered me to come down and learn a lesson. Even put restrictions on me. Now, compared to my original state, I’m weakened in every aspect: strength, power, intelligence, charm. Isn’t that a bit too much?”

“The Tower Master truly is a wise ruler.”

A truly sagacious judgment.

“Anyway, I personally want to compensate the King of Death. I’ve subtly sided with you during meetings so far, but that feels insufficient, right?”

“Hmm.”

I pondered, chin in hand.

‘I don’t really want compensation for the Flame Emperor matter at this point.’

Thanks to Yoo Soo-Ha having [Returner’s Winding Clock], I was also able to activate [I Want to Become Just Like You]. I lived a successful life and met my master and Raviel, becoming

happy.

I was unfortunate, but not unhappy.

-Hey. Zombie. What are you talking about, pillars and stuff?

Lost in thought, the Guardian Spirit spoke to me. The Guardian Spirit had shared every journey with me, except for when I met the pillars.

‘That exists. I’ll explain later... Ah.’

Seeing the Guardian Spirit floating around, I changed my mind.

“That’s right. I should receive compensation from you, Princess.”

“What do you want? Shall I give you a lot of race points?”

“That’s tempting, but... no.”

I shook my head.

“Show me how the kids lived after I left.”

"Huh?"

“Ssonia, Arika, Yumar, Sakum. The kids who were under my care before I left. I want to see how they lived after I disappeared. If possible, Uburka and Gorke too.”

The aftermath of my children.

I wanted to see it.

Desperately.

"....."

Slowly, the Princess raised her head.



Looking up at me, her eyes were filled with kindness.

“The King of Death is really greedy.”

“Yes.”

“Alright. I'll grant you that much.”

The stark white space transformed into a landscape.

Soon, the faces of the children appeared.

---

Ssonia didn't give up acting.

-It's okay.

After my departure, Ssonia faced harsh criticism. Accusations of his aura skills deteriorating, not performing as well as before. To the now discerning Earth Spirits, Ssonia's Fire Dramas were no longer satisfying.

-It will work out.

But Ssonia didn't quit.

He practiced relentlessly, to the point of breaking his nails and toenails.

-I can do it.

Ssonia became quieter. He barely spoke, except when performing or practicing, as if refusing to live unless on stage.

By Ssonia's side were Arika, Yumar, and Sakum.

-Starting anew with such a mindset is enough.

Despite the decline in the troupe's reputation, the actors didn't mind.

-In the beginning, the dance drama was innovative and shocking, but now the audience is used to it. Don't be disappointed and keep performing. Praise will return

someday.

-Ugol.

An outdated troupe.

Even with such a reputation, the actors diligently did their job.

Arika's long-gone mother returned. Having missed the opportunity to share their lives, it was hard for them to bond as mother and child now. However, Arika allowed her mother into his life, occasionally allowing shared meals.

Yumar generously donated a significant portion of his earnings from acting to his hometown. With most of its youth gone, the village was declining. Thanks to Yumar's contributions, the village could breathe until the next generation grew.

Sakum learned that his former master's family had fallen into ruin. Not one to miss such an opportunity, he rushed over and threw a coin at his former master, now a beggar on the streets. Leaving the dazed master behind, Sakum gleefully departed.

Time passed.

-.....

Wrinkles now marked Ssonia's face.

Ssonia, who had lived his life on stage, had bright eyes. His life was narrow but fulfilled in that confined space.

Sitting alone in an empty auditorium, he gazed at the theater stage, the wooden floor that his feet had touched every inch of.

-I've lived well.

Ssonia peered into the darkness of the stage with his slender eyes, reflecting on the shadows of his past dances.

-I should have been kinder to people.

Ssonia slowly closed his eyes.

Lost in thought, perhaps.

-Lord Kekerkker...

Then the scenery changed.

Unlike the delicate Ssonia, there was a Hopgoblin with a mountainous body – Uburka, acknowledged as the most formidable warrior in Earth Spirit history and the chairman of the first rank in the Fire River Council.

-I can no longer govern for the better.

Over 20 years after sending me off, Uburka had reigned supreme.

Countless warriors challenged Uburka over the decades, but he never faced defeat.

An undefeated warrior.

Then one day, he abruptly announced his resignation.

-Now, I shall step down from my chairmanship and walk only the path of martial arts.

The Hopgoblins were in an uproar, becoming accustomed to Uburka's iron rule. The idea of the emperor abdicating was bewildering.

But Uburka was resolute.

-Rather, it's not too late. Ugol. It was bothersome to stabilize the Mountain Calamity Tribe and conquer the continent. Since the mess I started 20 years ago has settled somewhat, I will now live for myself. Don't worry. I won't return. I sever ties with the mortal world.

-Where do you intend to go, Chairman?

-It's not me who is going.

Uburka grinned.

-I'm waiting for my daddy to come.

Uburka left Guru and climbed the mountains.

The most treacherous spiritual mountain in the continent.

Snowstorms raged all year round.

At its peak, Uburka sat in meditation.

-My daddy descends to the earth every few hundred years.

Uburka murmured, immersed in meditation.

-With my current state, I can only endure for about a hundred and fifty years. I need to transcend my limits.

Joy was evident in Uburka's voice.

-Come quickly, Daddy. I'm waiting.

The snowstorm buried Uburka.

Just as the scenery seemed about to fade, it continued.

"....."

The Princess didn't withdraw the after-story's scene.

Even after a minute, then three, the snowstorm of the spiritual mountain continued to rage around me.

"Princess?"

"Yes."

"It seems we've seen all of Uburka's after-story."

"No, not yet."

The Princess smiled enigmatically.

"It's not over yet."



Her smile hinted at a secret joke.

"....."

Could it be?

My heart started to race.

Despite thinking it was impossible, I asked.

"Is he still alive?"

Uburka.

The child who smiled and said 'I have to live very long' when we parted. I assumed he was dead by now. To the Earth Spirits, Uburka had already become a legend.

But if Uburka succeeded in rejuvenation.

“Did he manage to survive?”

My voice trembled slightly.

Seeing me, the Princess’s lips curled up.

"Yes."

“Do you want to meet him?”

The next stage.

On the 35th floor, the child I must meet was decided.

# Chapter 195:

## Unintentional Act

### (3)

---

We were ready to enter the next floor.

In the last stage, everyone succeeded in their quests. It was difficult to single out someone to drop out, but luckily, one of our comrades volunteered.

“If you must choose someone, let it be me.”

The one who offered was the Paladin.

It seemed unnecessary, but the Paladin shook her head.

“It’s fine. To establish the Black Knights, I need to go down to the 1st floor anyway. I’m also uneasy leaving the Vigilante Corps for too long. And to be honest, I don’t particularly wish for the Gill Fish Race to dominate the continent. Just having

enough to live is sufficient.”

Typical of her, donating most of her earnings to an orphanage.

“Hm.”

The Black Dragon Witch seemed to know something more.

“Is that really the only reason?”

“...What do you mean?”

“Just thinking you might be lonely alone.”

The Black Dragon Witch grinned like a cat basking in the sun.

“Anyway, I’ll leave the establishment of the Black Knights to you. If anyone from our guild tries to interfere, tell them, ‘The Witch’s Cafe is past the crossroads, in a basement alley.’ If they ask for a menu, say, ‘Pumpkin latte, hold the ice.’”

“Black Dragon’s code?”

“Yes, this month's. It hasn't been updated yet.”

“Your taste is still unique...”

The Paladin chuckled and looked at me.

“I’m sorry to leave the vanguard first. King of Death. I’ll make sure to build a solid foundation for the guild. By the time you clear the 40th floor and return, everything will be ready.”

“Um, if you truly feel sorry, could you do me a favor?”

“Of course. Speak.”

“When this expedition is over, could you teach me music?”

The Paladin raised her eyebrows.

“That’s right, there was such a talk. You wanted to play for Raviel Ivansia?”

“Yes. I promised to learn music and play for her when I confess.”

“Good. Jazz is love.”

The Paladin smiled, seemingly pleased.

“Having such a romantic partner, you’ll certainly need music. I’m not skilled in teaching, but I’ll do my best.”

“Then, I’m counting on you, teacher.”

"Hmm."

We shook hands.

“Take care of the rest, young master.”

The Paladin's smile was swallowed by the light.

[The Paladin has been eliminated from the stage!]

[The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages is settling the points.]

[You have earned 1510 race points!]

[Your current race points are 7112.]

The points the Paladin had were distributed among us.

Race points, akin to child support, should ideally be used for all races, not just the Earth Spirits.

‘But the immediate priority isn’t the welfare of the race.’

I clenched my fist.

An eager child has been waiting for me for hundreds of years.

‘Wait for me, Uburka.’

Enveloped in light, we transitioned to the 35th floor.

‘Daddy is coming!’

---

Immediately upon arriving at the 35th floor, I coaxed the Black Dragon Witch to move with me.

“Quick! Just head to the highest mountain on the continent!”

“You’re not treating me as a taxi, are you?”

“I always deeply respect you in my heart!”

“If you can’t even say that much...”



The Black Dragon Witch sighed but complied with my request. Using her [Teleportation] was much faster than moving around in spirit form.

“Over there?”

We soared across the sky, stepping on clouds. Before long, mountains spread below us. Tall mountains, where the earth seemed to have folded and left its mark. As we went deeper, the mountain peaks turned white.

“...This seems higher than the Himalayas.”

The Black Dragon Witch made a grim face as she surveyed the mountain range.

“Just looking makes me feel cold. Are you sure your apostle is here? It's not logical.”

“The Princess showed me in a vision.”

I was certain it was around here.

I looked around.

“He should be near...”

A foreboding feeling suddenly gripped me.

There's a gap of about 150 years between the last and this stage.

Maybe Uburka didn't survive past 150 years.

"....."

My heart sank.

‘I’m too late.’

My heart constricted.

‘I arrived too late.’

The mummy's face was deeply wrinkled, but I sensed Uburka's remnants.

A face free from worldly suffering, now lightened.

Unable to cry, I stared at the peaceful expression.

'I'm sorry...'

Just as I reached out to touch Uburka's head.

"Daddy?"

A familiar vibration resonated in my ears.

I stopped reaching out and turned my head.

"Ugor."

There was a certain world-weary tone in the voice, always

holding a hint of laughter deep in the heart, echoing through the atmosphere of the snowy mountain.

“Really, it’s Daddy.”

Uburka stood tall on the white snowfield.

Behind his shoulders stretched the rugged mountain range.

Here, being the highest point on the continent, no one else shared our altitude in this world.

"U..."

I began to speak.

“Uburka...?”

“Good to see you. It's been roughly 363 years and about seven months, my Daddy. And you’ve brought an unfamiliar noble with you.”

“Good heavens.”

I was spellbound, alternating my gaze between Uburka and the mummy.

“How, how did this happen? I thought you had died and became a mummy...”

“Ah. That?”

Uburka approached the mummy with an unconcerned face.

“This is not a corpse but a husk. Just like a caterpillar must endure the prison of a cocoon to become a butterfly, this is my cocoon.”

Uburka tapped the mummy with his large finger.

The mummy lost its balance and melted away, sinking into the snow.

“A husk...?”

“After meditating for 60 days, enlightenment came to me. Ugor. Visions like dreams appeared before me, and stepping forward, I suddenly found myself living in that dream.”

Uburka shared something about a realm I had never heard of.

“In that dream, I was born as a son of a prestigious martial family. However, born with the inability to use aura. Despite being the eldest, I faced all sorts of scorn and neglect for not being able to use aura. Ugor, eventually, I took over the family head position through politics and schemes.”

“Such a detailed account for a dream.”

“Perhaps, it was my past life. Though I died of illness at the age of 26. When I awoke from the dream, my original body flowed away like a shed skin.”

Uburka laughed, revealing his fangs.

“I originally planned to leave it as a memento, but since Daddy has returned, it doesn’t matter. Proof of waiting is only kept for the joy of meeting. Now that we’ve met again, my wait has already become joy.”

“Uburka...”

I felt a lump in my throat.

Our child had grown up so magnificently.

"King of Death."

Then, the Black Dragon Witch tapped my shoulder.

“It’s fine to show your affection, but haven’t you noticed something strange? We haven’t used any items.”

The Black Dragon Witch looked at Uburka with deep eyes.

“We haven’t used [Animal Possession] or [Character Possession]. We’re still in a spirit state. Humans in this world can’t recognize us. But how can that kid see us so naturally?”

Ah.

That's when I felt the strangeness.

‘Right?’

In a spirit state, no one should be able to recognize us. This had been a constant rule from the 31st to the 34th floor. Yet Uburka conversed with me as if it were natural and even recognized the Black Dragon Witch's presence.

Moreover.

‘I spread aura around earlier, but no life was detected.’

It was a peculiar situation.

I locked eyes with Uburka.

“Uburka, how can you...”

“Ugor.”



Uburka rotated his neck in all directions.

Crack! The sound of bones aligning loudly echoed.

“Upon achieving enlightenment and transcending life, I began to see things I couldn’t before. The world is the ultimate other. If one can perceive the world as a single entity, then one could also be considered an entity comparable to the world.”

“Uh.”

What was this child talking about?

When difficult words hit my brain, it starts to stutter. I didn’t understand a word Uburka said.

“Kid. What are you talking about?”

“Simply put, it means this, Daddy.”

Uburka snapped his fingers.

[The Constellation 'The Muscle Pig Dreaming of Parricide' is looking at you.]

What?

[The Constellation 'The Muscle Pig Dreaming of Parricide' is delighted to reunite with you!]

Incredible.

I stared dumbfounded at Uburka.

It felt like being hit on the head with a shovel.

“You, you...”

“Many wonders exist in the myriad of things.”

Uburka's smile deepened as he looked at me.

“Seeing Daddy's dumbfounded face, I'm glad I practiced diligently. How about it? As far as I know, there's no one in this land who has reached a higher realm than me. I've officially become the strongest warrior of all time.”

“No...”

A Hopgoblin becoming a Constellation.

I knew he was a genius, but I didn't expect this level.

“By the way, Daddy.”

The son, now a Constellation, smiled slyly.

“We can always share our stories later. Today, our father and son duo have fortunately reunited. Shouldn't we share the joy of 350 years of longing?”

“Ah, yes. That's right.”

It had only been a short time for me, but for Uburka, it was a

long and lengthy period.

The joy shared between a parent and child who have reunited should be expressed through actions, not words.

I spread my arms wide.

“Come here, Uburka. Although I'm tiny compared to you, I'll hug you with joy...”

“Ugor. Then I will not refuse the invitation.”

[The Constellation 'The Muscle Pig Dreaming of Parricide' challenges you to a duel!]

Huh?

“Brace yourself, Daddy.”

Uburka clenched his fists.

“I might have been miserably defeated 350 years ago, but today will be different!”

With each step he took, the mountain range quaked. The snow on the peak collapsed and soared into the sky, changing the direction of the blizzard.

“Wait, just a moment. Son. Wait a minute---.”

“I’ve eagerly awaited the day like today!”

Uburka launched a punch.

[The Constellation 'The Muscle Pig Dreaming of Parricide' roars.]

At that moment, heaven and earth shook.

# Chapter 196:

## Erosion (1)

---

Among all the Constellations I've met, the most powerful was undoubtedly Preta, the Demon King of Autumn Rain.

The saintess of the demons once piled up mountains of corpses with a single slash of her sword. The continent was dyed in red blood under her blade, turning mountain ranges into pools of blood and rivers fragrant with blood.

“Hahaha!”

However, today my heart's ranking might change.

“As expected of Daddy! You dodge like a slippery eel!”

A fist whizzed past my face. The sheer noise it created splitting the air was violently loud. Thank goodness I braced my legs; otherwise, I would have been swept away by the air pressure.

“Ah, son!”

“Speak! Daddy!”

“Do we really need to do this among ourselves!”

I shouted with earnest desperation.

“After so long, we could share our joys, indulge in pleasant conversations as father and son...”

“This is the most fun for me!”

“Are you trying to kill your father!”

“If you die by my fist, it just means Daddy’s abilities were only so much. Don’t blame me, blame your own frailty!”

An explosion resounded.

Turning back, I saw a part of the snowy mountain collapsing due to Uburka's aura.

“Incredible.”

While not quite at the level of severing the world's edges with a thought like my teacher, his destructive power was immense.

What would happen if I got hit by that fist? Considering whether my skull or the mountain peak was sturdier, the calculation was clear.

“Spare your Daddy!”

I cried out.

“People of the town! Here's a disrespectful son trying to crack open his father's skull! After teaching him Aura Manipulation and passing down the Demonic Heavenly God Art, this ungrateful brat now seeks my death!”

“Yours truly! Will commit parricide with fists!”



Spouting such nonsensical words, Uburka readied himself. It was a posture all too familiar to me.

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The First Form.

Sword of Starving Death.

Aura erupted from all around, engulfing my body. I opened my eyes wide. The mastery of aura was incomparable to the old days.

-Ho.

The Guardian Spirit let out an exclamation, which stretched endlessly in our prolonged perception. His voice sounded like 'Hoooo' to me, and before the snowstorm could catch the end of his words, I launched a counterattack.

'If we clash head-on, I'll lose.'

I drew upon the aura from my entire body.

It was a situation where even a second's lapse in concentration meant defeat.

‘Can I do it?’

As time crawled, I came up with a counter-strategy.

‘Let's try.’

My movements were quicker than my decision.

I stepped forward. Crunch! The snow under my feet shattered. My aura rapidly infiltrated the finely broken snowflakes.

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The First Form.

Sword of Starving Death.

I didn't counter Uburka's attack. Instead, I overtook it.

The Demonic Heavenly God Art ultimately depends on the caster's memory, the mental image. No matter how many directions it attacks from, if one thoroughly understands the caster's mental image, it can be unraveled.

'It depends on how well you understand the art.'

I quietly observed his offense.

To my eyes, the flames of aura appeared as vivid gestures.

Uburka chose two main attack paths.

'Let's see.'

One breath.

I first broke the most violently rushing flame. Hunger's agony. It was an attack filled with a child's scream.

‘Classic.’

I skillfully maneuvered the art. Recalling the gestures of a mother who has to hear her child's screams right before her eyes.

Pain and agony clashed. My aura twisted Uburka's, like hands wringing a neck.

The direction of the attack reversed.

".....!"

Two breaths.

Uburka's eyes became ferocious. He grasped my intention to fight not with physical strength but with the understanding of martial arts.

“Daddy always picks the most irritating ways!”

To anyone ordinary, Uburka’s words would have sounded like mere ■. Just a meaningless, single syllable.

However, ■ twisted and bent with aura, stretching endlessly in our slow-motion time. It required a high level of mastery.

“You make me out to be a dim-witted musclehead!”

“Exactly.”

Our father and son proudly displayed a high-level conversation.

“If you don’t want to lose, release the Demonic Heavenly God Art first.”

“Never! I will beat you with the art! I want to crush you utterly, make you acknowledge my strength from the depths of your heart!”

“After three hundred years, you've only learned bragging. Just succumb to my grasp.”

“Ugor!”

Ugor in the Earth Spirit Tribe's language roughly means 'No', 'Not really', 'Enough', 'Go away', 'Damn this guy', and carries a variety of other rich meanings.

“I've waited for over 360 years; I can't lose again!”

“Three hundred or three thousand years, it doesn't matter.”

Three breaths.

I began to dominate the Demonic Heavenly God Art unleashed by Uburka. It was like adding colors to a sketch he drew, or more precisely, adding my impromptu performance to his music.

“I have no intention of quietly handing over the leader's position.”

As Uburka embedded his child's pain, I painted the image of parents feeding only their child while starving themselves.

Which hunger more aptly depicted universal screams?

Two interpretations of the same art intertwined.

“My child.”

“What!”

“Since you've reached a substantial level, we can now have a more profound conversation.”

I deflected Uburka's punch with the back of my hand. It wasn't a forceful deflection. Anticipating his attack, my body was already prepared to evade. The backhand strike was merely the final motion needed for evasion.

Ugor!

Uburka, his anger reaching its peak, lunged at me.

“We live among people, especially as members of the Demonic Cult. If one only wishes to contemplate the world’s pain, they should become a monk. The Demonic Heavenly God Art is a vow to reside in pain. We dwell amongst people.”

Each punch Uburka threw demolished parts of the mountain.

However, none of his strikes hit me.

Rumble-

Centered between us, avalanches erupted in all directions.

On the fringes of dark and light arts, petals blossomed profusely.

Blood Blossoms.

The snowstorm collapsed into a white cascade.

“Good heavens...”



Twenty steps away from us, Black Dragon Witch murmured dumbfounded. Was she astonished by Uburka's immense strength, or was she in awe of how I deftly handled such a precarious situation?

I continued talking to Uburka, paying no heed.

“Be careful. Our Demonic Cult can easily degenerate into a showroom of pain. Anytime, as much as possible.”

“A showroom of pain?”

“Don’t compete over who suffers more. Ensure your pain doesn’t become a power for you alone. I know you're not that kind of person, but it's still worth mentioning.”

Four breaths.

I successfully occupied all of Uburka's attack routes.

Though Uburka was moving, the paths his aura could extend were limited.

“Ugh!”

Uburka clenched his teeth. His red aura fiercely flared up in an attempt to break free, but I skillfully caught the tips of the flames and directed them where I wanted.

“If you bear the pain alone, the people around you will wither away. The ones who cherish you the most will suffer the most. I want to stop you, but how can I argue if you wish to shoulder the world's pain? If pain is the proof of being human, then you alone are a human.”

I wondered if Uburka was keeping up with me.

There was no certainty.

Yet, I continued to weave through the flames.

It might be too early for such advice, but as Black Dragon Witch said, it's much better to be early than too late.

“Don't make those you care for miserable while claiming to act for the world. It's a contradiction.”

"....."

“Find companions. Find fellow travelers. Convince people with your ideals. If you’ve attained enlightenment on the mountain, it’s time to descend. Find people to trust your heart with, to think in your stead. Talk a lot with them. To become human, be with them.”

“That kind of person...”

“There’s already someone.”

Five breaths.

I spread out my aura.

“Look, child!”

My reflection appeared in Uburka's eyes.

Like mirrors reflecting each other, our eyes endlessly captured each other.

“Why do you think I passed on my will to you!”

Aura burst forth.

Not from my power.

It was the torrent of aura released by Uburka.

I merely steered the flow.

“To share the same sky!”

And then, I painted the long-dreamed scenery with red brushstrokes.

Uburka was the infinite palette, and I was the brush.

The same aura manipulation, the same Demonic Art, the same mental image – a feat only possible when shared, descended on the white mountain top.

Demonic Formation Art.

The First Method.

Wandering Mansion of Flames.

Six breaths.

The landscape changed.

Red aura swirled, forming various shapes.

Candlesticks. Candles lit on the candlesticks. Even the melting wax.

Lavish floors, stairs, decorations adorning the mansion – all made of aura.

“Wait. This place is...?”

Black Dragon Witch was astounded.

The scene seemed familiar to her.

Hundreds of candle flames rose, and between each candlestick and candlestick, shadows made of aura hid.

-Hehehe.

A familiar sound.

A laughter that slithered like dripping candle wax.

-Hide and seek?

-Who's...

-Play with...

Then, the scenery crumbled.

It probably lasted only about three seconds.

Despite Uburka's immense aura and my precise manipulation, maintaining objects, sounds, and an entire space was difficult.

But we did it.

Even if it was fleeting.

I successfully recreated the hellfire mansion.

"....."

Uburka looked around, dazed.

The scenery had returned to the snowy mountains.

But everyone present knew that what they had just witnessed was neither a hallucination nor a fantasy.

“Uburka.”

I gathered the little remaining aura in my body.

“That formation I mentioned to you 363 years ago, this is it. It’s not just about embedding mental images into the aura and shooting them. It’s about bringing those images to life with aura.”

Passing down the Demonic Heavenly God Art to Uburka.

Spreading the Blood Fire Drama among the Earth Spirit Tribe.

It was all to unfold a realm of existence impossible to achieve alone.

“I alone can’t sustain it for even a second. My aura would deplete instantly, and I’d collapse within ten steps. Even combining our auras, three seconds is the limit. But what if twelve warriors join us?”

"....."



“Twenty-four, hundreds, no, a thousand Earth Spirit Tribe members performing the formation together. What then?”

Uburka imagined the scene I described.

His gaze traced some landscape.

“It's an impossible feat, normally. But over the past few centuries, the Earth Spirit Tribe has shared and refined these images. Only we can accomplish this. We are musicians sharing the same score.”

“That's...”

Uburka began to speak.

“It's singing the song of pain...”

“But it will be beautiful.”

“Ugor. It will be beautiful.”

An exciting prospect.

“Descend the mountain with me.”

I smiled.

“Even if we sing of pain, our lives will still be joyful.”

“How is that possible?”

“I’m a remarkable man. So are you. You respect and like me, someone who strives for the best. How can my days not be joyful?”

I extended my right hand to Uburka.

“I become a little happier because of you, and you’ll smile a bit more because of me.”

“Let’s go down, my rebellious son.”

Uburka took my right hand.

[You have created a new skill!]

Just then, the Tower's voice echoed.

[Creating skill card!]

# Chapter 197:

## Erosion (2)

---

A rectangular card shone in my left hand.

A familiar skill card.

However, the color of the card was unfamiliar.

‘Purple? Violet?’

The color of the card indicates the skill's rank.

From F to C rank, they are bronze-colored, often mocked as 'poop color.' Most hunters possess this rank of skills, and there are plenty who lament not even having this.

From B to A rank, they are silver-colored, commonly referred to as jackpot skills.

Above S rank, they are golden. Surrounded by highly skilled colleagues, it's easy to forget that conversing with a hunter who has a golden skill is extremely rare. There is no mention of a [purple] card anywhere.

‘Could it be a glitch...?’

I scanned the letters etched on the front of the card.

+

[Demonic Formation Art]

Rank: Undetermined

Effect: Based on Demonic Heavenly God Art, this formation materializes shared mental images of the casters. The more casters join the formation, the more skilled they are in Demonic Heavenly God Art, and the clearer the shared mental image, the more powerful the formation becomes.

This formation's effectiveness has not been proven yet!

You are the first to conceive this skill. Now, you must demonstrate the potential of Demonic Formation Art. As sufficient data accumulates, the rank and description of this skill will be revised.

\*The current skill rank is not yet determined.

+

‘Ah.’

Now I understood why the card was purple.

A kind of prototype. It seems untested skills are imbued with a purple color.

‘Such cases exist too...’

-That’s awesome!

I was startled. Guardian Spirit suddenly leaned close to my ear and shouted.

‘What the heck?’

-This man right here is seeing a purple card for the first time!

Guardian Spirit's eyes sparkled.

-Yay, so glad I didn't just die and became a ghost instead!

‘It's just a uniquely colored card, why the fuss...?’

-Listen, Zombie. You're usually sharp, so what's this? Doesn't it strike you as odd? Would you use purple as the default color for a test version? Typically, it would be white.

Hmm.

That was a valid point.

‘Right? I wouldn't set purple as the basic color. Usually.’

-My point exactly.

‘Hmm.’

Could the Tower's master favor purple?

As I pondered about the enigmatic Tower Master whose face remained shrouded in darkness, Uburka spoke.

“Daddy.”

“Ah, sorry. I got lost in thought for a moment.”

“It’s alright.”

Uburka shook his head. I was still holding his giant hand.

“More importantly, I need to explain the current era to you. There must be a reason why you’ve descended at this specific time. Something big is happening, not just in the continent, but perhaps in the world.”



“Something big?”

“Yes. Perhaps it’s not just a continental issue, but a global one.”

Uburka spoke cryptically, his smile mysterious.

“A new continent has been discovered.”

At that moment, the quest updated.

[The quest for the 35th floor has been given.]

The name of the quest in the window read:

[The Age of Exploration].

---

A new continent.

Its discovery dates back 24 years from now.

“I spent over three hundred and fifty years in the snowy mountains, but occasionally I visited the city to eavesdrop on the world. A member of the Gill Fish Race reportedly saw an unknown land on a map.”

Gill Fishes typically live in rivers, but there's always an exception.

One of them was curious about what lay at the end of the sea. Luckily, they had the capability to realize their curiosity and the courage to stake their life on it.

「 Please support me. 」

The Gill Fishes captain spoke before the admirals.

「 The Earth Spirit Tribe has the right to dominate the land, as even our tribal name starts with Earth. Fairies, being cunning, should control the gold. But the water is exclusively our realm, the Gill Fishes, and there should be no waters or routes unknown to us! 」

An argument without logic, yet the admirals applauded.

「We grant you one ship, a Vampire, and forty fishermen.」

Thus, a legendary voyage began.

It's like their minds are as free as their swimming in water. Developing salt and being involved in unique incidents in this world seem to be the forte of the Gill Fishes.

“What happened to that captain?”

“He achieved his dream. Sixteen months into the voyage, he discovered the new continent.”

Uburka spoke calmly.

“And on his triumphant return, he was eaten by a killer whale.”

That's tragically unfortunate.

“Being eaten by a killer whale is quite common. Ugor. The leading cause of death among Gill Fishes is crocodiles, followed by killer whales, and third, drowning.”

“Drowning? They’re merfolk.”

“I don’t know the details.”

The mystery deepened.

As father and son pondered, a sigh came from nearby. Black Dragon Witch.

“You guys... just teleport.”

Right beside us, she sighed heavily, looking up at us.

“Can you not just comfortably chat among yourselves while using someone as a driver? Teleport. It's irritating to just listen quietly from the side. Teleport.”

Black Dragon Witch repeated 'teleport' in her speech because

we were currently using her teleportation bus.

I was snugly nestled in Uburka's enormous arms, and Black Dragon Witch was comfortably seated in my lap. Thus, we were able to repeatedly perform stable instant teleports.

“If you look from afar, do we resemble a Matryoshka doll or a kangaroo?”

“Hey, I’m offering a comfortable ride in exchange.”

“I might be comfortable, but it’s troublesome for me. Teleport. Do you know how burdensome it is to continuously cast a skill? Teleport.”

“We’re almost like family now. So close. I was wondering if I could call you ‘sister’ since I’ve entered the Tower. I’ve been wanting to have a siblingly relationship with the Black Dragon Witch.”

“You’re the type who gets obnoxiously clingy once you get close, huh... Teleport.”

Our trio flew over the sea.

Yes, the sea.

No land or even a rock reef in sight, just endless blue stretching to the horizon. We were slicing through the ocean, heading straight for the new continent.

“‘Sister’ is not acceptable. I don’t like it.”

“How about ‘Your Majesty, the Black Dragon Queen’?”

“Our King is quite amusing.”

Black Dragon Witch smiled slightly.

I experienced a brief moment of getting smacked.

“I won’t tease you anymore...”

“Good thinking. Teleport. If you really want to change how you address me, call me ‘senior.’ Teleport. I’ll allow that much.”

“Oh, that’s great, senior. You can also call me ‘Gong-Ja’ if you like.”

"....."

Black Dragon Witch didn’t respond to my words. She just turned her head forward, her expression emotionless, and continued muttering ‘teleport.’ Silence naturally ensued.

Listening to the sound of the waves crashing below, I checked the quest window once more.

+

[The Age of Exploration]

Difficulty: A-

Mission Objective: Exploration! Adventure! A new continent has emerged for the seven tribes. The route opened by the Gill Fishes has now drawn other tribes as well.

‘I want to live somewhere else, not here.’

In every era, there are those who dream of other worlds. Unfulfilled desires, unmet miracles, unexperienced excitement. People board ships, pinning everything they haven't achieved in this life to a land beyond the sea.

However, the new continent is a fresh world only for the seven tribes.

Others have already established their homes and live on this land. At present, there is imminent discord between adventurers and natives! A one-sided massacre might even occur.

Is it invasion, coexistence, or expulsion?

The seven tribes are at risk of annihilation. Lead them!

\*However, failure in leadership may result in the extinction of one or more tribes.



Massacre. Annihilation.

These ominous words struck my eyes.

This was the reason we were hastily heading to the new continent.

“Are our children massacring the natives?”

“I don’t know. Teleport.”

Black Dragon Witch responded.

“But it’s possible. Similar things often happened during new route explorations in the outside world... Teleport. I hope the people of this world don’t do such things, but teleport. We can’t always expect our children to grow up as we wish.”

“I want to prevent any massacres, for whatever reason.”

“I support you.”

“Ugor.”

Uburka suddenly spoke up.

“There’s something over there.”

He pointed towards the horizon. I couldn't see anything. But upon hearing his words, I instantly enhanced my vision with aura.

Something was floating in the vast ocean.

“A ship?”

It was a massive vessel.

I frowned.

“Black Dragon Witch. I mean, senior. There’s a ship over there. Let's stop by.”

“Why?”

“There are no sailors on the ship.”

“Teleport.”

Black Dragon Witch also seemed to have noticed the ship. We instantly moved to the deck.

As soon as we set foot on the wooden planks, we already felt something was off.

"There are people here, but....."

Black Dragon Witch looked around.

“...are they all asleep?”

The sailors were sprawled out on the deck.

They belonged to various tribes, mostly Ghost Tribe and Gill Fishes, with a few Pure Human Race mixed in. Regardless of tribe, every sailor looked terribly emaciated.

I approached the helmsman, who had collapsed by the ship's wheel, and gently held his wrist.

“He's malnourished.”

I circulated aura around the sailor's body, thoroughly checking his condition.

“He shows severe dehydration symptoms. Seems like he's been starving for about three to four days. Hmm. No injuries, and the head is fine, but....”

Having mastered Sword of Parched Death in Demonic Heavenly God Art, I was quite knowledgeable about dehydration. I examined other sailors, but the symptoms were all the same. Severe malnutrition and dehydration.

And.

“This is not just simple sleep.”

The sailors were breathing comfortably, sound asleep.

Not unconscious or passed out, merely in a state of sleep.

“Did you try waking them with aura?”

“Yes, I deliberately stimulated them, but they won’t wake up. This is really strange.”

“Wait a moment.”

Black Dragon Witch approached and touched one of the sailors. Her fingertips flickered with black aura.

Soon, she narrowed her eyes.

“...they're not cursed.”

“Could it be drugs? Are they drugged?”

“It’s possible, but given the symptoms, it seems too mild to be drug effects. I can’t feel any traces. There might be drugs unique to this world that I’m unaware of, but....”

Black Dragon Witch pondered.

Meanwhile, Uburka had been dragging sailors from various parts of the ship.

Interestingly, the captain was a member of the Mountain Calamity Tribe. It’s quite bold for a Mountain Calamity Tribe member, who deteriorates or even melts upon contact with salt, to venture into the sea.

“This is certainly peculiar.”

While setting down the Mountain Calamity Tribe captain, Uburka sniffled.

“It seems these people fell asleep suddenly while working. It’s as if they were all abruptly overcome with drowsiness in the midst of their tasks.”

“All at once?”

“Ugor.”

In total, 32 sailors lay asleep on the deck, seemingly having forgotten the living world.

Indeed, the mystery only deepened.

“...shall we briefly enter and exit their dreams?”

After pondering, Black Dragon Witch suggested.

“Dreams?”

“Yes. Using [Character Possession] would be more certain, but it consumes 1000 points. We can’t waste points here, so let’s use [Appearance in Dreams].”

That’s a hint of her character. She must be the type to meticulously distribute the guild’s budget, penny-pinching every cent. Debating between a dessert cafe and convenience store desserts, she would eventually choose the latter for better value.

‘Meanwhile, Raviel would probably rent out an entire dessert cafe just to eat.’

She must even have a reserved seat there.

Impressive.

I instinctively thought of our noble Countess and then nodded.

“That sounds like the quickest solution.”

“Okay, then I’ll go first...”

“Senior, you’ve been through a lot, scaling mountains and crossing seas. You’ve covered all terrains. Let me handle this.”

“...sometimes you act so admirably, it’s hard to scold you.”

“Senior, I’m here to take care of you.”



I opened the Civilization Store.

[You have purchased 'Appearance in Dreams'.]

[100 race points are consumed!]

[Your current race points are 7012.]

I then used the item on the Mountain Calamity Tribe captain in front of me.

Whooosh!

My vision swirled.

It was like a whirlpool in a bathtub, swirling before my eyes. After a breath, two breaths... as my breath quickened, my sense of time became numb. At some point, I had closed my eyes.

A while later.

-Gong-Ja.

Someone whispered in my ear.

-Open your eyes, Gong-Ja.

I opened my eyes wide.

Right in front of me was a woman who looked exactly like Raviel.

"....."

Hmm.

I quickly scanned Raviel's white neck and long fingers. No necklace, no wedding ring.

Certainly, there was no use for money here. Before climbing to the 30th floor, I spent half of all my assets on a wedding ring that was nowhere to be seen.

-Chuckle.

Just in case, I looked around a bit more.

A bedroom in the Ivansia Duke's residence.

I was lying on a soft bed. The woman with Raviel's face hovered above me. I noticed a plant stand and a chair, but there was no golden skill card anywhere.

‘Okay.’

Situation assessed.

-What are you so diligently looking at?

The woman in front of me stroked my cheek.

Her eyes, identical to Raviel's, shone deeply.

I momentarily pondered whether to take this as a dream come true or a nightmare, but thankfully, I came to a conclusion in 0.1 seconds.

-Tomorrow is a holiday. My love. Let's enjoy a pleasant time...

“You bastard, using Raviel’s face to lie? Wanna die?”

The woman’s touch stopped abruptly.

“You have 10 seconds to get off me and kneel, or whether you’re a deity, an apostle, or some golden retriever-looking jerk from another world, I’ll obliterate your existence. Take this kindly warning. I don’t count to ten. Kneel within 10 seconds.”

-.....

The woman's face stiffened.

-How...?

She looked bewildered.

-You're still not fully asleep? No, that can't be. I've perfectly entered the dream world. How did you...

“Ten seconds are up.”

-What?

I smiled brightly.

“Let's start with a beating.”

# Chapter 198:

## Erosion (3)

---

A newly opened route to uncharted lands.

In the so-called New Continent, there naturally lived indigenous people.

However, the kind of tribe they were was extraordinary.

"Dream Demon?"

Quite extraordinary indeed.

-Yes, King of Death... that's correct....

Right after getting hit exactly 59 times by me, the Dream Demon raised its hands submissively. Incubus. Succubus. The Dream Demon tribe, often with names ending in 'bus,' were

indeed the original inhabitants of the New Continent.

I cracked my knuckles left and right.

"Oh? My question seems to lack substance to you? Do you lose strength and become listless when asked? Should I take care of your spirit?"

-No, King of Death! We are brimming with energy!

"From now on, answer my questions politely. If your tone isn't polite, your face will become 'polished' instead."

-Yes! King of Death!

"Good."

I nodded in satisfaction.

The Guardian Spirit looked utterly overwhelmed.

-Kim Zombie, this guy... He's really mastered the art of beating people up!

Looking into the abyss makes the abyss stare back at me. Being trained by the Guardian Spirit and my master, I had unwittingly specialized in thrashing others.

"All the crew members on this ship have passed out. Did you do this?"

-Yes! It was our doing!

"How?"

-Our tribe usually parasitizes the dreams of other beings to survive!

The Dream Demon confessed.

-In fact, from our perspective, dreams are reality. What you call reality is, conversely, a dream for us. We thought we were the only sentient beings until you crossed the ocean, and since then, it's been one shock after another....



"Hmm."

A tribe that takes dreams as their true life.

"So, you don't have a physical body?"

-If you mean a body as you understand it... Yes, we don't. Our common sense is too different from yours for normal conversation.

"Yet, communication seems to be going quite well."

-Ah. That's because we are currently occupying the mind of this beast.

The 'beast' the Dream Demon referred to was the Mountain Calamity Tribe captain of the ship. From their habit of referring to people as beasts, I guessed the eccentric nature of the Dream Demon tribe.

-We share the memories of the beasts whose dreams we devour. Thanks to this, we know a lot about you. Over the past 24 years, we've been planning meticulously after the shock of meeting you.

"A plan?"

-We've never encountered beasts with such overflowing memories. From our perspective, it's like a feast. A banquet... The shock was beyond words.

"Hmm."

"Our children knew nothing about you."

-Well, we strictly parasitize in dreams... We don't have a true form. We choose an appearance from your memories that seems appropriate. You have never seen us, and even if you did, you would just dismiss it as a dream.

Incidentally, the current form of the Dream Demon was that of the Flame Emperor.

I had ordered it.

I couldn't bring myself to hit Raviel's face, even if it was fake. Before being my love, Raviel, with her beauty alone, is a treasure of the universe. How could I, as a cultured citizen, mistreat such a treasure?

-I... It's the first time someone whose dream has been devoured by us is still fine like you, King of Death.

The Dream Demon confessed softly.

-So, it's fascinating. How did you know it was a dream right away? How did you even enter our dream in the first place?

"My memories should tell you everything."

-That's the strange part, King of Death. Your memories don't read well. Only fragments can be scanned. This is... quite unusual.

The Dream Demon kept glancing at me with a look of wonder.

I roughly understood how things had played out.

‘Because of the [Appearance in Dreams] item.’

This isn't my dream. It's the consciousness of the Mountain

Calamity Tribe captain.

I used the item to enter the mind of another.

That's why my consciousness is only partially accessible to the Dream Demon.

'A race that lives only in the world of dreams.'

Fascinating.

"Well, it seems my mental strength is so strong that illusions don't work on me."

-Strange. That shouldn't be the problem...

"You are an interesting race, I get that."

I changed the subject.

"So why did you needlessly capture these sailors and put them to sleep? Because of you, this ship has turned into a ghost ship. They might die of dehydration."

The Dream Demon hesitated cautiously.

Seeing the Flame Emperor's face on this creature, performing such gestures, felt like my stomach acid was about to synchronize with my spit.

Moreover, it wasn't just any Incubus; the muscles seemed to be upgraded compared to the original Flame Emperor. Broader shoulders and a firmer chest. It seemed to even radiate a sparkling halo from the face.

Disgusting.

-Ugh!?

"Ah."

When I came to my senses, my palm had lightly made contact with the Dream Demon's cheek.

-Why are you hitting me again!?

"It's just that... your face kind of provokes a beating...."

-King of Death, didn't you order me to take on the appearance of this creature!

"Sorry. Anyway, why did you capture a perfectly good ship?"

The Dream Demon started to stammer, then hesitated.

-This... I'm not sure if I should tell you. This matter might be confidential to our tribe.

"Might be?"

-Yes. We had never imagined there were beings beyond the sea. Especially such delectable ones. So, after 24 years of deliberation and discussion, we only recently came to a conclusion.

The Dream Demon opened its mouth.

-We decided to invade the land where you live.

Invasion.

-Currently, this ship isn't the only one under our control. All 33 ships crossing the ocean are under our control.

-We put all the intruding beasts that entered our territory to sleep. The vanguard already set sail ten days ago. We are part of the follow-up group.

That's when I realized something odd.

'The quest window.'

A hologram appeared before my eyes.

It listed the tasks to be completed on the 35th floor.

I focused on the part written in the lower paragraph.

+

...the new continent is a fresh world only for the seven tribes.

Others have already established their homes and live on this land. At present, there is imminent discord between adventurers and natives! A one-sided massacre might even occur.

Is it invasion, coexistence, or expulsion?

The seven tribes are at risk of annihilation. Lead them!

\*However, failure in leadership may result in the extinction of one or more tribes.

+

‘I see.’

I realized.



‘It's not the [natives] of the New Continent who are in danger.’

The quest window clearly stated that [the seven tribes are at risk of annihilation].

‘It's our children who might be massacred!’

The counterattack of the natives.

That was the crisis of this era.

---

As soon as I woke up, I immediately informed my comrades of the situation.

As the story unfolded, the expressions of Black Dragon Witch and Uburka grew increasingly grave.

".....Indeed. This is completely opposite to the history of our world."

Black Dragon Witch murmured.

“We were prejudiced. We thought that the ones being invaded would be the New Continent, and the natives would be the ones massacred.... Exactly. If the natives are stronger, the direction of invasion would be reversed.”

“It's not a matter of strength, Ugor.”

Uburka frowned.

“No matter how strong a warrior is, there are things in the world that can't be resisted. Like [sleep]. Everyone must sleep. Dream Demons, you said.... A tricky tribe to deal with....”

“King of Death. You said the invasion has already started?”

“Yes, senior.”

I nodded.

“Parasites have infested the crew of the ship that set sail ten

days ago.”

“Is there no way to wake up voluntarily from the dream?”

“That's up to the Dream Demons.”

I recalled the story I had just heard.

“They purposely give the happiest dreams to prevent waking. Conversely, they can induce nightmares to wake someone early. Hmm. In my case, the Dream Demon appeared in the form of Raviel.”

“.....That's dangerous.”

Sssshhhh, the waves rippled. The movement of the waves caused the ship to sway.

In the middle of the vast open sea.

Not a single one of the dozens of crew members had opened their eyes.

“Resisting unhappiness is one thing, but resisting happiness is another. Especially if one is lost in a dream that literally fulfills their [dreams]... They will not try to escape until their body dies.”

“Yes. The quietest massacre in history is about to happen.”

Black Dragon Witch clicked her tongue.

“We can't delay. Let's move quickly.”

“What about these sailors?”

“We can't just ignore them.... We have to save them.”

We tied up the 32 crew members with ropes, one after another. From afar, it looked like dried pollacks strung together.

Uburka took the end of the rope, and Black Dragon Witch firmly grasped Uburka's hand.

"....."

Uburka stared blankly at Black Dragon Witch's face.

"Hm? What is it, son?"

"Nothing. Ugor."

Uburka murmured softly and turned away.

Huh?

This guy, could it be...

"Boring. Teleport!"

As Black Dragon Witch activated the skill, a total of 35 people were teleported simultaneously.

Normally, since we are spiritual bodies, we can't directly

apply skills like this without possessing someone else's body.

But Uburka, as the Constellation of this world, acted as a bridge. Black Dragon Witch contacted Uburka, and Uburka contacted the sailors, so all of us benefitted from the skill's effect.

“Great!”

With the success of teleportation, Black Dragon Witch's expression brightened.

The sea breeze blew hard, scattering her thick black hair.

“We'll move to the New Continent like this. Make sure you hold on tight so you don't fall off!”

"....."

Uburka kept sneaking glances at Black Dragon Witch's face. She was too busy using teleportation to notice. Or maybe Black Dragon Witch couldn't read the complexion of a hobgoblin. It's hard to guess another race's emotions just by looking at their face.

‘Uh-oh?’

But it was very clear to my eyes.

I could feel it.

My senses, honed while sharing a century's romance with Raviel, were subtly trembling.

‘Could it be that he's really...?’

While my romantic antenna was busy catching signals, we quickly arrived at the coast. There was a port built on the shore.

A pioneer village.

A place that adventurers, merchants, soldiers, anyone dreaming of the New Continent, crossed at least once.

We gently landed in the village square and looked around.

“.....It's too quiet.”

Eerily silent.

“There's no sign of life at all.”

Despite being a fairly large village, there were no sounds of people.

Not only was there no sound, but there were also no shadows moving in the streets.

A cold silence pressed down on the air.

It was like a ghost town.

“Have the Dream Demons already gotten to them?”

Anxiety crossed Black Dragon Witch's face.



“Probably. Let's explore for now.”

I entered a nearby building.

Sure enough, people were asleep in the bedrooms.

“It seems the village was invaded while most of the residents were asleep.”

The situation was similar in other buildings.

More than five hundred residents had collapsed.

“Most are lying in bed, with only a few sprawled in taverns or on the streets. The Dream Demons targeted when humans are most vulnerable.”

“The same is probably true for other pioneer villages....”

“Likely not much different. The Dream Demons said they've begun a large-scale invasion. Sadly, some have already died of malnutrition.”

“If the Dream Demons cross to our continent on the ships' crews, the situation will spiral out of control.”

It would spread like a pandemic.

The children of the continent would fall into an eternal sleep overnight without understanding why.

“.....There might be survivors who haven't been affected by the Dream Demons. Wait here, I'll check the other villages and come back. Wait for me.”

Black Dragon Witch didn't wait for a reply and disappeared with teleportation.

Her dark blue aura lingered like an afterimage in her vacant spot.

Uburka and I were left alone in the square. Uburka stared blankly at the spot where Black Dragon Witch had just stood.

'Hmm.'

It does seem to fit, right?

“Hey. Uburka.”

“Ugor. What is it, daddy?”

I asked straightforwardly.

“Have you fallen for Black Dragon Witch?”

Uburka clamped his mouth shut.

The strongest warrior in hobgoblin history, now turned into a Constellation, furrowed his eyebrows, twitched his lips, and finally...

“Daddy...”

His face flushed.

"I think I've fallen in love for the first time."

# **Volume 9 – Chapters 199-222**

# Chapter 199: The Mirror Reflected in a Mirror (1)

---

“Uburka...”

“This is the first time in my life I’ve felt this way. My heart is racing.”

“That... that so.”

I was at a loss for words and just fumbled with my lips.

[The Constellation 'The Muscle Pig Dreaming of Parricide' marvels at the sweetness of love.]

It was awkward.

‘What should I do?’

Should I bless a child who is feeling first love for the first time in hundreds of years since birth?

But Black Dragon Witch is a close friend who shared meals with me. It feels somewhat guilty to support my son behind Black Dragon Witch’s back.

“Anyway, congratulations on falling in love. My son. True love changes a person. It helps you progress in many ways...”

“Black Dragon Witch, you said.”

Uburka grabbed my shoulder with a thud.

It was heavy.

Uburka’s palm was as huge as my head. The glittering eyes up close were somewhat, well, a lot, overwhelming.

Our child has beautiful eyes.

“Is that her real name?”

“No... Black Dragon Witch doesn't like being called by her real name. Even 'Black Dragon Witch' is just a title meaning the owner of the Black Dragon Guild. Probably fewer than five people know her real name...”

“Oh wow!”

Uburka was impressed.

“The name itself is not easily granted! Excellent. Only the brave and capable are worthy to be with such a person. I can sense a meticulous character.”

“Uh-uh...”

Black Dragon Witch isn't really the type to test the courage of those approaching her....

If anything, it's quite the opposite.



Black Dragon Witch hardly expects anything from the world.

“What’s her favorite flower?”

“Uh, lavender and allium...”

“I don’t know these flowers. What about her favorite music?”

“She likes piano music... like melodies dropping note by note on a white canvas.... She surprisingly enjoys jazz too.”

“Sophisticated and elegant!”

“Yeah. She’s an amazing person....”

But should I really be telling him all this?

My heart feels more and more guilty.

However, Uburka didn't care about my feelings and gripped my shoulder even tighter.

“Her hobbies? Favorite food? What does she usually do? When is her birthday?”

Son.

Blinded by love, you don't see your father or parent.

I understand being in love for the first time, but my shoulder is quite sore.

“Her hobby is romance novels... Dammit. You should find this out yourself!”

I shook off Uburka's hand.

“Why are you even asking me? You should know what your loved one likes just by looking in their eyes. If you're not confident, prepare and gift everything that she might like.”

“Ugor? Is that how it works?”

“Yes. But remember, Black Dragon Witch is a person with clear boundaries. Don’t invade her space with your feelings unilaterally. Be polite. Ask for permission. Do you understand?”

“That’s complicated...”

“What’s so complicated about that?”

We both froze in shock.

Turning our heads, Black Dragon Witch had already returned.

“What are you so surprised about? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Oh, nothing. We were just discussing how difficult it is to deal with the Dream Demons.”

“Hmm... okay.”

Black Dragon Witch shrugged her shoulders. Luckily, she didn't seem suspicious of us.

Of course. It would be hard to imagine that the Constellation of the hobgoblins has fallen head over heels for her.

“I checked the other villages.”

“How was it?”

“The same. Everyone was asleep. But there was a significant discovery.”

Black Dragon Witch concentrated aura on the tip of her index finger. Sssh. The black aura drew in the air like ink.

“I found a map in the village chief's house. The maps in other villages were similar. It's evidence they were sharing information about the New Continent. The paths of the pioneers can be inferred from this...”

Black Dragon Witch drew the map with a serious gaze.

Determination to save the children engulfed in the slumber of the Sleep Demon was evident.

Stealing a glance at Black Dragon Witch's profile with her long hair cascading down, I fully understood Uburka's feelings.

‘Worth falling for.’

A beautiful person.

Black Dragon Witch rarely talks about herself. Even when she brings up old stories, it's not about her personally but about the past she shared with [comrades].

A person with a heavy fortress in their heart always looks beautiful to my eyes.

A mark of once having tried to protect something.

“...King of Death. Are you listening to me?”

“Of course. I'm listening attentively.”

I nodded vigorously.

“Senior, the problem isn't just our continent being invaded. If we wait a few more days, the children weakened by sleep will start dying in droves. We really don't have much time.”

At most, less than a week.

Hearing my point, Black Dragon Witch's expression hardened.

“You're right... Is there no good solution?”

“Dream Demons live in dreams, not reality. We need to enter the dream to persuade or subdue them.”

But.

"Persuading each Dream Demon one by one will never end. It will take too much time, and in the meantime, more children will die of weakness. We have no choice but to persuade the entire tribe at once."

"Persuade them all at once...? How?"

"We invite the Dream Demons collectively instead of going to each one."

I turned to Uburka.

"My plan is this. First, draw as many Dream Demons as possible into Uburka's dream. Then, senior and I will enter Uburka's dream to negotiate with the Dream Demons."

"Ugor."

Uburka blushed and shrank his shoulders for some reason.

Basically, he twisted his body like a worm.

“Are you saying that my daddy and his comrade will enter my dream? That... that’s a bit embarrassing. It feels like opening a secret that should not be easily shown.”

"....."

What’s embarrassing about that?

You’ve already received plenty of dream training from me.

This father is quite embarrassed by your shyness.

“...I’m sorry for not respecting your privacy. But we have to prevent a massacre, don’t we? Uburka. It would be great if our son could make a firm decision here.”

Uburka glanced at Black Dragon Witch’s face.

“I understand. Ugor. For the greater good, I willingly offer my mind! More than anything, preventing the sacrifice of the innocent is paramount!”



Goodness.

It was too obviously a rehearsed line.

The desire of Uburka to impress Black Dragon Witch was glaringly obvious, like direct sunlight, making me want to close my eyes and ignore the fact that he's my son.

".....?"

Unfortunately, Black Dragon Witch didn't notice anything. She tilted her head once and then quickly got back to the point.

"Alright, King of Death. Your suggestion seems like the fastest solution. How do you plan to invite the Dream Demons?"

"Ah. First, I'll use the [Appearance in Dreams] item on a few and enter their dreams. I'll beat up every Dream Demon I meet so my reputation spreads among them. Then I'll tell them if they have any complaints, they should come to Uburka's dream."

“Okay.”

Black Dragon Witch’s lips curled up.

“You’re reliable. It’s good that I decided to work with you in this stage.”

“Ah, it’s nothing. I always---.”

That’s when I felt it.

The moment I was about to share a smile with Black Dragon Witch, I felt an intensely fierce gaze.

"....."

Uburka was glaring at me with a ferocious look.

The gaze was too strong to be described as such, and even the term 'eyeball' seemed too weak. It was more fitting to call it an 'eyeball beam.'

In short, Uburka looked at me as if seeing the enemy of his life.

[The Constellation 'The Muscle Pig Dreaming of Parricide' considers you a thorn in the eye.]

What?

[Constellation 'The Muscle Pig Dreaming of Parricide' suspects you might be a romantic rival.]

No.

Hey.

Hey! You crazy?

'I'm just friends with Black Dragon Witch! Close friends!'

I discreetly wrote a message on Uburka's forearm.

Uburka pouted his lips.

‘Aren’t you also a male? Suspicious.’

‘I already have someone! You’re talking nonsense.’

‘What if your world allows multiple partners?’

I’m annoyed!

Even though he's my son, I’m incredibly irritated right now...!

‘Shut up! Don’t even mention such things! I’ll decapitate you for disrespect.’

‘Your strong denial makes it even more suspicious. Are you genuinely interested?’

‘Black Dragon Witch and I shared life and death together! We’re friends! Smiling at each other is natural!’

‘What? You shared life and death? Ugor. Doesn’t that mean you want to be together from birth to death? I didn’t know my daddy was such a promiscuous person. I’m deeply disappointed.’

‘You’re driving me nuts!?’

Black Dragon Witch watched the bizarre scene of father and son bickering, utterly clueless.

“.....What are you two doing?”

“Just now, my daddy was encouraging me. Ugor.”

Uburka forced a hearty smile.

“Anyway, daddy worries too much. Even though I’ve reigned as the strongest in the history of the Earth Spirit Tribe for a thousand years. He’s too overprotective.”

“Oh?”

Black Dragon Witch seemed interested.

"You're like that when you're together?"

"Exactly. Though you might not know, but to me, daddy is quite the nag. Personally, it's very noisy being with him."

"Heh."

Uburka managed to continue a conversation with Black Dragon Witch.

Suddenly, Uburka glanced at me with a smile in his eyes.

[The Constellation 'The Muscle Pig Dreaming of Parricide' is keeping you in check.]

This guy?

"Morning training, aura manipulation, deeper understanding of Demonic Heavenly God Art. He interferes with everything. I wish he would keep a proper distance.

Being close only tires me out.”

This brat?

“I wish he’d let me be independent. I can’t always take care of daddy, can I? He’s so clingy it’s bothersome. Didn’t you see it earlier? Carving words on the forearm to exchange secret codes... Frankly, it’s disgusting.”

This punk?

‘You ungrateful thing!’

I was trembling with rage.

Fatherly affection means nothing in the face of romantic emotions!

Is this why they say it’s all regret when raising a son?

“Ah ha.”

Black Dragon Witch chuckled, covering her mouth with the back of her hand.

“You really get along well. Both of you.”

Her eyes were filled with warm light.

But it was not favor, it was kindness.

“Arguing with a smile means you’re open with each other. When you first declared you’d raise a goblin, I wondered what you were thinking, but it was needless worry. King of Death. You’ll be a good friend to your children.”

Even that kindness was directed not at Uburka, but at me.

“Oh... thank you...”

“What for? I give praise when it’s due.”

A warm atmosphere enveloped between Black Dragon Witch and me.



"....."

Uburka's face soured.

[The Constellation 'The Muscle Pig Dreaming of Parricide' deeply resents you!]

This is crazy.

Black Dragon Witch has watched my romance with Raviel in real-time and knows that there's no man as harmless as me in this world. I only have eyes for Raviel. No matter how close we are, there's no chance of love or romance blooming.

'And this son of mine!'

What can I do?

As a father, I can't interfere with my son's love life.

I suppressed the exploding emotions in my chest and quietly stood up.

“I’ll... go threaten the Dream Demons. Black Dragon Witch, please wait here with Uburka...”

“Really? Are you sure? The [Appearance in Dreams] costs 100 points each.”

“It’s okay. I can always earn more points later...”

“I’ve got a good junior. Really.”

Black Dragon Witch smiled and patted me on the shoulder.

“I’ll look for a way to solve the nutritional issues of the sleeping children. Hurry back, King of Death.”

Pat pat.

Her touch on my shoulder overflowed with friendship.

Since friendship is also an affection, it wasn’t wrong to call her gesture affectionate.

"....."

I glanced at Uburka's face.

[The Constellation 'The Muscle Pig Dreaming of Parricide' clearly recognizes you as an enemy!]

As expected.

Uburka was glaring at me with eyes emitting a blood-red aura.

If I wasn't mistaken... that was murderous intent.

[The Constellation 'The Muscle Pig Dreaming of Parricide' resolves to commit patricide!]

This child is really living up to his nickname.

# Chapter 200: The Mirror Reflected in a Mirror (2)

---

I wandered around the pioneer village, entering the dreams of the residents.

And in their dreams, I beat up every Dream Demon that appeared.

[You have purchased 'Appearance in Dreams'.]

[100 race points are consumed!]

[Your current race points are 6012.]

As expected, by the time I reached the tenth person, my reputation had spread among the Dream Demons.

In the tenth dream, an Incubus with the face of the Director screamed as soon as he saw me.

-Heek! A crazy thug!?

“Finally, my reputation is getting around.”

I smiled contentedly. It was satisfying. After using the [Appearance in Dreams] item a whopping 10 times, it was natural to see some effect.

This definitely wasn't just me taking out the stress I got from Uburka on them.

-Why, why would you interfere with our prey?

“Because you happened to catch my eye. Consider it bad luck. But why are you taking on our Director's face?”

-If I have this person's face, I get beaten less....

“Clever bastards.”

I gave the Dream Demons a fair beating.

-Argh! You're hitting me anyway!

"I said I'd hit you less, not that I wouldn't hit you at all. Child from across the sea. If you don't want to be hit more, spread my message to your tribe. Tonight, a hobgoblin will be sleeping in this village square. Make sure to bring as many of your kind as possible into the dream."

-Why....

"I am the guardian of the Earth Spirit Tribe. Under me, there are the Mountain Calamity and Fairy Tribes. So, I'm practically a guardian god for three tribes. How can I just sit back while you put our children into eternal sleep?"

-A god...?

The Incubus glanced me up and down. Skepticism filled his eyes. As I smiled widely and showed my fist, the Dream Demon quickly averted his gaze.

-Ah, alright. I'll pass on your message to my tribe.

That night.

We executed our plan as intended.

Uburka fell asleep, and Black Dragon Witch and I entered his dream. We intended to persuade the Dream Demons who also entered the dream. Essentially, Uburka's mental world would transform into a conference room.

"It's been a while since I slept after becoming a Constellation."

Uburka said that, but he fell asleep surprisingly quickly.

The quiet village.

This sea village, built by those who crossed the vast ocean dreaming of a new world, was truly silenced, captured by dreams. The waves lapped at the shore, and the village's cicadas cried in rhythm with the undulating waves.

"Shall we enter as well, senior?"

“King of Death.”

Black Dragon Witch called my name.

Her voice was soaked in the black echo of the waves and the white cry of the cicadas.

“Yes?”

“If you’re trying to set me up with your child, give up.”

I was a bit taken aback.

“Oh. You... noticed?”

“What do you think, how many times do you think I’ve been proposed to in my life? When it comes to romance, there aren’t many more experienced than me. Though I never thought I’d get attention from a Constellation or a goblin.”

“Uh. Sorry. I thought it wasn’t polite to keep it a secret, but talking about it seemed awkward...”



“I have no intention of dating anyone.”

Black Dragon Witch stroked her hair.

The summer night sea was drifting in the wind.

“Love is willingly allowing someone to be your weakness. I don’t want to be weak.”

“Doesn’t loving each other make you stronger?”

“Yes, it might. But are you confident you can live a life without Duke Ivansia?”

"....."

“If you lose Duke Ivansia, you’ll crumble. Even if the Paladin or I die, you as a structure will wear out. Even if the Viper or the Heretic Inquisitor dies, it would be the same.”

Black Dragon Witch drew in the air with her finger.

Maybe she bought an item from the civilization store.

“I find it hard to walk the tightrope of life with my life on the line.”

Black Dragon Witch looked at me.

“I want to be able to handle my life alone. I want to carry only the things I can discard when necessary... It’s embarrassing to share such thoughts with others.”

“No, senior. Thank you for sharing.”

“Alright. Tell your child to endure the ordeal of first love.”

My poor son.

Rejected even before confessing.

I looked down at Uburka, asleep in the square, with a pitying gaze.

“That’s enough serious talk. Shall we go save the children?”

“Yes.”

[You have purchased ‘Appearance in Dreams’.]

[100 race points are consumed!]

[Your current race points are 5912.]

Both of us dived into Uburka’s dream.

---

When I opened my eyes, a dense jungle unfolded before me.

Hmm.

The smell of damp soil filled the air. The scent that occasionally wafts up on a rainy night. There were no asphalt roads or dazzling signs, but trees as tall as buildings surrounded us on all sides.

“Welcome, daddy. And daddy's close friend.”

Uburka was sitting on a large rock.

“Where is this?”

“This is where I trained about 200 years ago. It's inhabited by powerful demon beasts, and I was quite indebted to them. It's a place known to be very dangerous and off-limits, but the more grueling the training, the sweeter the results.”

Uburka boasted about himself.

He didn't forget to subtly highlight his chest muscles.

Well, his muscles were indeed as vast as the Pacific Ocean...

“King of Death's son truly has a noble mindset.”

Black Dragon Witch just gave a kind motherly smile.

“He feels like a younger brother to me.”

“Ugor. A younger brother...?”

Uburka tilted his head and glanced at me.

‘Daddy. Feeling like family means this surely has a good meaning, right? It's overflowing with possibilities.’

No.

You've just been rejected as clearly as possible....

Please, pay attention to the fact that she specifically called you a [younger brother].

Black Dragon Witch keeps praising me in front of you as a gesture for you to give up. Kid, how are you going to survive in this harsh world of romance with such a lack of perception?

-Grrr...

A beast's howl echoed from the forest.

The three of us immediately stopped chatting and turned our heads.

-.....

-...Grr....

It wasn't just one or two beasts.

In the shadowy, dark jungle.

Hundreds of pairs of eyes glittered blue under the trees like wildflowers. Some beasts had antlers larger than their bodies, resembling stags, while others hissed with the mouths of snakes.

“So many demon beasts...”

“Probably all the ones I defeated in the past.”

The beasts surrounded us.

For a moment, they prowled around threateningly. Rough breathing. Savage footsteps. As hundreds of beasts exhaled simultaneously, the jungle air heated up.

“You’re Dream Demons, right?”

But Uburka and Black Dragon Witch had long lost their fear. Black Dragon Witch faced the demon beasts as if looking at neighborhood dogs.

“We are the guardians of the tribes from across the sea. We’ve come to protest your unilateral invasion. Honestly, are you in your right mind?”

-.....

“Because of you, many children have become dehydrated and malnourished. Lives are at stake. Many have already died, and more will follow. Call your leader. We need to know why you’ve done this.”

The beasts looked at each other, realizing that their numbers

wouldn't intimidate us.

-A guardian god, we heard... Indeed. Maintaining sanity in our world is impressive, but you are still an outsider. It's impossible for you to significantly harm us, let alone stop us.

A stag stepped forward from among the beasts.

As the stag moved, the shadow of the jungle leaves on its luminescent back cascaded like fish scales.

I opened my mouth.

“Are you the king of the Dream Demons?”

-A foolish question. We have no king.

The stag's eyes examined my face.

“If there's no king, then why do you step forward?”



-Don't judge us by your standards. You might think you're conversing with me, but it's not true. We simply possess your dreams and speak according to your memories.

Black Dragon Witch frowned.

“What do you mean?”

-We have no form, no appearance. Inevitably, we lack individuality. We can't use words you don't know, nor can we mimic people you're unfamiliar with.

I recalled the ten Dream Demons I had beaten up.

“Despite that, their reactions were quite vivid. Their manner of speaking was frivolous too.”

-Those you met reflected your mind. If their speech was frivolous, it's because your speech is frivolous. If they dislike being beaten, it's because you dislike being beaten. Foreigner. We are merely mirrors.

“.....All that was just mimicking me?”

-Exactly.

I was shocked.

“That’s impossible! I’m not that frivolous! I’m known for my serious charm as a hunter!”

"....."

"....."

“What’s with you two? Why are you both staring at me like that?”

“It’s nothing, King of Death.”

“I didn’t raise any objections, daddy.”

“See! Even my colleague and child agree with me!”

The stag opened its mouth as if amused.

-We have no interest in your reputation, foreigner. Our interest lies solely in the nearly infinite dreams of your races.

“Interested in dreams?”

-Your dreams are exceptionally delicious.

Crunch.

The stag crushed a jungle centipede under its hoof.

-Until we met you, we had only fed on animal dreams. It was like eating bland porridge. Compared to that, how varied are the dreams of your kind!

The stag flicked its long tongue.

-We were quite primitive before meeting you. Insignificant intelligence, negligible memory... We didn't even know there was another reality beyond our own, nor did we fully

understand we were a species that lived by parasitizing dreams. Thanks to eating your dreams, we have developed rapidly.

I understood the Dream Demon's words.

“So, you should be grateful to our children, right? Even unintentionally, you became smarter because of them.”

-We have already repaid enough. Haven't we given you the happiest dreams possible?

“But what's the use of happy dreams if they're going to die like this?”

-Happy dreams or miserable reality. You prefer the latter, it seems.

The stag sneered.

Its laughter, produced by a beast's vocal cords and tongue, was bizarre.

-But the people of your kind we have met so far think differently. Why not wish for their happiness, foreigner?

“Sounds plausible, but it really just seems like you want to gorge on delicious food.”

-You maintain sanity in our world, but you are still an outsider. It's impossible for you to significantly harm us, let alone stop us.

The stag, true to its nature, had a stiff neck.

-Don't worry. We have no intention of exterminating your races. After crossing the sea, we will restrain our dream-eating to ensure your kind can continue to reproduce. But your dreams are so attractive that we might overindulge.

Alright.

I got the gist.

“So, you're saying you can do whatever you want because you can't lose.”

-That's one interpretation.

People only show humility to those who can hit them back.

The same seems true for Dream Demons living in dreams.

“Good that you’re easy to understand.”

-You speak as if you can attack us.

“Exactly.”

I opened the civilization store.

“I don’t know how grand your dream world is, but...”

I purchased an item.

[You have purchased ‘Character Possession’.]

[2000 race points are consumed!]

[Your current race points are 4012.]

“I’ve experienced all sorts of worlds, kids.”

I'm genuinely curious about what it feels like to become a Dream Demon.

Smiling, I chanted toward the stag.

“Activate item. Character Possession.”

That instant.

The infinite world of dreams unfolded before my eyes.

# Chapter 201: The Mirror Reflected in a Mirror (3)

---

-What?

My vision turned completely white.

In my mind, or rather, within my spirit, the demon beast let out a sound of panic. The Dream Demon had realized that something unusual was happening.

-What are you doing... Attempting to invade [our world]? Impossible. You have no terminal to connect to us. How can you...

“Feeling scared?”

I let out a mocking laugh. I could feel the Dream Demon flinch. Though I had no mouth to express laughter in my



current state, my taunting intent and emotions were clearly conveyed.

-Insolent...!

“Got no confidence, huh? Ah, but you're a stag, so you naturally have a long tongue.”

-You, living in a wretched material world, are so arrogant. We govern the dreams of all beings. Even if you step into our world, do you really think you'll remain sane for even a moment?

“So, you're saying you allow me to enter?”

-Come if you dare!

Okay.

I smiled inwardly.

“I'll take that as your consent. Guest.”

The view, which was solely white, transformed.

My consciousness overlaid with the consciousness of the Dream Demon.

[Congratulations!]

[You are the first foreigner to visit the Dream World.]

[You have achieved a unique accomplishment.]

[You are awarded 3000 race points!]

And the world that unfolded before me was extraordinary.

A pink sky.

The color was so enticing, it seemed like it would sweeten my mouth just by looking at it. It was as if a child's imaginative coloring of the sky had been carefully brought to life by some transcendent being.

".....! Uh!"

The pink not only filled the sky but also invaded my consciousness. My consciousness? No, it was indistinguishable from inside and outside. At this moment, I was the consciousness itself.

“Ah...”

Memories rapidly receded.

The components that made me. The steps Kim Gong-Ja had taken were being erased. Like footprints on the beach washed away by a single wave. Quickly, the pink wave eroded the beach of my memory.

"-----."

Somewhere, the sound of children laughing echoed.

Hallucinations.

Delusions.

Before I knew it, the sky was no longer pink but yellow. The color of my consciousness also turned yellow.

The sky turned blue. My consciousness also became blue.

"Um."

My existence was like water in a triangular flask, transparent. As the world dropped dollops of colorful paint, my water turned red, yellow, blue.

A world where moments flickered rapidly.

This was the place where the Dream Demons lived.

"This is a bit dangerous."

The past vanished. Memories faded.

As the past disappeared, my ability to act freely diminished, and as memories faded, my shadow became fainter.

Feeling intoxicated, my consciousness was hazy.

Now, all I could perceive was the present.

If I let my guard down even slightly, I feared I would lose myself.

‘If I were alone, I would have been helplessly overwhelmed.’

But what constitutes a person is not just oneself.

In a rush of anxiety, I shouted desperately.

"---Ghoul Reincarnation."

Suddenly, my shadow expanded.

[Activating skill.]

My shadow was pitch black. Not a translucent shade but pure black. The blackness spread rapidly in all directions.

Swoosh-

The blackness consumed the pink sky, swallowed the yellow, and even the blue.

My shadow became thousands of fingers, scratching the corners of this world's sky. Wherever my black nails touched, the sky bled colorful blood.

“What the hell?”

Where the pink paint melted and flowed, my Ghouls, borrowing fragments of my memory, started to reveal themselves one by one.

“What kind of messed-up place is this?”

Flame Emperor.

A handsome man with a ponytail looked around irritably.

"....."

Preta.

A girl, hiding half her face with an animal bone mask, looked up at the sky. Her eyes were filled with coldness. Preta gazed at the world as if looking at a dead animal.

"No, I'll brew the tea again immediately. I'm sorry! My lord! I'll brew it with a feeling of being reborn... Huh? What? What the hell is this?"

Goldencup.

A young lady in a maid outfit looked around blankly, kneeling on the ground. By the way, Lady Goldencup, Silvia Evanair, was serving as a maid in our Duke's household.

‘Raviel...’

It seems she was summoned while being scolded by our Duchess.

Happy to see you enjoying life, my love.

“Where is this?”

“Look over there. The sky’s color is quite strange.”

“It’s too bizarre for the Peach Blossom Spring. Really. Our young master sure knows how to find interesting places!”

“Hmm...”

Four Demon Lords.

The elite of the Demonic Cult, clad in dark robes, were summoned. As their robes fluttered once, twice, the entire army of the Demonic Cult, numbering thousands, was also summoned.



“Phew.”

Finally, I sighed.

A place to accommodate my breath was prepared here.

“Nice to see you all again.”

The Ghouls turned to look at me. I looked at them. As our gazes met, the distant past returned. Memories became clear. The outline of my existence became more defined.

To the Flame Emperor, I am an enemy.

To Preta, I am a ruler.

To Goldencup, I am the lover of a rival.

To the followers, I am the Vice-lord.

My vengeance, duty, love, responsibility. All were reflected in the eyes of the Ghouls. Just as they became Ghouls reborn through me, so too had I reached the current Kim Gong-Ja through them.

As long as they were with me, I wouldn't disappear.

“Good to see you all. Except for that chimpanzee over there swearing.”

“Huh? Are you talking about me?”

Yoo Soo-Ha frowned.

“Of course, brat. I was summoned while working, what do you expect? Getting called out like this by some kid who can't even properly behave. I was already frustrated in life, not even reaching E-rank, and now I have to clean up after a brat even in death...”

“Go dance over there.”

“Damn it!”

While Yoo Soo-Ha performed a hip-hop dance, I explained the situation to the Ghouls.

“Interesting, a race that parasitizes dreams.”

Hearing my story, Lady Goldencup stroked her chin. Despite wearing a maid's outfit, her elegance, known as 'The Flower of the Imperial Social Circles,' still shone brightly.

“Is this a dream within a dream? The dream of succubi living in dreams, now distorted by the Constellations. How romantic! I find it quite romantic, Butler.”

“I am not your butler, but the Duchess's.”

“Ah, don't sweat the small stuff, Butler. You'll go bald worrying like that. I sense an aura of baldness around you! I see it, I really do! The Duchess sighing and stroking your bald head...”

“Go dance over there too.”

“Damn it!!”

While Goldencup danced a waltz next to Yoo Soo-Ha, the rest of us, the sane ones, discussed our strategy.

“As the golden-haired maid pointed out, the Dream Demons' traits do seem similar to a Constellation.”

Preta spoke.

“They’re not a combat-type Constellation but rather a characteristic-type. They infiltrate their ideologies into reality, distorting phenomena... Such beings can’t be defeated by force.”

“So they’re the type who set their own rules.”

“Precisely, my Lord.”

Clink.

Preta fiddled with her skull mask.

“Dreams are a reproduction of experiences and a realization

of wishes. Recollecting the past or contemplating the future. Among these, my Lord, I believe the latter should concern you. If you can fulfill their wishes more satisfactorily than the dreams created by the Dream Demons, then naturally, we could subdue this world..."

Preta suddenly stopped speaking.

Not only Preta, but everyone else was startled.

-Hahaha! Can you guess who I am?

Slap.

On one side, a lady in a luxurious carriage appeared. Humans, not horses, pulled the carriage. The lady joyfully whipped them.

-Come on, hurry!

-You are the brightest moon of the empire, the majestic Silvia Evanair Empress!

-Ah, your words are music to my ears! But your voice lacks passion. A more agonized, wrung-out tone, please praise me with that!

-Oh, gracious and beautiful Empress...

-More!

It was Goldencup.

Precisely, a dream figure resembling Goldencup.

"....."

"....."

Hmm.

We all turned our heads and stared at one side.

There, the real Goldencup, still in her maid outfit, was earnestly showcasing her waltz skills.

“That’s not me! It’s a false illusion! A fabrication by the ignorant masses!”

“But this is the world of dreams. In other words, [that] is your dream...”

“How unpleasant, Butler! I’ll sue you in the imperial court!”

“Half of the judges in that court receive funding from our Ivansia Ducal family. You know that, right...?”

“Damn it! This is why I hate the powerful!”

The real Goldencup performed a triple axel.

Beside her, the Goldencup of dreams, or rather the fragment created by the Dream Demons, laughed ‘haha’ while relentlessly whipping the people tied to the carriage.

Truly a world of dreams.

Chaotically absurd.

“Ah.”

Preta, realizing late, murmured.

“It seems... our dreams are starting to be reflected as well.”

“Seems so.”

“Here is a different realm, my Lord. The longer you stay, the more your common sense and knowledge will warp and twist. It’s essential we find the core of this world quickly to minimize damage, to hold onto...”

Preta probably meant to say ‘to hold onto our sanity’ but couldn’t finish.

There was a reason for Preta's stuttering.



-Yoo Soo-Ha, here is the signature cocktail you ordered.

-Ugh, it's not good. I can get this in any local bar.

-I'm deeply sorry. To sully your refined taste, I deserve to die a thousand deaths.

-No need for that, just...

-Oh, Yoo Soo-Ha, such modesty. They say even a ripe rice stalk bows its head, but with your virtue, not even a grain could fit.

-Hey, hey, don't exaggerate, man.

-I'm sorry, I just spoke my true feelings...

The dream world's Yoo Soo-Ha was dressed in a tank top and sweatpants.

An endless stream of well-dressed gentlemen surrounded him.

-Yoo Soo-Ha, here is a watch our brand will soon release. If you would grace our humble junk with your noble wrist, it would be an honor for our ignorant kind.

-Eh, it's so-so. But out of kindness, I'll wear it. Just for two days, and then I'll throw it away.

-We will remember those two days for a thousand years.

-Yoo Soo-Ha, I've gathered the most famous chefs from the Tower to prepare a full course. If you could enjoy our food just a bit...

-Ah, so noisy. Just bring it.

-You are calling me noisy... I'm so moved.

In the distance, the sky shimmered pink.

We quietly observed the 'real' Yoo Soo-Ha.

He looked like he had swallowed spit that somehow refluxed

back onto his tongue.

“What. You think you’re cleaner than that?”

“...My Lord.”

Preta spoke.

Behind the skull mask, Preta's eyes were serious.

She clearly didn't want to be lumped in with such beings as Ghouls.

“Please, if you plan to accept more under your command, please choose wisely.”

Somehow, I felt guilty.

# Chapter 202: Black Dragon (1)

---

We headed towards the heart of the Dream World.

-Hahaha! Hurry and pay homage to this Empress!

Behind us, the succubus impersonating Goldencup was still whipping away, but we ignored it and moved on. No one in our group wanted to get involved with that.

As we walked, we encountered bizarre and peculiar landscapes.

First off, the sky above us was unusual.

"The moon... has eyes, my Lord."

"Indeed."

Blink.

The moon blinked its eyelids. As Preta mentioned, the full moon had eyes, and its pupils were red. The red-eyed moon blinked at us.

"Kind of creepy, but the eyes are pretty. Makes you want to keep looking up."

For some reason, my heart fluttered.

Preta gave me a subtle look.

"Uh, well, I think that's influenced by your subconscious, my Lord. Perhaps it imitates the eyes of the Duchess..."

"Oh? Really?"

Looking again, they did resemble Raviel's.

Just with the eyes, she steals my heart. Truly, our Duchess is enchanting, not a single unattractive trait from head to toe.

Next, we arrived at a place influenced by Preta.

"Hmm."

Under the red moon, a field of yellow wheat stretched out before us.

Between the stalks, farmers bent their backs, laboring.

"....."

Preta's expression noticeably stiffened.

I immediately recognized where this place was modeled after.

"It's Ester's village."

"Yes, my Lord."

It was the village annihilated by the Aegim Empire and the allied forces.

Children I once saw in Preta's trauma were playing in the wheat field.

-Spirit! Spirit!

Something lay amidst the ripe wheat grains.

A massive beast.

A blue-furred wolf with half-closed eyes watched the approaching children.

-Here's a gift for you!

-We picked the prettiest ones to make this!

The village children offered the wolf bouquets of flowers.

However, the wolf's head was too large for the bouquets to fit. The children, slightly puzzled, then simply hung the bunches on the wolf's ears. Suddenly, the wolf sported flower earrings.

-Grrr.

Seemingly pleased, the wolf let the children ride on its back.

The wind caressed the wheat field, and the children's laughter rippled through the air.

Their laughter carried on the wind was named happiness.

“That beast is...”

“It seems to be my fantasy, my Lord.”

Preta murmured.

“If I hadn't devoured Ester and remained a beast instead of becoming human... such a possibility. Then I wouldn't have



become Ester, revered as a saintess, nor would I have been reviled as a witch. The village wouldn't have burned down either."

Preta's tone was even.

"I was foolish."

She quietly gripped her sword.

"If I hadn't consumed humans, I wouldn't have understood human hearts. I only understand what I've devoured, only after digesting them. If I hadn't eaten Ester, I wouldn't have harbored the wish to be with humans. This landscape laid before us is a contradiction filled with wishes."

Preta approached the wheat field.

The wolf carrying children stopped.

A silent confrontation.

The doppelganger coldly gazed at its imitation.

“Die.”

Preta drew her sword and cut down the wolf.

As soon as it was sliced by Preta’s blade, the wolf melted into pink paint.

The children riding it, the farmers working the field, even the village itself, all instantly melted away.

“...Phew.”

Only Preta remained under the red moon.

She slowly turned her head to look at me.

“Let’s move on, my Lord.”

“...Quite decisive. Even though that was a scene of your happiness.”

“It may be presumptuous to say, but I haven’t lived a life light enough to be swayed by such contradictory fantasies. I vividly remember drinking Ester’s blood and consuming the flesh of a child. How could I pretend it never happened, even in a dream?”

I nodded.

“You’re right.”

We continued our journey.

Along the way, we encountered the dreams of the cult members, Uburka’s dreams. In this Dream World, Uburka was laughing hysterically, having crushed me underfoot, shouting Ugor! Ugor! Since Uburka was also in contact with the Dream Demons, it seemed his subconscious was reflected.

“Are we still far from the core of this world?”

“No, my Lord. We are almost there.”

Preta kicked Uburka aside and pointed ahead.

“There, I sense a presence comparable to a constellation.”

Ahead was an old barbed wire fence.

Sitting in front of the shabby barricade was a Dream Demon.

As we approached, the succubus tilted its head, saying, “Heh, really keeping your wits about yin this place. Fascinating.”

The succubus looked familiar.

Smaller and more fragile than the person I knew, I realized who she was modeled after.

“Black Dragon Witch?”

-Yes, the person you call by that name. This human.

Maybe seven or eight years old.

A much younger Black Dragon Witch stood up, saying, “Eucha,” and stretched.

-We don't have natural faces. We need to borrow the form of another creature to converse. The only person you treasure yet can have a cold conversation with you is this child.

“What do you mean?”

-It's simple. She doesn't easily get swayed by emotions.

The succubus glanced over my shoulder.

Yoo Soo-Ha, Preta, Goldencup, the Four Demon Lords, and the cult members followed behind me.

-So many guests, but not a single table to entertain them. Sorry. But understand our plight. We have nothing to plunder in this wretched place. Why did you bring so many soldiers?

“We're not the ones who intruded. Isn't it you who invaded across the sea?”

-Nature dictates that wild beasts are drawn to the scent of blood.

“If that's the case, then it's only natural for the strong to subdue the weak. So, it would be nice if you just quietly listen to me.”

-Scary.

“Want me to be scarier?”

Step.

I left the others behind and approached the succubus.

“Seems like you're taking us lightly since physical force doesn't work well here...”

-Oh? And if that's the case?

“Then if we can't negotiate, I'll have to play my trump card.”

-Interesting.

The young succubus smiled.

-Tell me about this trump card of yours.

“I have the skill to resurrect the dead. I'll kill you all and then revive you.”

I summoned the [Ghoul Reincarnation] card.

The golden card sparkled in my hand.

"Any being that dies by my hand becomes obedient to my commands after resurrection. Subjugating your Dream Demon clan will be a piece of cake for me."

-.....

“Think I’m bluffing?”

I looked directly into the succubus’s eyes, just inches away from me.

I had already obliterated [The Immortal Missionary of Happiness] once.

There was no reason, at least for me, not to do the same thing again.

The hint of a smile vanished from the Dream Demon’s lips.

-...No, I don’t doubt your sincerity. King of Death, you are a terrifying person.

The succubus, who had been staring into my eyes, shook its head.

-It's just regrettable.

“Regrettable? What do you mean?”



-Actually, it's not us but the original creature this body is based on that feels regret. In the end, even your way of persuasion resorts to the logic of force.

That's when it happened.

Gunshots rang out from behind the barbed wire.

“Lord!”

“Vice-lord!”

Preta and the Four Demon Lords instantly surrounded me for protection. However, there was nothing wrong with me. Neither Preta nor the Four Demon Lords seemed to be injured.

Watching our reaction, the succubus chuckled.

-Don't worry. According to your way of speaking, this is also just a fantasy.

The gunshots continued behind the barbed wire and fence.

Looking in the direction of the gunfire, I saw a man clutching a small child, running frantically, as if being chased.

-How deep of a mark even a single moment of experience can leave on you. The more I know, the more astonishing it is.

The man kept looking back but made sure the child never turned around, protecting the child with his body.

-Don't ever look back. Understand?

-Yes.

Hearing the child's voice, I realized.

This was Black Dragon Witch's childhood.

Both the man and the child were dirty, as if they hadn't washed for a long time. Mud stained their clothes, solidifying at the hems, weighing them down. Dragging their heavy steps, the man and child were fleeing.

「 It was when I was seven. There was a civil war outside, and my father passed away. 」

There was a small door in the fence.

The man pushed the child through the door first.

The gunshots were getting closer.

「 We were fleeing with my parents, and it seems soldiers were chasing us. My father stayed behind. 」

The child screamed as it got stuck in the door.

-Dad! Dad...

-Don't look back! Go ahead! I'll follow!

The man forcefully pushed the child through the fence. The child continued screaming, but as per the father's instructions, kept moving.

「 I really didn't look back and just ran. 」

What happened to the man afterward was not captured in Black Dragon Witch's memory.

But at the end, just behind the young Black Dragon Witch, there was a thud, like something hitting the ground.

That sound marked the end of the fence scene.

"....."

I could guess what the sound meant.

The man must have tried to climb the fence after sending the child through.

Climbing it like a tree, he was likely shot and fell to the ground.

The last sound Black Dragon Witch remembered must have had such a backstory.

-No matter how strong you are, you can't reverse the irreversible.

The succubus spoke indifferently.

-That's why it's best to prevent problems before they happen. Always prepare and be on guard. The original being of this body thinks that way. She has a habit of imagining the death of everyone she meets first. Sadly.

"I know, even without you saying it."

-Huh. Then you must also know that this person has prevented eight kidnapping and assassination attempts on you so far?

"...What?"

I was shocked and turned to look at the Dream Demon.

-The world knows you've grown rapidly. It wouldn't be strange if some nasty forces took interest in you. The original has smashed and obliterated them, but there are still spies sent from the outside world remaining in the Tower.

"....."

-Without power, you can't even protect the lives of those around you.

Crash.

The moon in the sky of the Dream World shattered.

The red moon broke into pieces and fell toward the horizon.

-King of Death. Since you have power, I'll bow to you for now. I'll order the Dream Demons who sailed across the sea to return. But you can't stay on the continent forever, looking after the seven tribes, can you?

The earth became soft and turned into a pink sea.

Splash, splash.

The fragments of the moon that fell plunged into the pink seawater.

-You have only temporarily subdued us. You haven't truly persuaded us. That's the law of force after all.

A tidal wave rose from the sea where the moon had fallen.

Just as the wave was about to engulf us, the form of the succubus melted away too.

-See you next time. King of Death.

And the Dream World collapsed.

---

“---King of Death? Are you okay, junior?”

I suddenly came to my senses.

Black Dragon Witch was looking at me with concern.

"Senior?"

“Thank goodness. Your eyes are back to normal.”

I looked around.

We were no longer in the jungle landscape that unfolded in Uburka’s dream.

I lay in the square of the harbor town.

“The Dream Demons...”

“Right after your conversation with the stag, we were suddenly ejected from the dream. What happened? Did you succeed in persuading them, or did you fail?”

“I guess I succeeded.”

As if to prove my words, the people lying in the square began to wake up one by one.

Despite being stiff from dreaming for so long, they thankfully seemed to have no life-threatening issues.



“Sigh...”

Black Dragon Witch let out a deep sigh of relief.

She finally seemed to have relaxed.

“We can talk about what happened later... Right now, it’s...”

“Senior.”

I grabbed Black Dragon Witch's wrist.

She turned to me, tilting her head in confusion.

“I have something to tell you.”

“Why so serious all of a sudden?”

“It’s a serious matter.”

A strange silence lingered between us.

I took a deep breath.

Then, looking straight into Black Dragon Witch's eyes, I spoke.

“Senior. I am a returner.”

# Chapter 203: Black Dragon (2)

---

“.....What?”

Black Dragon Witch blinked.

The leader of the top guild in the Tower fluttered her eyelids, slowly digesting the information. A fleeting moment passed.

Gradually, she furrowed her brows.

“A returner? What are you talking about?”

“Since before, I’ve been pondering. You and I traveled across the Aegim Empire together, didn’t we? It would have been easier to reveal my identity back then, but I didn’t fully trust you yet. That’s why I’ve been hiding it until now.”

"....."

As I continued, Black Dragon Witch's expression grew more solemn.

She was clearly realizing this was no joke.

"You often said to me, where did such an unusual rookie come from? Too cunning for his age. You were right. I am not a rookie."

I summoned a skill card.

"Skill card, open."

The card shimmered with a golden light.

Flipping the shining card in my hand, I showed it to Black Dragon Witch.

+

## [Returner's Winding Clock]

Rank: EX

Effect: Activated automatically on death. You will return 24 hours back in time from the moment of your death. Your memories and stats are preserved while returning.

\*However, there is a greater penalty the higher your rank.

\*Skill copied from Yoo Soo-Ha

+

“Wait a minute.”

Black Dragon Witch reached out her left hand and grabbed mine, the card in hand. Consequently, the skill card was obscured, preventing her from reading the description.

She unintentionally blocked what I intended to disclose.

“No.”

Her eyes, deep and dark, resembled a bottomless well, seemingly desperate. She looked at me urgently, a thin layer of cold water rippling silently in the depths of her gaze.

“Don’t do this. Please.”

The voice was always familiar, yet its tone and tremor were new.

“There's something you're about to say, and I don't know what it is, but I know the outcome. There are lines that shouldn't be crossed between people. No matter how close or intimate, that line must not be breached.”

Black Dragon Witch spoke as if she had predicted such a situation long ago.

That naturalness might have stemmed from past experiences.

“Don’t share your secret with me. Don’t divulge it. If you reveal it now, King of Death, we’ll cross a river of no return.

When people rely too much on each other, it's not reliance but dependency."

"I understand. I know."

"...You and I are good friends. Reliable comrades. It's not right to expect more in a relationship. I will solve my own problems, and you live your life. Isn't that the best way?"

Black Dragon Witch was seeking my agreement.

Her earnest words made me ponder again. Deciding the nature and extent of relationships was always difficult.

Soon, I reached a conclusion.

"Then listen to what I have to say, and decide."

"It's too late once I hear it."

"No, it's not. We can turn it back. We can make it as if this conversation never happened. I have that ability."

"....."

Black Dragon Witch fell silent.

In the square of the seaside village, people were waking up and instinctively searching for a well. They were expelling the toxins accumulated from their long sleep with moans and groans. Groans and gasps resonated from all directions.

“...Let's not talk about it here.”

Black Dragon Witch muttered, still holding my right hand.

“Teleport.”

In the next moment, we were out of the square.

At the village dock.

Ships were tied to ropes, creaking with the waves. The discordant sounds made by the boats were embraced by the sea. For a while, we listened to the sound of the waves.



“Okay. I understand.”

Having finally made up her mind, Black Dragon Witch nodded.

“I’ll listen to what you have to say first. But I can’t discuss such a topic sober.”

With a wave of her hand, a black whirlpool appeared in the air, looking like a piece of the world cut out and painted black. Black Dragon Witch effortlessly reached into it.

Shortly after, she pulled out a bottle of liquor.

I was slightly surprised.

"A skill?"

"Yes. [Item Storage]. It's limited to storing only certain items, but there's no skill more convenient for disposing of evidence after killing someone."

Black Dragon Witch casually said this and then took out two cups as well.

“Consider yourself honored. No one else knows I have this skill. Among the living hunters, you're the first to witness this skill, King of Death.”

I took the cup from Black Dragon Witch.

For a while, only the sound of the bottle emptying filled the air.

Before the alcohol could cloud my consciousness, I spoke up.

“I am a returner.”

I stated it clearly once more.

“I'm not sure where to start... I have a skill that can turn back time. Specifically, it's an ability that takes me back 24 hours upon death. Thanks to this ability, I've overcome countless difficulties. The 10th floor, the 20th floor, all of it was survived using this returner skill.”

I showed Black Dragon Witch the skill card.

This time, she did not avert her gaze.

“...I see.”

She sighed, as if she had finally found the last piece of a long-sought puzzle.

“Did you suspect this?”

“A little. At least I knew the [Prophet] thing was a lie.”

Black Dragon Witch tilted her cup.

“It was too convenient an excuse. I've been watching you all along, and you weren't acting on [pre-existing knowledge]. You fought as if it was your last time, every time. Ah, so it wasn't foreknowledge, but traveling back to the past.”

Black Dragon Witch looked at my face anew.

“There's something I've been wanting to ask you.”

“Please, go ahead.”

“The battle on the 11th floor.”

She let out a long-held curiosity.

“On the 11th floor, our Tower experienced its first group battle. Everyone, excited that the stage following the 10th floor had opened after years, rushed into the 11th floor. We fought against the Demon King's army there. Remember?”

“Yes.”

“Miraculously, not a single hunter lost their life. There were injuries, but no deaths. But...”

She hesitated.

“Did you...”

“Yes.”

“...return until there were no casualties?”

“Yes.”

Black Dragon Witch closed her lips.

A bit more water rippled in the well beneath her eyes.

“How many times...?”

“Many.”

“Ten times? Twenty?”

“It was a bit more than that.”

“Even on the 12th floor?”

“And since then, continuously. Until I met Raviel, that's how it always felt.”

"....."

Black Dragon Witch's breaths became shorter.

“Why? For what reason...? You didn't have to go that far.”

“It wasn't because I am inherently good. If I had been alone on the 11th floor, I could never have repeated it dozens or hundreds of times. It was always you all who pushed me forward.”

I looked directly into Black Dragon Witch's eyes.

“Every time the number of humans dying on the stage decreased, Black Dragon Witch smiled a bit.”

The smiles she couldn't remember.

“At that time, I had never seen Black Dragon Witch smile

genuinely. Not a mocking smile, but one that truly shone with happiness. When hundreds of hunters were dying during the conquest, you coldly did what you had to do... But as the casualties decreased to two digits, Black Dragon Witch changed.”

The transition of her that only I remember.

「Wow! Maybe not even 40 hunters died!」

「Incredible... Maybe not even 10 died. It's possible. In a battlefield like this.」

The blossoming smile like a tightly closed flower blooming.

I still vividly remember that moment.

“I thought it was beautiful.”

“.....”

“I was happy. For the first time, I realized I could genuinely

make someone smile. It was me.”

I smiled.

“Thank you, Black Dragon Witch. Senior.”

“Why.....?”

“I was able to walk the path I could never have walked alone, thanks to you. Now, I love my life. I'm with the person I love. Although you may not have intended it, your smile that day helped me take that step.”

That's what I wanted to say.

What I wanted to convey.

“You give strength to others, Senior. At least to me, that's true. You're not alone. Even if you worry about saying goodbye to everyone you meet, you don't have to worry about me.”

I have the skill to turn back a dead day.



“I’m fine.”

I don't die.

“You don’t have to stop attempts on my life. Don’t fret about what will happen if you fail. I’m here, and as long as you allow it, I will always be here.”

"....."

"It's okay to fail."

"You shouldn't say things like that..."

"It’s alright now. You don’t have to fear failure anymore. You can pursue whatever you want, however you wish. Even if something goes wrong, I can give you another chance, multiple times."

“That’s something you shouldn’t say.”

Black Dragon Witch was afraid.

I already knew what she feared the most.

Even when drunk with the Paladin, Black Dragon Witch had mumbled.

「It's too late. King of Death.」

「It's always too late.」

The fear of something irreversible happening.

That's what Black Dragon Witch feared most.

Therefore, I decided to give her the most earnest gift I could offer.

Something only I in this world could give.

“It's okay to be a bit late.”

"....."

Stung like a thorn, Black Dragon Witch flinched.

“With me by your side, there's no such thing as irreparable. We can always start over. So, go ahead and take more risks and gambles. Senior. You deserve it.”

The wind from the sea tousled Black Dragon Witch's black hair.

“Senior, you're much more skilled than me. Managing organizations, starting businesses... governing the entire Tower. These are talents I lack. Likewise, the talent to start over was given to me, not you.”

My precious friend.

“We can achieve much more together.”

Therefore, I didn't see the tears she shed.

I just slightly bowed my head and held Black Dragon Witch's hand.

“I'm already relying on you, so please rely on me too.”

“You... really.”

Black Dragon Witch swallowed her words sip by sip.

“You're a terrible person. You talk like this and say you can make it as if it never happened? That if I want to erase this conversation, I should ask you to die...?”

“Yes.”

“You're insane.”

Black Dragon Witch gripped my hand tightly.

“Insane...”

She murmured.

“Just watch. I’ll use you until you’re sick of it. What? A returner? With such a power, you dare to share it with me? You have no idea who the head of the Black Dragon Guild is. Just watch. Insane, you insane bastard...”

I waited for Black Dragon Witch's trembling to subside.

As time passed and she calmed down a bit, she spoke.

“Anastasia.”

"....."

“That's my real name. Kim Gong-Ja.”

I slowly raised my head.

Black Dragon Witch was wearing a diluted smile.

“Use it properly, I’ll let you, so be prepared.”

“Of course.”

I also smiled sincerely.

“Senior Anastasia.”

Among the climbers of the Tower.

For the first time, I had a companion who shared my secret.

# Chapter 204: Black Dragon (3)

---

“Ah-ah-ah. Somehow, I felt this would happen.”

As the sound of the waves became familiar and tranquil.

Black Dragon Witch stretched out leisurely, her expression brightened.

“Well, I kind of expected that you and I would end up like this someday.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes. I can pretty much gauge a person the moment I see them. To what extent I can get close to them, how to become friends with them. Since I turned 25, my intuition has never been wrong.”

“That’s amazing.”

“All thanks to experience.”

Black Dragon Witch chuckled.

“After repeatedly getting my hopes up and failing, I’ve come to understand human perseverance. Ah, right, right. In front of others, I’ll continue to use your alias instead of your real name. Is that okay?”

“That’s fine, but... why?”

“Why? Because it would be embarrassing to call you by your real name only in front of others.”

She said it with a completely unembarrassed face.

“Try to avoid calling me [senior], too. It sends shivers down my spine. I really hate showing off relationships in front of others.”



“Not that there’s no point, but... isn't it more awkward to call each other differently when we’re alone...?”

“A difference in philosophy, I guess. Alright, our opinions diverged quickly.”

Black Dragon Witch then took something out with her [Item Storage] skill.

A cubic object studded with round dots, a dice, commonly used in casinos worldwide.

Not just that, but she also took out paper and a pen.

"Kim Gong-Ja."

Black Dragon Witch looked at me with serious eyes.

“What, what is it? You're scaring me.”

“From now on, you and I will sign a [Friendship Contract].”

“...What?”

A what contract?

“I’ve always believed that human relationships should be documented.”

Black Dragon Witch was assertive.

“Humans make mistakes. Whether it’s from staying up all night or working 20 days straight, screw-ups are inevitable. Even if there seem to be no problems, tiny emotions can accumulate over 5 years, 10 years, eventually becoming a real problem.”

“Uh....”

“To prevent such unfortunate incidents, contracts must be written. They’re essential for a healthy and sound relationship.”

What in the world?

Seriously, what?

“Of course, the [promise] should be made in agreement between you and me. Neither side can impose. I’d like to include as the first clause of our contract: [In case of disagreements, roll the dice and follow the opinion of the person with the higher roll].”

"....."

“What do you think?”

-Indeed.

The previously silent Guardian Spirit snorted.

-I get it, zombie. You made friends with a troublesome one....

I was flustered.

I’ve never met anyone like this in my life.

“Uh, well, um. Maybe it’s okay?”

“Think seriously!”

Black Dragon Witch got angry.

Why is this happening?

“People think being blunt and straightforward without question is friendship, but it's not. Such relationships are only possible when people happen to have compatible personalities. To really maintain a relationship, you need to use your brain! Yes, your head. You have to use your head diligently to establish friendship!”

“Okay, you’re right, but a contract...?”

“Breaking the contract means you can immediately end the friendship, which is convenient.”

What is this? Confusing.

My concept of friendship is being shaken.

“Being wishy-washy only leads to a wishy-washy relationship. Kim Gong-Ja, if you're going to start, you should lay a solid foundation from the beginning. Quickly agree to the clause or present a well-reasoned argument against it.”

"....."

I thought hard, using even the parts of my brain I normally don't.

As a result, our [Friendship Contract] began with a very historic first sentence.

+

[Friendship Contract]

This contract is established upon the agreement of Anastasia Zelensky (hereinafter referred to as A) and Kim Gong-Ja (hereinafter referred to as K).

A, not trusting the shelf life of human emotions, believes that only a diligent attitude and an industrious intellect can solidify the relationship between two people. Accordingly, A and K agree as follows:

1. All promises are valid only when both parties agree.
2. All promises can be voided if both parties agree.
3. However, the establishment or voiding of a promise is only possible on weekends (Saturday or Sunday).
4. In case of disagreements, roll the dice and follow the opinion of the person with the higher roll.

Signature: Anastasia Zelensky

Signature: Kim Gong-Ja

+

I looked at the contract with a somewhat stunned mind.

Is this really the best way?

"....."

"Come on, stamp it already."

Black Dragon Witch urged.

Kind of scary.

"I don't actually have a stamp..."

"You have fingers, don't you? Use your fingerprint."

"Right...."

So I stamped it.

As I pressed my thumb down, leaving a red print, I thought, 'At least she didn't suggest writing a blood oath, so that's a

relief.'

In these 30 minutes, I had a very detailed understanding of Black Dragon Witch's character.

"Good."

Black Dragon Witch looked satisfied as she scanned the contract.

"This is not bad for a start. Well, we'll probably hit a rough patch in the second or sixth year, but can't help it. I'll have to do my best."

"There's still a rough patch even after doing all this...?"

"Kim Gong-Ja."

Black Dragon Witch murmured softly.

"Don't underestimate human fickleness. Furless beasts like us change into different beings in just six months."



Such a strong assertion.

“Daddy’s friend! Friend of my daddy!”

A familiar voice called out. My son, Uburka, was running towards the pier.

“Where did you two disappear to! I’ve been looking for a long time.”

“Oh, sorry. I had to talk with Ana...”

Black Dragon Witch stepped on my foot before I could finish saying, Anastasia.

“Ugh! Cough!”

Pain surged from my foot to my throat, exploding into a splendid scream.

That wasn’t the footwork of someone who had stepped on a foot for the first or second time.

“...I just had something to discuss with Black Dragon Witch.”

“That’s right. King of Death and I had to share a talk that only the two of us could.”

Black Dragon Witch smiled gently.

“Your daddy and I have a somewhat special relationship.”

Uburka stopped dead in his tracks.

“A s-special relationship?”

“Yes, a unique relationship to each other.”

“Unique...?”

“Embarrassing. What am I saying in front of a child. Anyway, we’ve finished talking. What brings you here?”

“The villagers... they’ve all woken up... It seems like the problem has mostly been resolved... I came to report that...”

Uburka mumbled and then suddenly looked at me.

His eyes were fiercely shining.

[The Constellation ‘The Muscle Pig Dreaming of Parricide’ demands an explanation from you!]

No, it's a misunderstanding, kid.

This is just her using me to get rid of you!

“Daddy, is what she just said true...?”

“King of Death. Was there anything wrong with what I said?”

My son and friend looked at me side by side.

I've never faced such a situation even in my countless repeated deaths.

Is it the paternal love supporting my son's love, or is it the friendship understanding the heart of a friend?

"...My son."

"Speak, Daddy."

"Black Dragon Witch here and this daddy are indeed..."

I swallowed.

"...indeed in a special relationship."

Uburka's expression contorted.

Silence.

The thick lips of the Hobgoblin trembled, and the long eyelids vibrated.

“I really hate you, daddy!”

With a line straight out of a teenager’s playbook, Uburka ran off into the distance. His flight, aided by Aura, was like a form of light martial arts. Leaving behind only tears, Uburka disappeared beyond the horizon.

The moment my centuries-long first love shattered.

[The Constellation 'The Muscle Pig Dreaming of Parricide' is deeply hurt.]

[The Constellation 'The Muscle Pig Dreaming of Parricide's distrust in humanity increases.]

Ah, ah, ahh....

I was in despair.

“No, Uburka. My son. This daddy has always held only one person in his heart till death.... How could you misunderstand like this... Even if I talk nonsense, you should’ve understood perfectly...”

“Thank you.”

Immediately after Uburka disappeared, Black Dragon Witch became indifferent.

Slightly, she swept her hair back with the back of her hand.

“Thanks to you, I got rid of a burdensome kid. I’ll ask for your help often in the future if I get annoyed by someone, Kim Gong-Ja.”

“Aren’t you using me a bit too freely for someone who’s supposedly a friend...?”

“What are you talking about? Really.”

Black Dragon Witch laughed brightly.

“You use friends conveniently.”

That was the third smile I'd seen from her.

And probably, a face I would see countless times from now on.

---

There's an epilogue to tell.

“You are wrong.”

-.....

The seven-year-old Anastasia looked straight at me.

The Dream World.

All the pioneers of the New Continent who had fallen into sleep were now awake. The sailors who had departed across the sea returned safely, except for a few unfortunate casualties. Consequently, Black Dragon Witch and I had to spend race

points.

“I came back to say this.”

After the incident concluded, today, I re-entered the Dream World.

-...I don't understand what you mean by wrong.

The young incubus replied bluntly.

Behind the Dream Demon, the same fence stretched as before.

The remnants of some civil war – rusted barbed wire and old fences.

The dream species was parasitizing the scars turned into wounds.

“You said it when we first met. Anastasia imagines the death of people she meets first, trying to prevent it preemptively, and



thus, she seeks infinite power to prepare and be ready endlessly.”

-Right.

“But I became an exception for her.”

Gunshots echoed.

“You saw it too.”

A man holding a child’s hand was running towards the fence.

Just like a broken tape repeating the same part over and over.

In a world of broken images, I said quietly.

“You can only grasp Anastasia, not change her. It’s a natural limit. After all, you only live in past traumas.”

-.....

“I suppressed you with power. You also fled from power. But thinking our relationship in that other world is based solely on power is a misunderstanding.”

-What do you want to tell us?

“Don’t mess around, brats.”

I emitted red Aura in all directions.

The pink-tainted world became a bit darker.

The Dream Demons flinched, their shoulders tightened.

“You can talk all you want. About [power] and [logic], making it seem like you can tailor the world to your liking. But the world isn’t thin enough to be cut by your scissors.”

-.....

“According to your logic, what under this sky isn’t power?”

I filled my hand blade with Aura.

“Suppressing someone is power. Persuading someone is power. Sharing and walking together in someone’s past is also power. You are merely capable of repeating human dreams, nothing more than that.”

-We are....

“You can never change Anastasia. I did. You are weaker and more incompetent than me, and in the end, you lost.”

I swung my hand.

Aura split the space.

The fence was cut and instantly turned into pink bubbles and vanished.

The father and child trying to escape through the narrow

exit also melted away.

“Next time I come, be more competent.”

-.....

“If you repeat the same thing after giving you hundreds of years, well, I might have to turn back time and make you extinct.”

It's simple.

The Dream Demons will just be added to my ghoulish collection.

I got up from my seat.

-How many will that be?

The Dream Demons glared at me.

-One? Two? Ten? Twenty? A hundred? Even if so, they mean nothing in the world you live in. What's the point?

I snorted.

“If numbers worry you, help yourself.”

-.....

I spread Aura to disconnect the surrounding area from the Dream World.

If my master were here, he could have annihilated this place in one strike, but that level is still difficult for me.

Just ensuring my own space to maneuver was the best I could do at the moment.

[Quest Clear!]

And my best worked even on this stage.

Just before leaving the Dream World, I looked at the Dream Demons.

The young Black Dragon Witch was biting her lip, seemingly very frustrated.

“Look forward to our next meeting.”

I declared the stage clear.

Murmuring in my mind, bright light enveloped my vision.

[Stage Clear!]

[You have cleared the 35th floor.]

[Reward tallying will be conducted after entering the 36th floor.]

[Sequential layer progression - You will be forcibly transferred to the 36th floor!]

Towards the place where my friend waits.

# Chapter 205: Easter Egg (1)

---

I have one particularly important task to handle.

Completely unrelated to conquering the Tower, but it's something I must resolve.

With a grave expression, I stated, “I want to introduce Uburka to Raviel.”

Right after clearing the 35th floor.

We were summoned to the usual white space.

Amidst the celebration with my companions, I made a request to the Constellation [The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages].



“No, I must introduce him. I've been delaying it, but I can't postpone it any longer.”

“Hmm...”

The Princess stroked her chin thoughtfully.

“Is that so?”

“Yes. Uburka might not be my biological son, but I consider the Earth Spirit Tribe my children. We're a married couple. It's something Raviel needs to know, and I need to tell her.”

“Although I understand it's a personal matter for the King of Death... You are currently continuously conquering from the 30th floor. A resident participating in the conquest can't just wander off to another floor.”

“Can't we invite Raviel here for a while?”

“No, no!”

The Princess crossed her arms, forming an X.

“Raviel didn’t participate in the conquest. Moreover, she’s not yet officially a part of your Tower. It’s impossible to call her here. That’s the Tower’s rule! Even if you have complaints, it’s difficult to change.”

I pondered.

“...What about Uburka and I briefly visiting Raviel’s world?”

“Well, that’s difficult too. Uburka, being a Constellation himself, does have the right to visit other floors...”

Of course. Uburka is The Muscle Pig Dreaming of Parricide.

Sorry, son, for not being able to support your first love....

“By rule, it’s possible, but whether it’s permitted, I’m not so sure? Because, King of Death, you’re also in the middle of a conquest. Unless you drop out of the expedition, you can’t just come and go as you please.”

“Okay. Let’s do this then.”

I smiled.

“As a reward for clearing the 35th floor, grant Uburka and me a visitation permit. At the very least, allow Uburka to stay here.”

“Eh?”

Interest sparked in the Princess’s eyes.

“Why is that?”

“Uburka would have died of old age if he hadn't become a Constellation. If we move to the 36th floor, hundreds of years will skip again... I don't want to leave Uburka alone while that happens.”

“So, it’s about [parental responsibility]?”

“You could say that.”

“Alright.”

The Princess nodded.

“If it’s for that reason, I have a valid argument to persuade the higher-ups. The Tower Master values maternal affection, parental duties, and such things! Just wait a moment.”

The Princess closed her eyes.

Suddenly, her bangs rose and bent like antennas. They swayed left and right.

...Is she communicating through that?

“Yep. Communication complete.”

The Princess opened her eyes.

“The King of Death’s request has been accepted.”

“Great.”

“But! You can't meet in the world where Raviel was born. The only place allowed for the meeting is the 29th floor. King of Death, Uburka, Raviel, only the three of you can meet there.”

".....?"

I couldn't help but tilt my head at her words.

“Thank you for listening, but, uh. Why only the 29th floor?”

The 29th floor isn't just any floor.

It's Kim Yul's stage.

The floor where Shinseo High School and its surrounding commercial district are replicated.

“It's not even the real world.”

Exactly.

Named by the Head Librarian as [The Side Story] of the City of Ascension.

A city manifested as a mere fantasy, not incorporated into the main history of our world.

There's no unique resource or tourist attraction.

Why treat only the 29th floor specially?

“---Sorry.”

Suddenly, the Princess turned expressionless.

“I can't tell you why.”

A resolute will emanated from her face.

“I owe the King of Death a lot. I have [debts]. So, as much as possible, I want to fulfill your requests. But this, I can’t.”

“I’ll acknowledge The Muscle Pig Dreaming of Parricide as a Constellation. If the King of Death becomes his guardian, granting a visit to the 29th floor is permitted. Is this compensation enough?”

I nodded slowly.

‘There’s a secret on the 29th floor.’

Seeing such a strong rejection, how could I forcefully inquire further?

The Princess is my ally. There’s no need to push a Constellation that favors me.

‘I’ve achieved what I wanted.’

Freeing Uburka from hundreds of years of waiting.

Introducing Uburka to Raviel.

I've accomplished both goals, so there's no need to rush.

‘But...’

What kind of secret could make such a powerful being so serious?

I buried my curiosity deep in my heart and replied.

“Yes. The compensation you mentioned is enough.”

“Great! Then, I’ll have those currently visiting the 29th floor exit for a while-.”

[The Constellation ‘The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages’ temporarily inherits the management authority of the 29th floor.]

[The Constellation ‘The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages’ is expelling all hunters from the 29th floor.]



The Princess waved her hand, saying, "Yap."

"I'll adjust the local time too."

[Administrator Authority - 'Lockdown' activated.]

[The 29th floor is sealed from the City of Ascension.]

[The rank required to enter the 29th floor is upgraded.]

[You are granted the right to enter the 29th floor!]

"Good."

The Princess smiled contentedly.

"Until the King of Death comes out, no one can enter the 29th floor. Not even the Constellations. It's a place prepared solely for the King of Death. Enjoy a heartfelt conversation with your family!"

“Uh... Thank you?”

“You're welcome.”

Not fully grasping what had just transpired, I bowed anyway. There was an air suggesting some significant authority had been exercised on my behalf.

“Go ahead to the 29th floor. I'll soon send Raviel and Muscle Pig over. Consider it a service. Take it easy.”

The Princess snapped her fingers crisply.

“When you want to return, just think of my face and say ‘Return’. I won't interfere with the 29th floor until then. Have a good trip!”

With the Princess's beaming smile as the last sight...

[Verifying the King of Death's eligibility.]

[Permission granted to enter 'City of Ascension - Side Story'.]

Dark shadows enveloped my vision.

---

When I opened my eyes, I was standing in the middle of a crosswalk.

Beeeeep!

Car horns blared at the intersection, loudly disrupting the peace. Shaken out of my post-transportation dizziness, I turned to see a driver gesticulating at me.

“Hey! Wanna die? Move it, kid!”

Despite his rudeness, he had a point. The traffic light was red. A clear sign to stop walking.

“Sorry about that.”

“Sorry my foot, just move! These youngsters...”

I moved out of the crosswalk, allowing the halted cars to

start moving. The drivers shot me glances, but that was all. They quickly disappeared into the distance, the 'city' becoming wholly indifferent to my existence as they continued on their schedule.

Just as the city lost interest in me.

"Um."

I lost interest in them too.

Because across the crosswalk, a dearly missed face was waiting.

"Raviel!"

Dressed in a simple gown.

An attire too alien for a modern city.

Raviel stood under the red traffic light, creating a sanctuary of her own.

“.....Gong-Ja?”

Seemingly still dizzy from the teleportation, Raviel lightly touched her forehead.

“Is this a hallucination? Or another Constellation’s invasion? To think my consort is right before my eyes, yet I must first worry about its authenticity. How sad...”

“Are you feeling dizzy? Should we sit? No, it’s too hot here. Let’s go into any shop and rest. Just lean on me for now.”

“Hmm, my overprotective husband. You’re indeed my love.”

Raviel relaxed her furrowed brow and finally smiled.

“I’m sorry for doubting you, even for a moment, Gong-Ja.”

“It’s alright. We are each other’s greatest weakness, so we always need to be cautious. I also encountered a dream demon imitating you while conquering the 35th floor.”

“Oh? That sounds intriguing. Did you see through its disguise in seconds?”

“In one second. I realized it wasn’t you even before I finished exhaling.”

I beamed.

“That foolish demon didn’t even bother wearing a wedding ring.”

“Indeed. A critical mistake.”

Raviel chuckled softly.

Before her laughter faded, I took her left hand gently, caressed the wedding ring on her ring finger, gently pulled her towards me, and kissed her.

“I missed you.”

“I’m happy to see you.”

“Is everything okay at the manor?”

“Ah, yes. With the mistress and even the Goldencup maid suddenly gone, there have been serious disruptions in the manor’s operations. Had the lord of the house been any less capable, our fortunes might have dwindled.”

“That’s unfortunate. Whoever married such a competent person must have saved a country at least three times in a past life.”

“From what I’ve heard, he saved the world a few times over.”

This time, Raviel leaned in for a kiss.

We spent a moment exploring each other’s eyes.

“...But what’s going on, Gong-Ja? I was in the middle of my morning duties when suddenly a blonde child popped out of the floor, saying, [Hello? Sorry. The King of Death asked for a favor, so I need to take you to the 29th floor for a bit!].”

“Ah, that person... is a Pillar.”

“A Pillar?”

“Yes. A Constellation above Constellations, you might say. One of the people managing the Tower. I asked her to let me meet you briefly as a reward for conquering the 35th floor, and she agreed. Though, I didn’t expect such a blunt method of transportation.”

“Ah.”

Raviel caressed my cheek.

To reiterate, this is an intersection.

Cars pass by, and naturally, pedestrians roam around.

“Kids these days...”

“Education is in serious trouble...”

“Classroom collapse isn’t just a rumor...”



Bystanders stopped one after another, looking our way and murmuring. Understandable, given a beauty like Raviel openly displaying affection in broad daylight. Anyone sane would be captivated.

Of course, we paid them no mind.

Why would I offer even an inch of my consciousness to others when I'm reunited with Raviel after months? My mind is busy capturing and storing every detail of her face and smile.

[City of Ascension - Side Story] might as well be a world created for me, so such behavior should be excused.

"A cute request. You missed me that much?"

"Actually, Raviel. I have something important to tell you..."

"Daddy?"

At that moment, the world stopped.

“That’s definitely daddy.”

Raviel and I slowly turned our gazes.

There, Uburka stood with arms crossed, glaring at me.

Raviel tilted her head.

“...[Daddy]?”

My heart sank.

"Uh. Wait. Raviel, about that..."

“Oh my!”

Uburka scowled.

"Disappointing! Just recently, you were giggling with a colleague, and now you're kissing and sharing love with

someone else. I'm losing hope in you as a father!"

Raviel's eyebrows lowered slightly.

"...Colleague? Giggling?"

Raviel stared at me intently.

"Gong-Ja. That stranger uttered some interesting words. If my linguistics knowledge isn't failing me, my suspicions and deductions are hard to ignore."

"No. No. No! Raviel! It's not like that!"

"Truly shameless daddy. After boldly confessing to having a 'special relationship' with the Black Dragon Witch, how do you have the audacity to meet another? I can't comprehend!"

"....."

Aha.

Raviel's lips curved into a smile.

“Black Dragon Witch? That must be the person from the engagement ceremony.”

Raviel reached out and grasped my neck.

Her grip was not strong.

But never had I felt such fear, not even when captured by a Demon King.

“I trust your love. There's no place for infidelity or betrayal in your life. However, I can't help but want an explanation. It's strange. Gong-Ja. I'll give you exactly 60 seconds to explain, for your life and for my peace of mind.”

I'm innocent!

# Chapter 206: Easter Egg (2)

---

"Indeed. There was a minor misunderstanding."

Raviel nodded her head upon hearing my desperate explanation.

A fast-food restaurant.

I would have preferred a café, but the era of the [Side Story] still lingered in the past. The countrywide proliferation of cafés was still a ways off. Sadly, there weren't many places where one could freely enter and converse.

"Well, it's unlikely that you would turn your eyes to another while leaving me aside. It's more plausible to hear that the universe has abandoned the laws of physics. Even someone of my stature can get swept up in emotions."

"No, I'm really grateful that you believe me...."

Honestly, I thought the world was ending.

"Hmm. From what I saw, the Black Dragon Witch was a competent individual. Had she been born in the empire, she would've flourished as a noble. To share a genuine friendship with such a person is a wise move on your part. You have good people luck. Of course...."

Raviel glanced through the front glass window of the shop.

"Though I never expected you to return with a goblin as your child."

Outside the window, Uburka stood with his arms crossed, his back turned to us.

Despite the giant hobgoblin in the middle of a modern city, passersby seemed not to notice anything unusual.

While some were startled by Uburka's immense size, none recognized him as a hobgoblin.

"Could it be that we are under some kind of perception-altering magic?"

"Perhaps."

Clink.

Raviel stirred her cola, the ice cubes clinking against each other.

"In this place, the attire I'm wearing is quite alien. It would be normal to stand out. But while many steal glances at my face, none seem to pay attention to our clothes."

Raviel was dressed in an imperial gown. Yet, when the store clerk saw us earlier, there was no reaction to our attire.

It was the beauty of Raviel, not of this world, that caused their eyes to widen.

"The conclusion is clear. To their eyes, we all appear to be wearing ordinary clothes."

"A world-scale perception alteration... that's too excessive."

"It signifies that the entity accommodating your convenience is omnipotent. You do have the knack of gaining favor with the powerful, Gong-Ja."

"Haha."

A quick glance around showed that all the customers in the shop were sneakily glancing at Raviel. Perhaps the perception alteration didn't apply to looks.

In an era with smartphones, they might have secretly taken our pictures.

"Then bring over that child you consider as your son."

"Is that alright?"

"Yes. He may not be your blood, but he is a bond you've formed with your heart. Who knows, he might even find favor in my eyes and be recognized as part of the Ivansia Ducal Family."

It was rare for Raviel to show kindness to others.



Before the Duchess's mind changed, I quickly brought Uburka over.

"....."

Uburka sat down, taking up a chair with each of his left and right buttocks. Still with his arms crossed, he looked down on Raviel, who was much shorter than him.

"....."

"....."

The silence continued.

What's this?

Why do I feel the most tense being caught in between?

".....Silver hair mocking the moon and red eyes mocking the cockscomb."

Uburka was the first to break the silence.

“Now that I see it, your appearance reminds me of someone from the legends. Ugh. Are you Raviel Ivansia?”

“Oh? Contrary to your appearance, you speak so poetically.”

“I’m just recalling what my daddy told me.”

“Is Gong-Ja spreading stories about me in your world too?”

“Daddy created five legends. The fourth one is about you, Raviel Ivansia. Silver Lily. The moon robbed of its heart by the mirror. Any Earth Spirit would know you, impossible not to.”

“Hmm.”

Raviel lifted the corner of her mouth. She seemed a bit more pleased. Holding a thin straw, she slowly stirred her cola.

“I heard you're a Constellation.”

“Ugor.”

“I was once a Constellation too. Not by choice, but I didn’t entirely dislike the fact that the world revolved around me. You possess a caliber far beyond ordinary humans. Do you have no doubts in considering Gong-Ja as your daddy?”

“Ugor, that's a foolish question. Even when Earth Spirits were immature beasts, daddy already tried to fulfill his parental duty. Bonds aren't formed by matching status, but by casting it aside.”

“Don’t you care about your own dignity?”

“Ugor. Dignity stems from qualification. Daddy has it. Conversely, I wonder who else, besides my daddy, holds the qualification to be revered by our Earth Spirits.”

“Hmm.”

Raviel nodded once.

To me and my beloved, that's definitely a sign she’s in a good mood.

But why does this Uburka act so mature in front of Raviel and like a child around me? Is he discriminating against his daddy? It's heartbreaking. So heartbreaking. This is why raising a son is all for nothing.

“How was your first encounter with Gong-Ja...”

“Ugor, during the war against the Slime Empire...”

Soon, the two of them began a warm conversation. Leaving me out.

Feeling isolated by both my wife and child, a wave of sadness hit me.

Is this the sorrow of a 'goose daddy'...

‘Huh?’

As I had nowhere else to look, I gazed out the window at the scenery, when suddenly a passerby caught my eye.

Something about that pedestrian felt strangely familiar.

".....?"

At first, I was drawn by the pedestrian's attire.

Shinseo Middle and High School's uniform.

Specifically, the middle school section.

Among those who bullied Kim Yul, there were middle schoolers too, both boys and girls. Maybe that's why my eyes lingered for a moment.

‘But they never appeared in the video.’

What could this sense of déjà vu mean?

When I enhanced my vision with Aura, I started noticing awkward aspects about the pedestrian.

Firstly, the hair.

'Blonde.'

Not dyed, but naturally blonde.

The long golden locks swayed with every step the pedestrian took.

I thought they might be a foreigner, but considering they wore the uniform of Shinseo Middle and High, that seemed unlikely.

'A dirty uniform... and a briefcase?'

The pedestrian wasn't carrying a student bag.

Instead, they held an old, worn briefcase, something more fitting for an office worker, in both hands. The leather was peeling off the corners of the bag, which looked almost ready for the trash.

The last point that caught my eye was:

'The stride is consistent.'

There was no variation in the steps.

This fact accounted for half of the unexplainable sense of déjà vu.

'The stride length and speed are maintained exactly the same.'

Such control over one's movement is difficult without significant training. Yet, the pedestrian showed no signs of Aura or even regular physical training. In fact, they seemed physically weaker than their peers.

As the pedestrian slowly passed in front of the fast-food restaurant's window,

Our eyes met for a moment.

Time seemed to slow down.

No, it wasn't that my time had slowed down.

The pedestrian had a completely expressionless face. As if born with that expression, it suited them perfectly. And that expressionless face had a perfect symmetry.

Their eyes.

Endlessly transparent.

It was midsummer, yet the pedestrian's eyes did not mix with the sweltering heat on the streets or the irritated sighs of others. There was an unmistakable purity, refusing any impurity.

Whoosh-

A car horn sounded from somewhere.

At the crosswalk, the traffic light flickered.



Even the changing lights at the intersection from red to yellow seemed irrelevant to the pedestrian's eyes. They walked in a different timeline.

The same rhythm. Exactly the same stride. An absolute uniformity that seemed to skim the world.

The act of [walking] should ordinarily prove one's belonging to this world.

But not for this pedestrian. With their gait alone, they could reject the world several times over. With each step, once. With two steps, twice. Three steps. Four steps...

Endlessly.

"Gong-Ja?"

Unknowingly, I had stood up from my seat.

"What's the matter?"

"I'm sorry."

Raviel and Uburka stopped their conversation and looked at me.

"Please wait here for me. Just for a moment. I need to go somewhere."

I apologized to them but kept my eyes on the pedestrian's retreating figure.

"I'll leave a trail of Aura, so if anything happens, feel free to follow. Uburka should be able to easily catch up."

"Daddy?"

"Son, please guard Raviel."

After saying this, I hurriedly rushed out of the fast-food restaurant.

'Where did they go?'

The pedestrian was crossing the street. The traffic light had just turned green not long ago, yet it was already blinking, urging people to hurry.

Beep beep beep-

It was a rare sight to see people crossing at this time of day in midsummer. Only one person, the pedestrian, was crossing the crosswalk. Despite the light still being green, drivers ignored the signal. Cars passed both in front of and behind the pedestrian.

'When? Where have I seen them before?'

I followed.

'Did they attend Shinseo High?'

The pedestrian walked into an alley.

'No. I would never forget a student with such a gait. If I had seen them even once, I would have definitely remembered.'

The trees cast blue shadows on the ground.

'It's definitely the first time I've seen that face. But why...'

The summer sun blazed white.

The stark boundary between shade and non-shade was evident. As the pedestrian entered the shade, they seemed to drift away like a mirage, escaping the season.

Buzzzzz-

Cicadas cried out.

'Who are they?'

Thud.

In the middle of the shade, the pedestrian stopped.

I, too, had to stop in my tracks.

"....."

The pedestrian slowly turned around.

I felt an invisible force pulling me.

Even the brief moment of the pedestrian turning seemed to slow down time. My breathing halted, my thoughts accelerated.

In the slowed-down time, fragments of memory floated by.

「I want to know how the tower is established.」

Before entering the 35th floor, the Paladin asked.

「Live the life of the most miserable person in that world.」

The Princess answered.

「 There is a master who made the Tower. 」

「 That master lives the life of the most miserable person in each world. 」

「 The worlds where towers are erected are those where the master has already lived and passed through. 」

As the pedestrian turned halfway around, I felt a tickle in my nose.

A familiar scent wafted through the air.

It was a smell I knew.

「 I'm going to school early today. 」

Kim Yul.

「 I need to feed the rabbits at the animal pens. 」

The smell of old, stored animal feed in a corner of the warehouse.

「 Anyway, the animal club is no more. Now, middle school class leaders take turns managing the animal pen... Middle schoolers won't be diligent in such tasks, right? It's usually the security guard and me. 」

「 A certain middle school student. 」

「 We almost always feed them. 」

Our world has a Tower established.

If the Princess's words are true, it means the Tower Master once [lived] in our world too.

Living the life of someone deemed even more unfortunate than Kim Yul.

「 Kim Gong-Ja. 」

For some reason.

A single sentence hurled at me by the class leader crossed my mind.

「 You went around calling him the second most bullied in Shinseo Middle and High, you named it yourself, laughing. 」

The pedestrian looked at me.

I was standing under the summer sky. The pedestrian was on the shaded ground.

There was a distance.

A gap.

Only the noisy chorus of cicadas bridged the gap between us.



"---Who are you?"

An emotionless resonance.

As the pedestrian opened their lips, I finally realized the identity of the déjà vu.

It was a voice I had only heard in the Tower.

"If possible."

"....."

"Please tell me why you are following me."

The Tower Master.

The Master of All Lives looked at me.

# Chapter 207: Easter Egg (3)

---

As soon as I said, "I want to talk with you," the Tower Master gazed intently at my face.

After about a minute,

The Tower Master nodded and led the way.

"Okay. Follow me."

I walked following the Tower Master's direction.

"This way."

A decayed alley.

Old tiled houses lined the alleyway.

It was not the neat atmosphere of a traditional Hanok\* village.

\*Traditional Korean houses.

The tiles were worn and overgrown with weeds. The once demolished stone walls had never been repaired, enduring the weight of time in their collapsed state.

'Why do these Hanoks look like this?'

I was about to voice my sense of incongruity when,

"These houses are relics from the Japanese colonial era."

Clump.

The Tower Master walked ahead, speaking softly.

"During the war, this city was overrun almost instantly. That's why it retains more remnants of the past than other places."

"A war?"

"The Korean War."

A summer stench wafted up from the sewers.

"These are houses that missed their time to die."

"....."

A row of tiled houses, long in lineage but devoid of their owners, seemed to watch us.

Rather than being antique, they resembled faces covered in dark mold.

We walked along the protruding stone wall path, opened a peeling lacquered gate, and passed a courtyard where not even

weeds grew.

"Please wait here for a moment."

I sat on the large, wooden-floor veranda and waited.

There was no air conditioning or even a fan, only the shade of the eaves to cool my head.

Meeeh, meeehm, meeeh... Eh...

Under the direct sunlight, cicadas cried out.

Shortly after, the Tower Master returned with a tray.

"I have nothing to serve you as a guest."

"No, I'm sorry for suddenly coming like this."

I respectfully received the cup with both hands.

The stainless-steel cup, something you'd find in a school cafeteria, was filled with water.

"You must be meeting me for the first time."

The Tower Master sat formally and bowed her head slightly.

"I'm a third-year student of Shinseo Middle School, Class A, Jaa Soo-Jeong."

"Ah."

I realized I hadn't introduced myself.

"I'm known as Kim Gong-ja."

"Yes, Mr. Kim Gong-ja. What would you like to talk about?"

"....."

How should I put it?

Curious about why you, who seem like the Tower's owner, are here?

Would you tell me how you ended up creating the Tower?

But.

"There's something..."

The question that slipped out was entirely different.

"You mentioned your name is Jaa Soo-Jeong..."

"Yes."

"May I ask what it means?"

"It's written with the Chinese characters for 'Amethyst'."

The Tower Master took out a notebook from her briefcase.

Jaa Soo-Jeong.

A sharply sharpened pencil laid black strokes on the white paper.

'That's the Tower Master's name.'

Perhaps a name that only exists in this world.

Yet, I witnessed the Tower Master's name for the first time in our Tower.

'Jaa Soo-Jeong.'

I repeated the pronunciation in my mouth.

Never forget it.



"Are there any other family members living here with you?"

"Yes. Until last year, I lived with my uncle, but now I live alone."

"May I ask what happened?"

"A burglar broke in and killed my uncle. Three men who were with him at the time were also murdered. It's still an ongoing investigation, so it's difficult to say much."

There was no trace of emotion in the Tower Master's words.

No. She had been expressionless all along.

From the first meeting till now.

"Do you know about [the Tower]?"

"Which Tower are you referring to?"

"The Tower of Babel. It suddenly appeared in our world, and just by thinking about wanting to enter, you can go through some procedures and enter. Once inside, a paradise unfolds... Uh."

I felt a bit embarrassed mid-sentence.

This sounds like some cult.

I cleared my throat.

"Anyway, you don't know?"

The Tower Master quietly shook her head.

"Yes. I don't know."

"[Pillar]? Have you heard of [Hunter]?"

"I presume, Mr. Kim Gong-Ja, the words you just mentioned carry a different meaning than usual. I only understand the words 'pillar' and 'hunter' in their general sense."

".....I see."

Somehow.

The more the conversation progressed, the deeper the sense of incongruity became.

'The Tower Master has no memory of being one.'

The girl in front of me really doesn't know the Tower.

'The atmosphere is completely different even though the voice is the same.'

A god who lost their memory.

Whatever the hidden story or situation might be, the child sitting in front of me lacks the power of the Tower Master and even the memory.

She is simply living the life assigned to her.

"....."

Asking her about the Tower now would be fruitless.

I redirected my curiosity.

"You've been answering all the questions I've asked so far, is that okay? You even mentioned a burglar broke in. What if I was a criminal with bad intentions?"

"It's okay."

The Tower Master slowly opened her lips.

"If Mr. Kim Gong-Ja were a criminal, you would have made contact at a different place, not at the crossroads."

"Excuse me?"

"I cross two underpasses on my way home from school. One of them is deserted. The lights are broken, and it's dark with several recessed areas. A criminal planning an attack would

have ambushed me in the underpass or waited in ambush."

The Tower Master continued, still sitting formally.

"When I saw your face, there was no sign of an impromptu crime. Your gaze was always on my face. Especially our eye contact. If you were worried I might run, you would have watched my lower body; if you anticipated resistance, my hands; if you targeted me personally, my body. But Mr. Kim Gong-ja, you only observed my face. That's typical of someone trying to recognize a known person."

"Uh....."

"Even just now, what Mr. Kim Gong-ja focused on was my name. A sign that you are curious about my personal information. When I left to fetch water, you didn't thoroughly inspect the inside of the house. A criminal would naturally check if there's a third party inside, the structure of the house, but you didn't."

The Tower Master held the stainless-steel cup with both hands.

A sip of water moistened the Tower Master's lips.

"Your actions do not fit those of a criminal, Mr. Kim Gong-ja. Therefore, I judge that you are not a criminal with ill intent towards me."

"....."

"Thus, to answer your question, yes. I am okay with answering."

Meeeeeeeh-

Cicada sounds echoed in the large wooden veranda.

I listened dully to the stretching sounds of summer.

‘...Ah!’

I snapped back to reality.

“You’re very articulate. And smart.”

“Yes.”

The Tower Master matter-of-factly affirmed.

“I am smart.”

"....."

I realized.

Even if she had lost her memory, the girl in front of me was no ordinary individual.

“Um, would it be okay if I used the restroom for a moment...?”

“Go around to the back of the house, you’ll find it there. Be careful on your way back.”

On my return from the squat toilet, I belatedly understood why the Tower Master said, "Be careful on your way back," instead of "Be careful going there."

It was then.

"Huh?"

I sensed a faint presence from a warehouse in the corner of the backyard.

The presence didn't seem to move.

It just crouched quietly beyond the warehouse.

"....."

What is this?

Despite the hot summer, a chill ran down my spine.

As I looked at the old warehouse door, the presence stayed silent, almost as if confronting my gaze head-on.



‘What the hell is it?’

I approached to investigate.

With every step, the presence felt stronger.

A sensation like cold fingers brushing my nape intensified.

‘Hey, what are you?’

I tried releasing Aura, but there was no response.

The presence did not lessen but rather seemed to draw closer.

One step.

Another step.

‘Damn?’

I swallowed nervously.

The moment I tentatively grasped the warehouse door handle,

"Don't go in."

Something grabbed the hem of my clothes from behind.

"Don't enter."

Turning around, I saw the Tower Master looking up at me expressionlessly.

When did she come here?

"Huh...?"

"If Mr. Kim Gong-Ja goes in, the [children] will get scared."

Children.

“Um, what children do you mean...?”

“Please wait here for a moment.”

The Tower Master opened the warehouse door.

As the door opened, the presence inflated dramatically.

What was merely a brushing sensation became as tangible as scratching with nails.

"....."

"Sorry. A guest has come."

Inside the warehouse were piles of curtains.

As the Tower Master pulled aside the curtain, there was just

a full-length mirror.

As soon as the mirror was revealed, the presence vanished as if washed away.

“Stay calm.”

The Tower Master took a towel nearby and wiped the surface of the mirror.

I was left standing behind, merely watching her.

"That, that mirror. Isn't it strange or something?"

"Yes. It is a strange child."

"It seems like it could harm people..."

"This child no longer harms people."

The Tower Master put away the cloth and covered the mirror again with the curtain.

The presence was still felt but not as ferocious as before.

It felt more like crouching quietly.

"Isn't there a risk it might harm someone in the future?"

"That's the same for humans."

"....."

Meow.

A cat's meow sounded from my feet.

Out of nowhere, a [puppy doll] had climbed onto my foot.

"....."

Meoow.

Undoubtedly, unmistakably, a cat's meow came from the puppy doll, which should have neither a mouth nor vocal cords.

“What’s this?”

“That’s Meow.”

A name that shouldn’t be given to a puppy doll.

“Never pat its head thinking it’s cute.”

“What happens if I do?”

“It will keep meowing in your head every six seconds until it finds a new owner.”

“...Seriously?”

“Yes.”

“Crazy.”

“It's quiet now because it's placed in the puppy doll. It's pondering whether it's a cat or a dog, so it's put off looking for a new owner. Before relying on others, it's a child who first ponders its own identity. Quite diligent.”

“This still seems quite dangerous?”

“It's okay. Once it establishes its identity, I plan to move it to a squirrel doll.”

“Excuse me...?”

“Then it will ponder for about a year whether it's really a squirrel or not. Just keep changing its body every 10 to 13 months, and it's safe. Now, Meow, don't bother the guest. Come here.”

The Tower Master grabbed the puppy doll by the nape.

Meowww.

The identity-confused doll was placed on a shelf.

“My word.”

I looked around the warehouse in astonishment.

On the shelves were countless indescribable objects.

On the wall hung a frame that changed to Raviel's image as I looked at it.

“What’s that?”

“It shows the person you love the most.”

The Tower Master was nonchalant.

“Don’t look at it for too long. The more you look, the more



your memory of the loved one fades. Conversely, the photo becomes more vivid. Once all memories of the loved one are gone, it then shows the second person you love.”

I quickly looked away.

“Why do you keep these things?”

“They'd cause trouble for people if they were elsewhere.”

“Aren't you scared? These are like ghosts.”

“That's a strange question.”

The Tower Master tilted her head.

“If they are ghosts, Mr. Kim Gong-Ja, you have one following you too.”

I blinked.

“...Excuse me?”

“There.”

The Tower Master pointed behind me.

“There’s a muscular ghost following you, Mr. Kim Gong-ja.”

"....."

Where she pointed, the Guardian Spirit hovered.

-Huh?

The Guardian Spirit was startled.

-What? Can she see me right now?

Only I could see and hear it.

But the Tower Master responded as if it were natural.

“Yes.”

She was the first person besides me to see the Guardian Spirit.

# Chapter 208: Cheat (1)

---

"I investigated as my consort suggested."

Raviel placed a stack of newspapers with a thud.

"Did you find anything?"

"Yes. She's quite a famous student."

The newspapers were marked with a lime-green highlighter. Where it was highlighted, the words [Miss Jaa], [J], and [Jaa Soo-Jeong] were written. The minor's real name was exposed.

Such is the media of this era.

"She's more known by her nickname than her real name. Commonly referred to as [The Ghost-Seeing Detective]. Ask

anyone on the street, and one in two people knows her."

"Even without appearing on public broadcasts, that's quite something..."

"The younger they are, the more likely they know her. Especially high school and middle school students; there's hardly anyone who doesn't know her. Even if they don't know the details of her activities, they've at least heard the term [Ghost-Seeing Detective]."

The interest wasn't entirely positive.

"Most respond with [Ah, that fraud?]. It's unfortunate. The person you claim to be the Tower Master doesn't seem to have a good reputation."

".....A fraudster."

Two days ago. The day I met the Tower Master.

Uburka and Raviel had tracked me down using my Aura. I introduced them to Jaa Soo-Jeong, claiming she was the Tower Master. Both were surprised but agreed to stay here for

a while.

When I asked if it was okay to stay for a bit, [Jaa Soo-Jeong, a third-year student at Shinseo Middle School, Class A] nodded expressionlessly.

"Yes. It's okay. There are many empty rooms. Feel free to stay as you like."

However, there was a condition.

"Please get my permission before entering the warehouse. And try not to wander around the house after 1 a.m. It's the children's playtime."

I took the advice seriously.

No matter how brave I am, I'm not keen on playing with ghosts.

Especially when Aura doesn't work at all, it's already a mystery.

"12 administrative actions. 8 ongoing civil lawsuits."

Raviel furrowed her brows.

"Considering her young age, she's been through too much trouble. No wonder she's treated as a fraudster... Seeing ghosts is indeed astonishing. But Gong-ja, are you sure this girl is the Tower Master?"

"Yes. I'm certain."

Chop, chop, chop, chop.

In the kitchen, a knife danced rhythmically.

The Tower Master.

The student named Jaa Soo-Jeong in this world, with her back turned, was chopping a raw chicken. Preparing dinner, with Uburka assisting her.

"When I was conquering the stage here, there were several

strange points."

"Strange points?"

"Yes. Originally, this world is a manifestation of the trauma of the Constellation Killer."

I had faced Constellation Killer early on the 50th floor.

Although I succeeded in killing one of Constellation Killer's puppets, I ultimately lost.

The trauma of Constellation Killer that I glimpsed as I died is the very identity of this place [City of Ascension - Side Story].

"When the trauma was being manifested, I heard the Tower's voice."

I wrote on the notebook.

+



Warning.

Re-enacting the trauma of your killer.

Extracting the necessary data from your memories.

+

The important part is the last sentence.

"The landscape depicted in this world was Constellation Killer's trauma, but the 'paint' used to draw it came from me. Hence, the characters' appearances all changed to people I know."

The class president became Black Dragon Witch.

The student council president became Raviel.

My mother and father became Master and Guardian Spirit, respectively.

But there was one - the only one who didn't change from [my memories].

"Kim Yul's face didn't change."

"Hmm."

"I had no idea what Constellation Killer looked like in a previous life. Since I didn't know, I couldn't remember. Yet, in the world of trauma, only Kim Yul retained his original appearance from the start."

Raviel stroked her chin thoughtfully.

".....Indeed, that's strange. If your memories were extracted, [Kim Yul's face should have changed to someone else's]."

"Exactly. The conclusion is clear. Kim Yul was extracted from [another data source], not my memories. Borrowed from someone else's memory. I'm convinced that [someone else] is the Tower Master."

"On what basis?"

"There is something."

I picked up the pencil again.

"The Tower said something strange when I cleared this world."

I recalled the voices I had heard.

+

Clear conditions met.

Considering the peculiarities of this stage, a judgment is requested.

Judgment complete.

The Master of All Lives acknowledges 'Stage Clear'.

+

"Until now, the Tower assigned the decision of whether a stage was cleared or not to the responsible Constellations. The Constellation in charge of floors 21 to 30 was [Holed-Up Head Librarian], Hamusutra. But for some reason, this world was directly judged by [The Master of All Lives]."

"In other words, this stage was specially managed by [The Master of All Lives]."

There's more evidence.

"A suspicious message was delivered immediately after the stage clearance was recognized."

+

Today, the 29th floor has been cleared.

The Master of All Lives announces on behalf of the tower.

You've worked hard, everyone.

May fortune be with you.

+

There was a longer message in between, but I can't remember that.

But this is enough.

[The Master of All Lives] exceptionally conveyed congratulations.

"There's no doubt. The Tower Master managed this stage."

I spoke with certainty.

"Kim Yul's appearance was also manifested by the Tower Master. According to [The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages], the Tower Master once lived in this world. Lived the life of the most unfortunate person. And coincidentally, this

girl Jaa Soo-Jeong knows Kim Yul."

".....She managed the school animal pen with him."

"Yes."

So, using the Tower Master's memory, Kim Yul could be recreated.

This resolves the data gap.

"It makes sense. But if that girl is the Tower Master, why has she lost her powers and memory?"

"....."

I looked at Jaa Soo-Jeong's back in the kitchen.

Sizzle, sizzle.

The old pot boiled with chicken.

"There are several possibilities I can think of....."

"But?"

"From what I've seen, the Tower Master, no matter what happens, does not interfere much with the affairs of the Tower. Unless it's a truly dire situation, she does not reveal herself. [She stays as an ordinary human unless in a critical situation] - she might have imposed such a limitation on herself."

I fiddled with the pencil.

Raviel leaned over my shoulder, looking at the notebook.

+

Regarding Trauma.

+

"For example, trauma. I can see the trauma of the person who killed me. This is guaranteed by my skill [Returner's Winding Clock]. However, the question arises: what determines the trauma?"

Scribble, scribble.

Two possibilities were written on the page.

+

Regarding Trauma.

1. Trauma remembered by the subject.

2. Trauma that, even if not remembered by the subject, had a significant impact on their life.

+

"Initially, I thought it was the first option. But..."



“The existence of this world's stage negates option one.”

“Yes. Because Constellation Killer did not remember the trauma of his time as Kim Yul.”

The answer was the second option.

Events that impacted life, whether remembered or not.

That's the nature of the trauma my skill reveals.

“The Tower tends to mend any inconsistencies that arise. The contradiction that arose when Constellation Killer's trauma was being reenacted was this.”

+

1. The trauma of Constellation Killer's past must be reenacted.

2. However, Constellation Killer lost all past memories due to his skill.

3. The conflict between [Kim Gong-Ja's skill] that manifests trauma and [Constellation Killer's skill] that erases the past.

4. Contradiction occurs.

+

“The Tower recognized this as a crisis situation. So, the Tower Master, living as an ordinary middle school student, Jaa Soo-Jeong, temporarily awoke to resolve the issue. The Tower Master thought of a way to resolve the inconsistency, but...”

+

5. In a hurry, data is extracted from Kim Gong-ja's memories instead of Constellation Killer's.

+

“She hesitated at the last piece of the puzzle. The Tower Master probably thought: Is it really right to replace even Kim Yul, the original subject of the trauma, with someone else's face?”

"....."

“This is [Kim Yul's Trauma]. It's one thing to overlay surrounding characters with different images... but if even Kim Yul is changed to someone else, it's no longer [Kim Yul's Trauma]. It becomes a lie.”

The Tower Master could not allow herself to change Kim Yul's face.

That's the kind of person she is.

Finally.

+

6. Kim Yul's appearance alone is restored using her own memories.

7. After the stage is cleared, she reclaims her power and memory, continuing to live as the ordinary [Jaa Soo-Jeong].

+

“This is my conjecture about the true nature of this world.”

“Indeed. There are still many unanswered questions, but... impressive.”

Raviel patted my forehead.

“Busy as you are with climbing the Tower, you take time to reflect on the past and seek the truth. Such effort is your most shining talent. No other Hunter pays as much attention to the Tower as you do.”

“It's basic for me.”

“No, it's a deduction only possible for you. If it weren't for you, no one would have gathered information about the Tower Master, and without your skill, you couldn't have drawn her out. Be proudly boastful.”

Raviel praised me.

Hehe.

“Gong-Ja, what do you plan to do next? Even if that girl was the Tower Master, she now lacks both power and memory. Her ability to see ghosts is remarkable, but that’s it.”

Hmm.

“If my deduction is correct... there’s one way to bring back [The Master of All Lives].”

“Oh?”

“When a contradiction arises due to a skill, the Tower cannot resolve it internally. The judgment of the Tower Master is needed. So, if we cause another contradiction, the Tower Master will appear.”

“That makes sense. What exact contradiction do you intend to create?”

“I will be killed by Jaa Soo-Jeong’s hand.”

"....."

Raviel closed her lips.

I spoke emphatically.

"Then, a problem arises in the reenactment of the trauma. Trauma highlights an event that greatly influenced the subject's life. Whether remembered or not. So..."

+

Jaa Soo-Jeong's (Tower Master's) Trauma.

1. The trauma of the middle school student Jaa Soo-Jeong, living in this world.

2. Trauma from before Jaa Soo-Jeong lived her life as the Tower Master.

+

“A conflict arises. The Tower won’t be able to decide [which trauma] to show.”

"....."

“Following Constellation Killer's example, it’s correct to show [The Tower Master's Trauma]. That's the source. I’ll be incredibly close to the truth of the Tower, to the identity of the creator and ruler of the Tower, before even breaking the 50th floor.”

"....."

“This might be the first and last chance.”

Tap. Tap.

Raviel tapped the table.

“...

Can you be certain it's the last chance? Maybe after reaching

the 50th, 60th, 70th floors, you'll learn the Tower Master's secrets."

"I can assert."

I glanced sideways.

The Guardian Spirit, with arms crossed, listened to our conversation.

-Hmm.

The Guardian Spirit frowned slightly.

-I reached up to the 99th floor, but never encountered someone like the Tower Master. I only learned about [Pillars] after meeting Kim Zombie here.

This was a testimony from an experienced individual.

-If we compare it to a game, reaching the 100th floor is like seeing the ending. There will be rewards fitting for an ending.



But the [game developer] has nothing to do with the ending, right? Whether it's the developer's identity or personal life, it's irrelevant. I couldn't reach the 100th floor, so I can't say for sure... but probably the 100th floor and the Tower Master are unrelated.

I nodded.

“Yes. According to my Guardian Spirit, there's absolutely no information about the Tower Master up to at least the 99th floor.”

This has no connection with the progression of the Tower.

In a sense, an Easter egg.

Information about the creator of the Tower, the developer of the stages.

“I want to know the identity of the Tower Master.”

"....."

“Why did that person create the Tower? How? Why choose to live the life of the most unfortunate person in each world? If there’s a chance to know, I want to seize it.”

“And you think this is the last chance.”

“Yes. I think so.”

The secrets of creation.

The life of the creator.

That’s worth risking a life for.

“Raviel.”

I looked earnestly into Raviel’s eyes.

“Please allow me to be killed by that girl.”

# Chapter 209: Cheat (2)

---

“...My lover always forces difficult choices upon me.”

Raviel started to sigh but stopped herself.

A breath cut short midway.

During the remaining time, Raviel stroked my earlobe. I knew she refrained from sighing because she thought, [I don't want to sigh in front of the face of the one I love].

“I understand that it's a matter worth its value. If I were in your position, I would have acted the same way. Although I understand it with my head... my heart does not easily permit it.”

It's only natural.

What Raviel said applies to me as well.

If I were in Raviel's shoes, I would never easily allow it.

“Have you prepared a logic to persuade that child?”

Raviel glanced at Jaa Soo-Jeong's back.

“I've only observed her with a sidelong glance for about a day, but she's a person of strong resolve. No, it's more than that – it's as if her resolve itself has taken human form.

Jaa Soo-Jeong sees Raviel and Uburka [as they are].

To others, Raviel's silver hair appears black, and Uburka's green skin looks like flesh color. It's a confusion of perception.

But to Jaa Soo-Jeong, this change in perception does not apply.

“She didn't even blink when she saw me and Uburka the day before yesterday. That's the kind of person she is. I don't think

she will easily agree just because you wish for death."

That's where my opinion differs.

But for now, I sought Raviel's consent.

"So, does Raviel grant permission for my actions?"

"Fine."

Raviel stated her condition.

"If you die in front of my eyes."

"....."

"If you perish right before me, I will permit it."

I nodded my head.

“I will do as you ask.”

---

“Everyone, please eat.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong walked in carrying a tray. Uburka also held a bowl in each hand. The menu was chilled chicken noodle soup. The noodles were rolled up in the bowl, with ice floating on top.

“I will enjoy this meal.”

I slurped up a mouthful along with the soup.

The cool dongchimi broth filled my mouth.

“...This is incredibly delicious?”

I couldn't help but marvel.

“Wow, it's really tasty. You seem to be a great cook.”

“The weather is hot, so I made chilled chicken noodles.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong said.

"The gemstone Raviel gave is so valuable, we won't have to worry about a poor dining table for a while."

"It's gratifying to see my gift valued."

Two days ago, Raviel handed over an emerald gemstone as a thanks for letting her stay. Even to someone like me who knew nothing about gemstones, it looked extremely expensive.

Initially, Jaa Soo-Jeong refused it, saying it was [too much], but after Raviel said, [It's for me to decide if it's too much. Are you treating me, a guest and the homeowner, like a beggar?], she eventually gave in.

Typical of the Ivansia Ducal Family. The wealthiest family in the Empire.

And that family is mine.

Uh-huh-huh.

“...Daddy. Your face is exceedingly unpleasing. Could you stop grinning while eating? It’s seriously embarrassing as a son.”

“Right. By the way, how did you dispose of the gemstone?”

I changed the subject.

“It wouldn’t have been easy to exchange a gemstone for money with a student status.”

“I have a classmate named Imiho. She’s the third daughter involved in second-tier finance and construction, and also a local magnate’s daughter. So, I asked her to handle it.”

“Huh?”

Wait.

Local magnate + second-tier finance + construction.... Oh,



oh.

‘Isn’t that a gangster!?’

She asked a classmate from a gangster family to dispose of the gemstone?

‘Really?’

I looked at Jaa Soo-Jeong, who was eating noodles. She was expressionless. I couldn’t guess what kind of life lay beyond that expressionlessness, but it certainly wasn’t ordinary.

Jaa Soo-Jeong tilted her head.

“Is there a problem?”

“Ah, no, it’s not that. I was just thinking your friend circle is quite interesting.... Moreover, is it alright to tell all this to an outsider like me?”

“Yes.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong answered succinctly.

“Because Kim Gong-Ja asked.”

Hmm.

“...I want to clarify. It's not because I am someone special that you answered, but simply because I asked, right?”

“Yes. That's right.”

I shut my mouth.

Ever since we met the other day.

‘This person has no barriers.’

She seems to accept any question or request.

At least until now, she has never refused anything I said. Not

even once.

When I wanted to talk, when I asked if it was okay to let Uburka and Raviel stay, Jaa Soo-Jeong accepted without any hesitation, always replying with a [Yes].

“Um, Jaa Soo-Jeong.”

After dinner.

I decided to test my thoughts.

“I’m sorry to ask, but could I make a request?”

“Yes. If I can help.”

“Please come up and sit on the table.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong’s head tilted slightly.

Her blonde hair slid to the side.

“The table is not for sitting on, Kim Gong-Ja.”

“Yes. I understand. Please.”

"....."

Jaa Soo-Jeong slowly climbed onto the table and sat down cross-legged.

"Hmm."

“Ugh?”

Both Raviel, who was watching us, narrowed her eyes, and Uburka widened his.

Feeling a strong premonition that my judgment was correct, I made another request.

“Could you please place your hand on my head?”

“Yes.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong placed her hand on my forehead.

I continued to ask.

“I’m hungry. I’d like some chicken skewers for a snack. Could you make them for me?”

“...Kim Gong-Ja.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong admonished me softly.

“Using me conveniently like this may have a negative impact on you in the future. Also, late-night snacks are bad for your health. In my judgment, Kim Gong-Ja is not hungry, but rather, you are making these requests to understand my behavior.”

“Yes. That’s correct. So, please.”

"....."

Jaa Soo-Jeong nodded and brought a basket.

She was actually going to leave the house to make chicken skewers.

"Wait a moment."

Raviel grabbed Jaa Soo-Jeong's shoulder. Seeing the situation develop to this point, even the supreme Raviel could not refrain from intervening.

"Jaa Soo-Jeong, just to be sure, if a stranger on the street asks you for a little help or to follow them, would you go?"

"Yes."

Jaa Soo-Jeong readily affirmed.

"If I can help."

“This is an extreme example, but what if that request was to be confined in a subsidiary facility for a year?”

“Yes. If I can be of help.”

Raviel pursed her lips.

After a moment, she muttered, “Indeed.”

“This is... dangerous.”

Raviel and I exchanged glances.

I nodded to share an understanding with her.

“Yes, it is dangerous, Raviel.”

“...The mind is sharp enough to discern others' true intentions. To grasp others' purposes. But just understanding isn't enough, if someone earnestly requests, you never refuse. No, at this level, it's more like you can't refuse.”

Raviel frowned.

“I am certain now after the conversation we just had. As Gong-ja said, this child is indeed a Tower Master. At least, she’s not a human who was born and raised through normal means.”

“Yes. This personality isn’t [formed] but rather [programmed].”

Like an AI reacting according to conditions.

Simply an existence responding to people's wishes.

“Jaa Soo-Jeong.”

I knelt on one knee in front of the small blonde girl.

Finally, our eye levels matched.

Jaa Soo-Jeong, still holding the basket, looked at me intently.



“I come from another world. Raviel and Uburka too, are travelers from their respective worlds.”

“I see.”

Even upon hearing such an unconventional statement, Jaa Soo-Jeong's face did not change.

She just lightly nodded as if she had already guessed it.

“Open, Skill Card.”

I pulled out a golden card.

+

[Returner's Winding Clock]

Rank: EX

Effect: Activated automatically on death. You will return 24 hours back in time from the moment of your death. Your memories and stats are preserved while returning.

\*However, there is a greater penalty the higher your rank.

\*Skill copied from Yoo Soo-Ha

+

I showed my trump card as evidence.

“In our world, there are things called skills. It’s possible to move through space using skills, and even to turn back time.”

"....."

“As you can see, I possess a skill that allows me to not die even if I am killed. By presenting this skill, I would like to make a request to you, Jaa Soo-Jeong. Please kill me just once.”

“Why?”

“I believe you are a god overseeing our worlds.”

I looked straight into Jaa Soo-Jeong’s eyes.

“Our god implants a terminal in each world to represent them. The person who has lived the most unfortunate life becomes the candidate for this terminal.”

“I am that terminal?”

“Yes.”

Then, I started my story.

About how I came into the Tower. The story of the director and Kim Yul. My experiences in the Tower, meeting my master, meeting Raviel. I offered my life as evidence to the girl before me.

"....."

For over an hour and a half, the story went on, but Jaa Soo-Jeong watched me silently throughout.

I closed my mouth and waited for her response.

“...According to Kim Gong-Ja’s story, it’s indeed possible that I am the Tower Master’s terminal. It makes sense to lure the administrator by exploiting contradictions and face the truth of that administrator.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong extended her hand.

“You’re a hard-working person, Kim Gong-Ja.”

Her slender fingers gently brushed over my forehead.

“Recently, Kim Yul suddenly disappeared.”

“Not only Kim Yul but several people disappeared. The ones who bullied Kim Yul. No one but me noticed their disappearance. I thought it was a rare event, but according to Kim Gong-Ja, it makes sense.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong stroked my head.

“If I meet the Tower Master, I would be glad to convey your words.”

“What would you like me to say?”

“I am happy.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong quietly said.

A shiver ran down my spine for a moment.

“I love this city and the children living in it. I love the crying cicadas in summer and the sound of the radio leaking from the old windows next door.”

And I realized what I had misunderstood.

The child before me was not something akin to AI.

It wasn't that she lacked emotions and thus accepted every question and request.

Simply.

‘She sees us all as [children].’

Seeing them as children she needs to take care of.

Even the unidentified monsters sleeping in the warehouse.

And even me, who is having this conversation now.

Though she may admonish and point out faults, she cannot refuse the last request.

In essence, this child is a mother.

“So please tell her not to worry about me.”

“...Yes.”

I nodded.

“I will definitely convey your message.”

“Give me the knife.”

I handed over the dagger I had at my waist.

Jaa Soo-Jeong received the knife and swung it a few times.

Seemingly getting the hang of it, she pointed the tip of the knife at me.

"....."

Raviel silently watched over me.

"Kim Gong-Ja. I am not strong, so I might not be able to end

your life in one strike."

"I am prepared. It's not the first time I've experienced this...."

"If it becomes painful, I'm sorry. I apologize in advance."

Thwack!

Before I could even finish speaking, cold steel pierced through my neck.

‘Huh?’

My vision shattered like a broken window, splintering into several pieces.

While the agony spread through the cracks, a corner of my mind felt absurd.

‘No matter what, for a student to immediately go for the neck without any hesitation, it's absurd...’



My body swayed.

If I wasn't mistaken, Jaa Soo-Jeong had just swung the dagger once more.

'It's absurd....'

Within the torn vision, Jaa Soo-Jeong's face remained expressionless.

Her lips moved.

"May fortune be with you."

Consciousness snapped, just like that.

Along with the usual announcement of my death.

[You have died.]

[Your current Rank is B-Rank.]

.....

[Re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

[Extracting data from the original owner's memory.]

.....

[Failed.]

[Data for trauma re-enactment is rejected.]

[Requesting data from Zuraqua... Failure. Rejected.]

.....

[Trauma cannot be re-enacted.]

[Requesting approval from Zuraqua.]

[Failure.]

[Approval from Zuraqua is denied.]

[The matter is not within Zuraqua's agenda.]

.....

[Unable to cope.]

['The Master of All Lives' manifests.]

At that moment.

“----Goodness.”

Someone.

No, something grabbed my chin.

Firmly.

“How annoying this is.”

It was a voice like red silk soaked in peach juice for days, then wrung out forcefully, spattering sweet juice in all directions.

“Even though I, the lesser one, enjoy sowing chances in spring to harvest in autumn, this was truly an unforeseen situation.”

It was a voice like a hundred snakes flicking their thin tongues, a hundred ends of tongues drilling into ears.

“How dare you peek into the past of the lesser one.”

I opened my eyes.

In the darkness, a girl was smirking.

This being looked exactly like Jaa Soo-Jeong, who was stroking my head in the old house just a moment ago, with one exception.

“The first time I conceded to logic, the second time I pretended not to understand flattery. The third time I admired the audacity and obliged. Foolishly.”

The pupils.

“Now that we’ve reached the fourth time today, it is also my oversight.”

[The Master of All Lives] had purple eyes.

"Even so, shortcuts do not straighten out, and cheats are not acknowledged as standard. King of Death. You have done something truly amusing."

Purple is perhaps the darkest color to illuminate something.

However, the purple of the Tower Master shone transparently even in darkness.

It was a brightness that illuminated not a person's face, but their heart.

“How should I punish this adorable mischievous one?”

“I don’t recommend keeping silent like a mute. If the lesser one realizes how much I can torment you, you will understand that keeping silent is the most foolish thing to do. Please, speak your mind.”

I opened my mouth.

“It’s my first time meeting you formally.”

And I smiled.

“Tower Master.”

For the first time, I saw the face of the being who created this Tower.

# Chapter 210: Cheat (3)

---

“My name is Kim Gong-Ja.”

I spoke, suppressing the pounding of my heart.

“And, I am the one who received the alias King of Death from you.”

“Let me say this again. I'm pleased to meet you formally, Tower Master.”

The purple eyes pierced through me as they stared.

“Hmm.”

The Tower Master held my chin. Our faces were close enough for our breaths to mingle. The breaths she exhaled

were so faint they were almost inaudible.

“Since you have introduced yourself, it would be rude not to introduce myself in return.”

The Tower Master clicked her tongue lightly.

“Fine. As you said, I am the Tower Master. I hold the alias of The Master of All Lives, my first name is Jaa Soo-Jeong, and my second name is Kaleidoscope. I have many other nicknames, but there’s no need to tell you all of them.”

“Still, I would appreciate it if you did.”

“You really are shameless.”

“I went to such lengths to meet you, to learn about you. Isn’t that commendable?”

The Tower Master chuckled.

“As I heard, you are eloquent and charming. I’m well aware



that Hamusutra fell for your smooth talk. But if you plan to sweet-talk me, give up. That's my specialty."

"...You specialize in seducing people, Tower Master?"

"Yes. Be thankful I don't have a hobby of messing with married men, King of Death. Married women, maybe."

Thud.

The Tower Master released my chin.

[The Master of All Lives withdraws the Dragon Pressure.]

Only then did I regain the contours of my body. Until now, in this darkness, I could only feel my face, mouth, and heart. But after the Tower Master let go of my chin, I felt my arms and legs more distinctly.

My mind cleared.

Hmm.

It's okay.

My heart is still pounding, but it's not uncontrollable.

“Tower Master. You know why I summoned you. I intend to peek into your past, based on my skill.”

"....."

“You may be an omnipotent being in this tower. But at the same time, you are an operator who tries your best to be fair and strict. I have justly used my skill, so you have no choice but to comply with my request.”

“Damn it.”

The Tower Master narrowed her eyebrows.

Looking back now, she was really different from Jaa Soo-Jeong in the [Side Story].

The Jaa Soo-Jeong living in the side story had no

expressions. Her speech was monotonous. But the Tower Master frowning in front of me now, despite having the same beautiful appearance, frowned, clicked her tongue, and sighed.

She was a living person.

“King of Death.”

“Yes.”

“I sincerely advise against experiencing my past, especially cherry-picking just the traumas. It’s dangerous. It would be slightly safer to dive into an exploding volcano with dynamite strapped around your waist.”

The Tower Master shook her head.

“Please give up if you don’t want to be shattered to pieces.”

“I want to know about you.”

“Do you know who is the saddest being in the myth of

Icarus? Is it the Minotaur, who was trapped in an eternal labyrinth the moment it was born? Is it Icarus, who just wanted to fly a bit more? Is it Daedalus, who made wings for his son? No. It's the sun, which had no choice but to burn those approaching it and drop them into the blue sea. Please don't make me sad."

"....."

"Your access authority is B-rank."

The Tower Master snapped her fingers.

Then, purple letters were engraved in the darkness.

+

Hell Realm.

Hungry Ghost Realm.

Animal Realm.

Asura Realm.

Human Realm.

Heaven Realm.

+

“The depth of all lives you will experience is the Animal Realm. As you must know from experiencing the trauma of Constellation Killer, starting from the Animal Realm, traumas are not just [seen] but [lived]. If your rank was below C, I might have considered it, but...”

The Tower Master looked straight at me.

“No.”

"....."

“Give up if you don’t want to die without leaving even bone broth behind.”

Surprisingly, the Tower Master was quite vulgar.

“...You seem to know a lot about my skill. What comes after the Animal Realm, I didn’t even know.”

“Of course.”

The Tower Master retorted.

“That’s originally my ability.”

“What?”

I hadn't imagined such a statement.

The Tower Master sighed and brushed her blonde hair with her right hand.

“Every skill has an original. It’s much easier to develop something by referring to something already existing, rather than creating something out of nothing. The [Trauma Viewing Penalty] you have is originally one of the abilities of some

Dragon Emperor... Anyway, one of my ancestral abilities. I call it 'All Lives'."

Whoa.

"Perhaps the alias [The Master of All Lives] is...?"

"That's right. It was derived from there."

Good heavens.

Does that mean I share a similar ability with the Tower Master?

"It's an unexpected honor. No, how did such a coincidence happen..."

"Honor? Because of this fucking ability, my life went to hell."

Correction.

The Tower Master was far more vulgar than I expected.

“And it’s not even a coincidence. It’s attached to the penalty of [Returner’s Winding Clock]. You already heard who created the skill?”

“Yes, [The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages] created it...”

“That girl is my daughter.”

My mouth dropped open.

“Wh-what?”

“She’s my daughter.”

The Tower Master sighed and extended her left hand.

“Here.”



“What... what is this?”

“Smell it.”

It was a seriously awkward request.

“Uh. Um. Tower Master. I, uh, already belong to someone else...”

“Are you insane? Do you want to die? Didn’t I just say I’m not interested in men? I’m asking you to just press your nose against my hand and smell. I’ll flip your nostrils upside down and transplant your nose hairs with your head hairs.”

"....."

Hearing an insult I’d never heard before, I obediently pressed my nose to her hand and sniffed.

"Ugh."

At that moment, a dizzying fragrance surged into my skull.

My vision spun.

I reflexively lifted my head and created some distance.

“...Peach scent?”

“Yes. That’s my body scent.”

“Crazy.”

“I think it’s crazy too.”

The Tower Master made a face as if chewing on something.

“Now, remember the pillow that my daughter always carries around.”

I recalled [The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages] in my head.

True to the Tower Master's words, the Princess always hugged a pillow.

And the pattern drawn on the pillow was.

“Peach...”

“That girl. She’s severely a mama's girl. No matter her age, she still can't sleep without my scent beside her. She doesn't just have trouble sleeping, she refuses to sleep. That's the real problem.”

My mind went numb.

“I was hoping to hear various secrets when meeting the Tower Master, but...”

“You never imagined you'd learn such a secret, right? I know. I understand. Originally, there are no secrets in the world, and once you forcibly uncover them, all that awaits you is infinite responsibility. Damn it.”

The Tower Master's favorite phrase was ‘damn it.’

“I’m the same. Don’t try to know my secrets. Don’t dig them up. If you manage to handle what you discover and dig up, good for you, but all you’ll find at the bottom of my depths are rotting screams.”

“...But if I still wish to see it, what will you do?”

“I can offer you a different compensation.”

The Tower Master looked at me.

Her face was expressionless as she watched me.

At this moment, she looked exactly like Jaa Soo-Jeong in the [Side Story].

“Name any skill you want. I’ll be lenient. Speak of any power you desire. I’ll consider it. In exchange, tear up [Returner’s Winding Clock]. So that the trauma penalty does not occur.”

"....."

“If you’re worried about losing your ability to return, don’t be. I’ll delete only the trauma penalty and gift you a skill, the same, no, even better than that.”

“Really.”

I nodded.

“You can’t forcibly stop me, can you?”

The Tower Master sighed.

“...Yes.”

“All you can do is persuade me. You’ve appeared now to persuade me. Stopping the penalty activation according to the skill would be [abuse of authority]. You have the power to stop me, even change the world so this situation never happens, but you don’t.”

Because you are a person bound by your own rules.

“No matter how much you want to stop me, if I insist on proceeding, you have no choice but to let it happen. Am I correct?”

“King of Death.”

“I have no intention of tearing up [Returner’s Winding Clock].”

“Please, I beg you. You're going to get torn apart.”

“If I back down here, even if I climb to the 99th floor and ascend to the 100th, I will forever remain ignorant of you. I don’t want that. I want to live even a single day of life with you.”

"....."

Suddenly, the Tower Master’s eyes softened.

“I see.”

The Tower Master lamented.

“I had braced myself that this day might come. The one who wields the sword must know they will eventually be torn by the sword. I knew that someday, someone who speaks like me, reasons like me, believes like me, would appear, even if it took an eternity.”

The Tower Master reached out her hands and held my head.

“Please be strong.”

Then she pressed her forehead against mine.

[The Master of All Lives blesses you.]

The purple eyes reflected in mine.

“I am always beside you all.”

The moment her voice whispered.

[Your current rank is B-rank.]

[Warning.]

[Re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

The stopped clock hands began to move.

[The level of penalty is High.]

[Animal Realm.]

Eyes.

In the midst of a world dyed in purple, my eyes were captured.

Within the eyes caught, again the purple eyes.

In the purple eyes, again my eyes...



My consciousness fell into a labyrinth of mirrors.

.

.

.

.

.

.

That year, the rumors were endless.

In the Baron's territory, stones rolled on their own without anyone touching them. It was a bad omen as stones moved around on their own in the territory. The river water boiled every night for no reason. Frogs jumped out of the waterways and then smashed their heads on the ground and died.

In the capital, lightning struck twenty-six times in one day, and the fortune-teller at the North Gate blabbered, “The number thirteen is overlapped above and below to make twenty-six, it’s a bad omen.”

It was a grave sin to randomly predict the fortune of the country. The capital guards dragged out the fortune-teller and beheaded him. That day, even though the rainy season had not yet arrived, the river flooded severely, blocking all roads to the capital from all directions.

“The kingdom is an irrecoverable cripple.”

The nobles openly sighed.

Famine continued. Epidemics were successive. Time was like a rotten spine, pus accumulating at every continuous and successive segment. The corpses of the people flowed down the overflowing river.

The time of destruction.

In the midst of a crumbling kingdom, in some December, a girl was born.

Amethyst\*\* of the Baron House.

\*\*Jaa Soo-Jeong's name has the hanja for 'Amethyst' and Soo-Jeong means crystal in Korean.

Born with special eyes, she was the Lady of Baron Jaa Soo-Jeong.

She blossomed by absorbing all the last nutrients of the rotting kingdom and was beautiful.

“Purple eyes.”

Some nobles praised her eyes as [hard to forget once seen]. Others criticized harshly, saying there was [almost nothing notable about her other than her unusual eye color].

Her delicately brushed hair flowed down slightly whenever she turned her head.

“Her hair is platinum, almost divine. It captivates at first glance. But that too is a luxury allowed only from afar.”

There were those who excessively praised her.

“Getting closer, the hands are captivated before the eyes, and I unwittingly reach out. In the brief moment I extend my hand, time willingly stops. She turns to look at me. Clearly. Very clearly. And then I realize. I have grasped her wrist.”

Lady Amethyst was expressionless.

“She’s mute and seems like an idiot at first glance.”

Was she expressionless since birth?

Her long eyebrows never seemed to have frowned.

“A mere attention-seeker.”

“Doesn’t know how to be nervous.”

“A natural on stage.”

The year Lady Amethyst turned seventeen.

That year, the rumors were incessant. Stones rolled on their own, the river water boiled for no reason, and dry thunder struck the capital twenty-six times. There was a drought in spring and a rebellion in autumn.

There was also a rumor about the young Lady.

“Already the talk of the social world, albeit hush-hush -.”

That year, the Lady took over the position of the family head, succeeding her dead father.

“It’s no secret that Lady Amethyst killed her own father.”

And in front of the nobles who spread such rumors, Lady Jaa Soo-Jeong smiled. As usual, her expressionless face bloomed like a bright flower, and the socialites couldn’t help but admire her. A voice almost musical flowed from her angelic lips.

“---Acting all high and mighty. Damn it.”

Lady Jaa Soo-Jeong of the Amethyst Barony.

The girl was the craziest in the two-thousand-year history of the kingdom.

# Chapter 211: That God's Possession (1)

---

There was an incident that widely recognized Jaa Soo-Jeong as a lunatic.

At that time, the kingdom was plagued by serious conflict between the humans and the non-humans. A magician known as the Black Witch led a terrorist organization, slaughtering the humans. On the opposite side, a group called [Stone's Gathering] butchered the non-humans.

Retaliation and revenge. Resentment and anger.

The cycle of slaughter and butchery meant that the hatred between races had no chance to cool.

“The distinction between humans and non-humans must become stricter!”

The conservative nobles of the kingdom did not stay idle.

“Esteemed colleagues of the Noble Assembly! The current chaos in our kingdom is due to the indiscriminate mixing of humans and non-humans, morality and immorality, civilization and uncivilization. According to current marriage laws, marriage between humans and non-humans is permitted. Not only that, even same-sex marriage and incest are legalized! All relics of barbarism from hundreds of years ago. How can we hope for peace in the world when things that shouldn't be mixed are mixed? With great regret, our faction proposes the 7th [Integrated Marriage Law].”

"....."

Baron Jaa Soo-Jeong watched the Noble Assembly and smiled faintly.

“How interesting.”

That month, a family war broke out in the Baron Jaa Soo-Jeong territory.

When war between families was officially declared, a third party couldn't intervene rashly. The family that fought the Amethyst Barony was the Citrine Barony. Originally one family, they had split six generations ago.



Baron Hwang Soo-Jeong\* declared war by surprise.

\*Hanja of her name means 'Citrine'.

He had a reason.

The kingdom was in the midst of destruction. And slightly faster than that, Baron Jaa Soo-Jeong was also falling apart. When [Lady Jaa Soo-Jeong] murdered her father and became [Baron Jaa Soo-Jeong], loyal vassals and people from previous generations all left.

"I didn't want this."

Baron Hwang Soo-Jeong strung his bow.

In their childhood, Hwang Soo-Jeong and Jaa Soo-Jeong were as close as sisters. They were even kidnapped together by terrorists. Now recalling those distant days, Baron Hwang Soo-Jeong made a sad face.

"I'm sorry, Soo-Jeong."

“There’s no need to apologize. Sister.”

Baron Jaa Soo-Jeong smiled brightly.

“I wanted it this way.”

The forces of Baron Hwang Soo-Jeong suffered a crushing defeat.

The reports received by Hwang Soo-Jeong were all manipulated.

Baron Jaa Soo-Jeong's house was falling apart, but Baron Jaa Soo-Jeong herself was a genius of the era. All the vassals had left, but new vassals were appointed instead. A great magician who had been holed up in a room for the past 60 years suddenly became Jaa Soo-Jeong's close confidant, a fact Hwang Soo-Jeong didn't anticipate.

The price for being an incompetent noble was high.

“I don’t care if I die.”

Baron Hwang Soo-Jeong's face was resolute.

“But please spare my vassals. Their only crime was following me.”

“That’s an interesting thing to say.”

Baron Jaa Soo-Jeong beheaded the captured enemy vassals one by one.

“Because I plan to do the exact opposite.”

When the head of the third vassal rolled, Baron Hwang Soo-Jeong's knees also gave way. The resolute face had long crumbled. She belatedly realized that although she had braced for war, she had not prepared for defeat.

“I’m sorry. No, I apologize. Please spare the vassals... They did as I ordered upon my rock-like foundation and surrendered when I was captured. I beg you... please.”

“There is one way.”

Baron Jaa Soo-Jeong whispered into the ear of her distant cousin sister.

“I’ll formally request a noble trial. Follow what I say there.”

Nobles from the capital gathered at the trial.

The verdict on the family war was delivered. The fault was clear to anyone. Baron Hwang Soo-Jeong's house had declared war first and shot the first arrow. And they were defeated.

The conservative faction raised suspicions that the reports had been manipulated.

But there was no evidence.

The only witness was a vassal of Baron Hwang Soo-Jeong, but regrettably, he couldn't attend the trial. He was one of the three vassals whose necks Jaa Soo-Jeong had just cut.

“The victory of Baron Jaa Soo-Jeong's house is recognized.”

The judge from the southeastern region spoke with a short tongue.

“From now on, all property and people of Baron Hwang Soo-Jeong’s house are to be owned by Baron Jaa Soo-Jeong.”

“All decision-making power lies with me, including the life of Baron Hwang Soo-Jeong.”

“That’s correct.”

“What do you say, sister?”

“...Yes.”

Baron Hwang Soo-Jeong, tied with ropes, bowed her head.

“I’ll generously spare the remaining vassals. In exchange, swear to entrust your life, your fate, everything to me.”

“You already possess everything I had... I will comply with whatever you demand without hesitation.”

The nobles in the audience clicked their tongues.

The declaration of war by Baron Hwang Soo-Jeong was instigated by the conservative faction.

Baron Jaa Soo-Jeong, watching the nobles with bitter faces, smiled broadly.

“Then marry me.”

"....."

Baron Hwang Soo-Jeong raised her head.

“If so, I will forgive you.”

The conservative nobles opened their mouths.

“Your Honor? I will file for marriage. Please grant permission.”

“Wait a minute.”

The judge put a hand to his forehead.

The Judicial Inquisitor’s mind raced.

All laws are proclaimed by royal command or established by a vote in the Noble Assembly. Marriage law is part of the Assembly law. And all Assembly laws are recorded in the General Protocol of the Assembly, a hundreds-volume record more like bricks than books.

The judge remembered all the records accumulated over 2,000 years.

“...In the 5th marriage law, marriage between relatives was permitted, and there’s no need to go as far as the 6th law since there’s enough distance in blood relation. Same-sex marriage, which was illegal in the 3rd law, was permitted in the 5th law... Marriage registration between nobles requires the presence of other nobles.”

The judge looked around.

The nobles were still gaping in the audience.

“It’s fulfilled. The public certification... I can do it.”

The judge nodded.

“Is there anyone here who objects to this marriage?”

No one spoke up.

“The family war officially ended with Baron Jaa Soo-Jeong's house legitimately winning, with no doubts raised. All acquisitions have been reported by Baron Jaa Soo-Jeong's house, and in this process, the treatment of Baron Hwang Soo-Jeong was entrusted to Baron Jaa Soo-Jeong. Baron Jaa Soo-Jeong, holding all ownership rights of Baron Hwang Soo-Jeong, married Baron Hwang Soo-Jeong.”

Only then did the nobles recover from the shock and start murmuring.

But it was too late.



“The marriage is approved.”

It was both a same-surname and same-sex marriage.

The political significance of this event was clear. It was a big ‘fuck you.’

The conservative faction realized they had been screwed over by an 18-year-old noble, who until recently was a lady and had just become a baron.

It didn’t take long for the world to know Jaa Soo-Jeong was a lunatic.

+

[Madness Syndrome]

Rank: A-

Effect: A curse bestowed by a dragon. Those who possess this skill ‘cannot go mad’ no matter what happens. Even if

subjected to mental attacks and psychic magic, this person cannot be driven insane. This individual is always self-aware, knowing where they are, when it is, and who they are.

A curse invented by a dragon who fell in love with a human to protect the fragile human mind. According to legend, the dragon's lover went mad because they couldn't go mad.

\*However, once acquired, this skill can never be released.

+

Baron Jaa Soo-Jeong and Baron Hwang Soo-Jeong merged households.

Baron Hwang Soo-Jeong lost her title and became Madame Hwang Soo-Jeong. Baron Jaa Soo-Jeong, by absorbing her wife's title, ascended to Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong. The house that split six generations ago became one again.

“That crazy bitch!”

The conservative faction wouldn't just stand by and watch.

Dozens of noble lords grinded their teeth.

“You really are a madwoman.”

Even the faction opposing the conservatives didn't just watch idly.

Dozens of vulgar nobles acknowledged Jaa Soo-Jeong as a breath of fresh air.

“But do you have any other talents besides being mad?”

Duke of Apathetic Leisure\*.

\*Muhi Shik means ‘A state of being unconscious and unaware of one's actions or state’. The hanja for her name means something along the lines of ‘leisure’ or ‘effortless sustenance’.

One of only six in the world and a great noble responsible for all the artists in the kingdom, also known as the Leisurely Duke, showed interest in Jaa Soo-Jeong.

As implied by her role in nurturing artists, she too was not quite sane.

“I’m generally good at everything.”

“There have been 133,643 people who have said that to me so far.”

Duke of Apathetic Leisure was an Ascended. In this world, humans who overcame [Trials] and received the dragon’s blessing were granted eternal life. However, the dragon’s blessing wasn’t omnipotent and couldn’t save someone from a madman’s swinging blade.

The Duke of Apathetic Leisure was always cautious when walking the streets. Thanks to that, she hadn’t been stabbed to death in the last thousand years. That level of caution was necessary to play the role of a duke in the kingdom.

“Duke, Your Excellency.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong bowed her head.

“Isn’t life unbearably boring for you?”

“Oh. That sounds plausible. There have been 517,570 people who’ve said that to me.”

“You raise artists, Your Excellency. But even if an artist can overflow rivers and tear apart glory with their skill, they can’t save you.”

“Why?”

“Because for them, art is more precious than Your Excellency.”

The Duke of Apathetic Leisure felt that this little one was worth more attention.

“What are you talking about?”

“Artists with less talent than Your Excellency will worship you. But no matter how much they revere you, their art is insignificant, so they can’t save you.”

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong felt her prey approaching the trap.

“Artists with more talent than Your Excellency won’t care much about you. So no matter how supreme their works are, their gaze won’t be on you, so they can’t save you either.”

“Hmm.”

“You are fated to be beyond anyone’s reach. If this is your fate, Your Excellency, you are destined only to unrequitedly love and love again. There is only one way for you to save yourself.”

“By raising you?”

“Yes. I will create a masterpiece for Your Excellency. My wedding was indeed interesting, a long-awaited rain in Your Excellency’s life. Leisurely Duke. Wouldn’t you want to have someone by your side who can turn life into an art form?”

“20,351 people.”

“I have more talent than Your Excellency.”

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong turned away.

In Duke of Apathetic Leisure's heart were instruments. [The Grave of Instruments], the Musical Tomb. The duke collected the instruments of his favorite musicians upon their death, storing them until another favored person was born.

Jaa Soo-Jeong approached the piano and played.

It was a piano that had been in Musical Tomb for over 1700 years.

+

[Music of the Capital's Three Delights]

Rank: A-

Effect: Innate talent for composition and performance. Those with this skill are loved by music. Distant sounds connect, and the first and last notes on the sheet are instantly comprehended.

You discover the rhythm unique to stream water, autumn leaves, and babbling children among the indiscriminate noises of nature.

You are a tyrant.

By your mere existence, people will now recall your melodies when they hear the sound of a stream. Just as the croak of a frog is defined as ‘ribbit ribbit’ and the sound of clock hands as ‘tick-tock,’ human anger, despair, joy, and everything in the universe will be dominated by your music.

Blessings to the one who will become a queen.

\*However, daily, consistent practice and training are necessary.

+

The piano performance ended.

Duke of Apathetic Leisure nodded.

“750 people.”

“I am beautiful. I possess unparalleled talent. I will receive



everyone's admiration and recognition through my music, my works, my life. Yet still, I will dedicate my glory to Your Excellency, and finally, Your Excellency will hold everything in the world in your grasp."

"102 people."

The Duke of Apathetic Leisure yawned.

"Even if all your words prove true."

She leaned on her throne.

"It means you were astronomically lucky to be born so well, and to harbor such favorable feelings towards me, making me the very, very fortunate protagonist of luck."

The Leisurely Duke's gaze was indifferent.

Her eyes, rotten by time over a thousand years.

"Me becoming such a rare protagonist of luck would indeed

make me love the world's coincidences and fate. Is that the final destination you're leading me to?"

"Similar, but different."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong shook her head.

"You don't need to love anything, Your Excellency. Just my love alone will be enough, and eventually, someone else, another someone, another person will occupy Your Excellency's heart. That day. Finally, Your Excellency will accomplish what you've been postponing for a thousand years."

"What have I postponed for a thousand years?"

"Suicide."

"....."

"I will help Your Excellency commit suicide."

Somewhere, a droplet fell.

Duke of Apathetic Leisure was silent.

Dead instruments littered her grave.

“You dragged your father into the woods and killed him.”

“Yes.”

“I want to kill you.”

“Yes.”

“But I also want to keep you alive.”

“I know.”

Duke of Apathetic Leisure took out dice from her pocket.

“I’ll see your fate.”

Duke of Apathetic Leisure rolled the dice for major decisions. Her power was established on the fact that she unconditionally adhered to the outcome of the six-faced dice.

Years ago, after suppressing a count's rebellion, the Duke of Apathetic Leisure decided whether to massacre the prisoners with dice. An odd number came out, and twenty thousand prisoners died.

People thought she was mad, and the Duke of Apathetic Leisure thought so too.

“If an odd number comes up, I’ll kill you. If it’s even, I’ll keep you alive.”

“If a 6 comes up, please care for me. For any other number, kill me.”

“That’s for me to decide.”

The Duke of Apathetic Leisure threw the dice.

The dice rolled, turrur, on the wooden floor of Musical Tomb.

+

[The One Loved by the Dice]

Rank: SSS

Effect: Heavenly luck.

+

The Duke of Apathetic Leisure looked at the value revealed by the dice.

Jaa Soo-Jeong didn't look.

She kept her gaze fixed on the kingdom's powerhouse, the one who could protect her from the conservative faction's attacks, and shield her from any political onslaught.

“Have I now become the only person in Your Excellency’s life?”

Since that day.

Jaa Soo-Jeong was known as [Muhi Shik's Pet].

# Chapter 212: That God's Possession (2)

---

A nation in ruins.

Jaa Soo-Jeong was racing through the decaying kingdom.

"Rampage as you wish."

She had gained the favor of the Duke of Apathetic Leisure, one of only six nobles in the kingdom. She was under the protection of a powerful patron. Nothing could stop her now.

The girl pointed her sword towards the era.

[Act 1.]

[Witch Hunt.]

The first boss was a non-human terrorist.

The Black Witch led the rebel group 'Red Nails'.

Originally, the Black Witch was a top-ranking wizard in the Wizard Tower, an elite among elites. Why had an elite, who was neither non-human nor human, suddenly turned into a fierce terrorist? The world didn't know.

"It's not that they don't know, they just choose not to."

The Black Witch sneered.

"When you live long enough, you see a lot. You put children in rice sacks and kicked them to death. Hundreds of thousands of non-humans were enslaved. I don't expect a change of heart from you now. It's more unrealistic to expect a miracle from humans than from gods. We just..."

The rebellion of [Red Nails] shook the entire kingdom.

"It would be great if you all suffer."



Noble ladies in the capital were kidnapped and tortured. A powerful noble who had reigned supreme in the south for 700 years was attacked and killed during his journey. Special forces directly under the royal family went missing in the southeast. Thousands of slaves in the Viscount region escaped and joined the rebels.

Without discrimination against social status, nobles or commoners, [Red Nails] tortured and slaughtered humans. Though there was a bounty on the Black Witch, no one could catch her. The powerful were terrified.

"How interesting."

Jaa Soo-Jeong smiled brightly.

"Let me make it even more interesting."

Jaa Soo-Jeong used Duke of Apathetic Leisure's connections to approach a princess. The cruel princess, leader of the royal special forces, known for her brutality.

Collecting the right arms of criminals as a hobby.

"I will bring victory to you, Your Highness."

Jaa Soo-Jeong seduced the princess.

"I'm aware that Your Highness is troubled by the Red Nails."

"It's more of a toothache than a headache."

"The reason the teeth wobble is due to rotten gums, Your Highness."

Jaa Soo-Jeong whispered.

"The reason the non-humans are restless is because the kingdom hasn't been a support for them. Only a few among the non-humans are blinded by revenge and commit massacres. If we assure them of life and equality, the power of Red Nails will naturally diminish."

+

[Royal Advisor]

Rank: B+

Effect: Innate strategic genius. Wisdom in assisting a monarch.

One who possesses this skill instinctively identifies the enemy's weaknesses and devises actions to exploit them.

A true material for the throne. Rare are the strategies that this person cannot see through, from politics to warfare.

\*However, it activates only with sufficient information.

+

"....."

The princess looked silently at the noble who had approached her.

"Your proposal is reasonable but difficult to implement. They've already turned their backs on the kingdom once. If we

embrace them back as citizens, the humans and nobles won't stand for it. We can't risk the backlash of humans to stop a non-human rebellion. It's putting the cart before the horse."

"How dare I suggest Your Highness to embrace these lowly people?"

Jaa Soo-Jeong did not rush.

The princess had lost dozens of siblings in her youth. Although famous for her cruelty, her brutality stemmed from the harshness of her childhood. Jaa Soo-Jeong instinctively knew how to melt the unhappiness conceived in her early years.

"I'm a noble too."

Jaa Soo-Jeong decided to become a sister-like figure to the princess.

"A noble can take someone as a retainer, a private soldier, or even as a territorial citizen. Your Highness doesn't need to personally embrace the rebels."

Warm eyes. A compassionate smile. Gentle touch.

Jaa Soo-Jeong slowly corroded the cruel princess.

The poison was sweet when melting ice.

"Your Highness."

She listened quietly when life was lamented.

She stroked her hand when there was frustration.

Jaa Soo-Jeong often whispered how great the princess was and how much more dangerous the kingdom would have been without her.

".....Jaa Soo-Jeong."

When the place Jaa Soo-Jeong stroked changed from the hand to the shoulder, from the shoulder to the forehead, and from the forehead to the cheek, the princess was already calling Jaa Soo-Jeong [Jaa Soo-Jeong], not [Viscount].

"Tell me your plan."

"It's simple. Red Nails is a fragmented organization. I'll lead an elite team and crush their hideouts one by one. With each crush, I'll take the surrendered ones as my retainers or territorial citizens. I'll embrace those abandoned by the kingdom on your behalf."

"You'll step in for me, attracting attention and discontent."

"Yes."

"What can I do for you?"

"Love me."

The poison was sweet.

".....In private."

And fatal.

Under the favor of both the Duke of Apathetic Leisure and the cruel princess, Jaa Soo-Jeong absorbed the non-human rebels. She guaranteed 'absolute safety' to the surrendered terrorists. Former terrorists became soldiers, citizens, and slaves of the Amethyst House.

"That crazy bitch is at it again!"

Of course, the conservative faction couldn't tolerate such behavior.

"This person stirred trouble in my territory as a commoner. Return him to me!"

"A few years ago, my brother was killed by a runaway slave during a business trip. He lost both eyes. I heard that slave is now a retainer of the Viscount. I'll compensate you well, please hand over the prisoner."

"How dare you privately shelter national enemies. If you have loyalty to the kingdom, you should properly dispose of the captured rebels!"

Lords, merchants, and priests from all over the kingdom swarmed like bees.

Jaa Soo-Jeong just smiled.

"Putting on airs."

Jaa Soo-Jeong was strong.

"Regardless of their past, they are now my retainers, my slaves. By the law of the kingdom, I hold ownership over them. If you still want to take them away, challenge me to a duel or declare a clan war."

She won all three duels and one clan war.

She didn't give up a single non-human under her command.

+

[Guardian of the non-humans]

Rank: B



Effect: You easily gain the trust of non-human races.

Those suffering from racial discrimination are longing for your arrival. Break the chains of old slavery and liberate the kingdom's people. As long as you don't betray them first, the non-humans will follow you.

\*However, humans despise you.

+

Initially skeptical, the non-humans gradually dispelled their doubts about Jaa Soo-Jeong.

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong established a village in a vast forest near the capital, providing the former terrorists of [Red Nails] with shelter and jobs. With each crushing of a [Red Nails] hideout, her village prospered.

"....."

The Black Witch made her move.

"Yes, I knew you would eventually act."

Jaa Soo-Jeong lured the main force of [Red Nails] using the princess as bait. They were surrounded from all sides. The terrorists had nowhere to run, and even if they did, the future of the organization wasn't guaranteed.

The Black Witch gnashed her teeth.

"Impudent brat... Well done."

"You were quite something too. Incompetent old fool."

"You think killing me will destroy Red Nails? We are the blood that flows from wounds. As long as your kingdom exists, we will never perish."

"I'll try my best."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong swung her sword.

"I plan to create a new noble faction. It may take decades, but

I will abolish slavery, gradually liberate serfs and farm servants. I already have the support of the Performance Faction and the Non-Human Faction. Simple, isn't it?"

"Ha."

The Black Witch bled black blood.

"You're just a naive child who knows nothing."

"Wow. What a baseless accusation! If I know nothing, then 99.99% of the world's population are monkeys."

"We don't seek retribution or compensation. No matter how peaceful an era you promise, the dead will not return."

Blood filled the witch's eyes.

"There are children who died from whipping and slashing. Slaves who broke their ribs and lungs from torture and drowned in their own blood. You may not know, but we remember. Mad dog of the capital! If you can't bring back the dead, everything you say is just bullshit, just like a dog's barking!"

"....."

Jaa Soo-Jeong hesitated.

Her violet eyes looked down.

Under her pressed sword, the Black Witch's heart was pierced, bleeding out.

"You don't seek compensation...?"

It was a fresh shock for someone like Jaa Soo-Jeong.

"I can abolish slavery? It will take some time, but I can also resolve the discrimination between humans and non-humans. I'm capable enough for that. Isn't that the future you desire? Are you saying it doesn't matter?"

"We never cared about the future from the start."

The Black Witch launched her final magical counterattack. As soon as magic was detected, Jaa Soo-Jeong twisted the

sword's tip. Crunch! The heart was shattered again. The Black Witch coughed up blood.

"Die."

"....."

"All of you, just die."

Jaa Soo-Jeong felt truth in the witch's curse.

"Indeed."

And she realized.

"I'm utterly incapable regarding deaths that have already occurred."

For the first time since the day she killed her father, Jaa Soo-Jeong felt helpless.

"I can do something for those still alive. The Duke of Apathetic Leisure treasures me, and the princess cherishes me too. But... Yes, I can't resolve the unhappiness of those already dead. I hadn't thought of that."

"....."

"I'm still incompetent."

The Black Witch looked up at Jaa Soo-Jeong.

"What should I do, leader of Red Nails?"

"Do what..."

"How can I take responsibility for those already dead? How can I comfort those who live for the dead?"

Jaa Soo-Jeong's eyes were transparent.

Endless.

In her dying moments, the leader of Red Nails realized something.

"Don't you know?"

"....."

"You don't know."

Of course, Jaa Soo-Jeong nodded.

"That's why you went around killing the wrong people."

"You..."

"Murder is the ultimate incompetence. Killing because you can't persuade, killing because you can't convert, killing because you can't control. Just like I killed my father, who imprisoned me."

Jaa Soo-Jeong's expressionless face was reflected in the witch's eyes.

"I couldn't change my father even after 12 years of trying."

Gone was the girl who sought love from the duke and gave love to the princess. Not a trace remained. Only a beast eternally moaning in agony.

"How boring."

Jaa Soo-Jeong tilted her head.

"Black Witch, if you don't know how to care for the dead, might there be someone else who does? Do you know such a person?"

"Such a human... couldn't possibly exist..."

"Indeed. There might not be among humans."

Jaa Soo-Jeong nodded.

"Perhaps among the dragons, someone knows."



In her final breath, the leader of Red Nails came to know.

"Thank you, Black Witch. Thanks to you, I realized my incompetence today."

The Viscount, seemingly broken in some fatal way, bowed politely.

"Sadly, I can't resolve this incompetence for a while. Most Dragon Emperors live outside the kingdom. Hmm. Yes. I must learn the Dragon Tongue first."

Jaa Soo-Jeong smiled brightly.

"Just wait a little. I'll first repay the Black Witch after learning how to care for the deceased."

"Monster..."

"Farewell."

Jaa Soo-Jeong ended the witch's life.

"Awaken to a happy spring waiting for you."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong instantly became a hero.

All but one of Red Nails' leaders surrendered to her. Those tired of terrorism retreated to her forest village, while those still thirsty for blood became her soldiers. The kingdom was falling apart. Even without the conflict between humans and non-humans, battlefields soaked in blood were everywhere.

Jaa Soo-Jeong collected the kingdom's poisons.

Known as 'Duke of Apathetic Leisure's Pet,' 'The Cruel Princess' Master,' 'The Hunter of the Black Witch,' 'The Successor of Red Nails,' her titles were too illustrious to be dismissed as mere luck for her young age.

But compared to the names she would acquire, they were modest.

"Hello, Golden Dragon."

A year after the witch hunt.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Jaa Soo-Jeong, head of the Amethyst Viscount House."

She bowed gracefully.

Behind her stood numerous warriors.

The 'poisons' she collected over the past year.

[Capital's Supreme Sword] Ultimate Sword Duke, [Capital Army Leader] Viscount Shark Teeth, [Executioner] Baron Yoo Ik-Mo, [Last Leader of Red Nails] Joo Tan-Ha, [Undying Phoenix of the Inner Palace] Princess Nan Rak-Je, [Flower of Viscount Amethyst] Viscount Sim An-Chal...

Those who once dreamed, desired, hastened, welcomed, or ignored the kingdom's downfall. A formidable force that could overturn the kingdom stood behind Jaa Soo-Jeong. Their swords were stained with blood - blood of soldiers who leaped to protect the dragon.

"Though it might be rude to ask upon our first meeting."

Jaa Soo-Jeong smiled brightly.

"Do you happen to know how to care for those who've already died?"

That day.

Jaa Soo-Jeong captured a dragon that lived for thousands of years.

[Act 2.]

[Dragon Emperor Hunt.]

# Chapter 213: That God's Possession (3)

---

The Golden Dragon lived in a colossal tower.

Known as the Sky-Piercing Spear for its height, and the Golden Heaven Tower due to its golden pavilions. Its oldest name was the Yellow Spring Tower, for it overlooked Nirvana from the earth.

Seven thousand years had passed since the Golden Dragon built the tower. Through seven overlapping millennia, the gold remained brilliant. In the ancient past and even now, the Yellow Spring Tower stood sacred, like a lifeline from heaven.

In the southeast of the kingdom, the tower was visible from everywhere. It had been there long before the kingdom was founded. Its mere existence became a faith. People revered the mysteries of the world.

Even after seven thousand years, the pavilion in the sky remained unchanged.

“I decree a hunt.”

Yet, humans had changed.

“All nobles, hear this.”

The humans, once slaves to dragons, had now established their own nation.

“Organize a hunting party. Lords, send your soldiers. This is a royal command.”

The dragons had thought of humans as foolish and weak, their short lives making it hard to maintain continuity in their nation.

Humans might have been slow, but they were not foolish enough to forget who once enslaved them. The kingdom made it a national policy to eradicate all dragon territories from the surface.

“The military quota for each title is as follows: Dukes, a thousand. Viscounts, two hundred. Barons, fifty. Honorary Viscounts...”

Hundreds of thousands of troops gathered.

Yet, the hunts failed solely due to the Golden Dragon's powers.

Every dragon is born with a unique power. The Golden Dragon's power was [Instinct]. It unleashed human greed in its rawest form.

Brave warriors entering the Golden Dragon's domain were consumed by murderous rage. Innocent soldiers were swallowed by lust. Adventurers, once calling each other brothers, fractured over loot. The 1st, 2nd, 3rd hunting decrees all ended in the kingdom's army retreating in disarray.

It had always been so, and it was expected to be the same this time.

"....."

The Golden Dragon gazed at the girl before it.

Was her name Jaa Soo-Jeong?

She resembled a flower bud about to bloom, with a faint toxic fragrance seeping through its petals, which the dragon could sense.

“Why do you remain sane?”

“It’s simple. I already live according to my instincts.”

Said the flower-like girl, adeptly speaking in the dragon's tongue.

“I’ve taken what I wanted, done as I wished, and killed for my survival. If following one's instincts makes one a madman, then I’ve been mad for a long time. Golden Dragon Emperor, you cannot turn a madman sane again, especially one who’s already mad.”

“There’s sense in what you say.”

The Golden Dragon looked over the humans behind the girl. Dozens stood silently while Jaa Soo-Jeong spoke.

“However, that’s only your story. Why then do they too remain sane?”



“Hmm, that is strange, isn’t it? Why is that?”

Jaa Soo-Jeong smiled.

“Why don’t you try to guess, Golden Dragon Emperor?”

"....."

The dragon looked at the humans again.

There was nothing wrong with its power. The humans were panting heavily, fists clenched as if they wanted to kill and ravish someone at any moment. Their faces red with desire. They were silent, yet their bodies swirled with passion.

One commonality stood out.

An emotion stronger than lust or bloodlust governed them.

The Dragon Emperor, adept at reading emotions, quickly identified it.

“Indeed.”

It was [Fear].

“They are all afraid of being hated by you.”

“Yes.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong’s smile bloomed.

“I am loved, after all.”

The Golden Dragon understood the truth and shuddered.

These humans were boiling with lust and bloodlust, yet the fear of [disappointing Jaa Soo-Jeong] and the possibility of being hated by her suppressed all other emotions.

Even the fear of death.

The dragon had to ask.

“Love?”

This?

“Yes.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong affirmed.

“People often say they love themselves. That they love themselves the most, as if it’s obvious. What kind of love is that?”

Jaa Soo-Jeong hummed, her voice weaving a melody.

“Very few truly love themselves to the point of being unbearable. It’s rare. When people say they love themselves, it means [I don’t want to lose]. Not wanting to lose this life, this moment, this existence.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong slowly extended her left hand.

“Then, fearing to lose me is also a form of love, isn’t it?”

"....."

“Ultimate Sword Duke?”

Upon her call, a duke approached and knelt, kissing her fingertips.

The Duke, an Ascendant over two thousand years old, was undoubtedly the kingdom’s strongest swordsman. Even then, it seemed perfectly natural for such a duke to kneel before her.

“Rather than losing me, they would sacrifice their own lives. To them, I have become such a being.”

“The Netherworld Tower, once deemed impregnable, was conquered by love. How typical yet intriguing. What do you think? Isn’t it amusing, Dragon Emperor?”

In that moment, the Golden Dragon realized who was the stronger one and who the weaker.

“.....I want to live.”

The Dragon Emperor trembled.

“Spare me. ....Please.”

The dragon had assumed a human form. Atop the pavilion was a garden, and in its center, a fountain. Made of gold, the Dragon Emperor pleaded at the fountain, its trembling creating ripples on the water's surface.

“Of course.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong stroked the dragon's chin.

“I will save you. Such a beautiful being you are.”

“Please.....”

“However, you haven't answered my question yet. The method to care for those already dead. Do you know it, Golden Dragon Emperor?”

“I don’t know. But, I know others who might. They are Dragon Emperors too. I will give you their names and locations. So...”

“Yes.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong’s touch was gentle.

Understanding everything.

“There have been three hunts to conquer this place. The most recent was 20 years ago, with about 100,000 casualties. Including the uncounted, nearly 200,000. The royal family and nobles will swarm like bees to strike your neck.”

"....."

“Don’t worry. I will handle it.”

Splash. The water in the fountain distorted.

The Golden Dragon's hair spread and fluttered on the water's

surface.

“There’s just one condition.”

“What is it.....?”

“Love me.”

A drop of water fell somewhere.

+

[The Golden Dragon's Gaze]

Rank: EX

Effect: Those within the skill's range become engulfed in their instincts. Logic paralyzes and reason dulls. Suppressed desires, needs, and greed are liberated.

This skill reveals the ‘essence’ of its targets. It can be applied not only to living beings but also to objects. If desired, you can perceive the essence of all things. You will view the world from an omniscient perspective.

\*However, you are also included in the skill's range.

+

The Golden Dragon became a pet of Jaa Soo-Jeong.

“There’s a dragon called the Earth Bone Dragon beyond the mountain range in the desert.”

For the first time in its life, loving a partner, the dragon dedicated everything to her.

The Golden Dragon used its power for Jaa Soo-Jeong. It recited knowledge and pledged its future life for her. Aware of the doom that befalls a dragon in love with a human, yet its knowledge weighed less than her lover's blinking eyelids.

“The Earth Bone Dragon?”



“Yes. It possesses the power of immortality. Everything it touches turns to sand, and every life it grasps gains eternal life. A bit unorthodox, but...”

“Hmm.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong laughed.

“That’s interesting.”

The dragon felt happy.

+

[Earth Bone Dragon's Skull]

Rank: SSS+

Effect: Stores the memories of the living. Stored memories are kept in a 'box.' This box can only be destroyed by the owner of this skill.

As long as the box remains intact, you can repeatedly produce bodies of individuals inheriting the same memories. The bodies can roam the world, accumulating new experiences, which can then be 'updated' into the box. Of course, only if you permit it!

Even if the body of the individual is destroyed, the box remains unharmed. Bestow the privilege of immortality on those around you.

\*However, memories of a destroyed body cannot be updated into the box.

+

The Earth Bone Dragon soon became Jaa Soo-Jeong's pet.

“Perhaps the materials are still a bit lacking.”

The Golden Dragon and Earth Bone Dragon nuzzled against Jaa Soo-Jeong's lap. Jaa Soo-Jeong slowly stroked the golden hair of the Golden Dragon and the black hair of the Earth Bone Dragon. Each touch on their foreheads made the dragons tremble.

“I’ve gained the [Eyes] that see everything. I’ve also acquired the [Head] that stores memories. But it’s still insufficient to encompass even those who have already died. Is there no better method?”

“At the end of the great river.....”

The Golden Dragon opened its lips.

A sweet breath flowed out.

“There’s a child called the Ice River Dragon. Where it lives, harsh cold storms rage. The flowing wind turns to snow, and the surging sea to ice.”

“Interesting. Tell me more.”

“The Ice River Dragon freezes people it fancies in a special way... into ice pillars. These pillars can't be destroyed or melted by anyone except the Ice River Dragon. Amazingly, when the Ice River Dragon melts the ice pillar, the person trapped inside comes back to life as if they had just blinked their eyes.....”

“So?”

“The Ice River Dragon has the power to stop time.”

The Golden Dragon rested its head on Jaa Soo-Jeong's lap and looked up at its half-owner.

“If it can stop, it can accelerate. If it can accelerate, it can be controlled. Isn't that right.....?”

Jaa Soo-Jeong smiled sweetly.

“How adorable.”

The dragon felt even happier.

+

[Ice River Dragon's Breath]

Rank: EX

Effect: You can control the time of a chosen person. You can revert them to the past or stop them in the present. You can move them to any moment in the timeline you've observed.

\*However, you cannot move them to a time you have not personally observed.

+

The Ice River Dragon became Jaa Soo-Jeong's pet.

“Ah.”

All the materials were finally gathered.

At last, Jaa Soo-Jeong exhaled in relief.

“Nice.”

The dragons were happy under her breath.

“I’m happy too.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong herself was also happy.

Perhaps.

[Act 3.]

[Kingdom Hunt.]

At this point,

There was no political power that could stop Jaa Soo-Jeong.

There were six Dukes in the kingdom, each leading six factions. The Performance Faction following the Apathetic Leisure Duke. The Pioneering Faction following the Absolute Sword Duke. The Religious Faction following the All Gods Duke. The Inner Capital Faction following the Inner Duke. The Medical Stone\* Faction following the Steadfast Duke.

\*Refers to chinese needle medicines.

All six Dukes were 'loved' by Jaa Soo-Jeong.

Despite the unprecedented situation of a Viscount owning dragons, the nobles couldn't openly oppose her.

If the royal family had deemed Jaa Soo-Jeong dangerous, there might have been a chance. After all, who else but the royal family could restrain a rampant noble?

The current King was known as the Sun King.

Having reigned for over 90 years, he hadn't attended a single noble council in the last 60 years. During a rebellion 60 years ago, the Sun King executed his own daughter.

In a kingdom where kinship had to be killed to exist, the Sun King found no value.

Where there was no value, he saw no reason for his existence.

The King secluded himself.

In the 60 years of his seclusion, the kingdom decayed.

“Your Majesty.”

The fragrance of petals is strongest when they wither.

“Please heed my request.”

“Do you regret killing your daughter?”

“Revolts happened because I ruled the kingdom. No matter the policy or politics, somewhere in this land, someone inevitably becomes a sacrifice. The more politics are exercised, the more sacrifices are made. It’s the same for anyone, and it was the same for me. So, wouldn’t it be better to do nothing?”

“Let the wise exercise their wisdom. Let those who desire power obtain it. Your Majesty only needs to exist here. If that’s the only royal path you can take.....”



Jaa Soo-Jeong sat at the base of the throne.

Reaching out, she gently caressed the cheek of the King, who hadn't shown any expression for the last 60 years.

“Leave everything to me.”

The aroma of peaches filled the audience chamber.

“I quelled the Red Nail's riot, which no one could suppress. I stopped the Assembly, which no one could. I crushed the rebellion led by the retreating royals in the southeast. I revived the abolished Royal Army, toppled the Golden Dragon threatening the southern kingdom, collected the Earth Bone Dragon eroding the great desert's territory, and captured the Ice River Dragon freezing the eastern waterways. The Apathetic Leisure Duke, Absolute Sword Duke, All Gods Duke, Inner Duke, and Steadfast Duke, once decaying, now have beating hearts again thanks to me. Look, I've accomplished tasks no one else could.”

“I am competent.”

“I am the most competent.”

"....."

"So, Your Majesty."

The whisper of the era's genius was sweeter than the praises of a thousand flatterers.

"Entrust it to me."

Her violet eyes half-opened.

"Afraid of misgoverning? Misgovern, and I will correct it. Afraid of making mistakes? Make them, and I will reverse them. Afraid of going mad? It's okay. Go mad."

"Just lose yourself to me."

For the first time in 60 years, the stone statue spoke.

"Why."

The once-praised Sun King of the kingdom was puzzled.

“If you are so competent, the kingdom is useless to you. If you can give everything to the kingdom, the kingdom can give nothing to you. Why do you seek my favor? I can give you nothing.”

“With all due respect, Your Majesty, you are under a misconception.”

“What is it?”

“I am in audience with Your Majesty.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong gently rose from her kneeling position.

Her gaze met the monarch's.

“What I desire is Your Majesty. Just as you have always dreamed of an infinitely competent being, I long for Your Majesty.”

"....."

"Become my Dark Monarch."

Their breaths intertwined.

"I will make you the Sage of the Era."

The statue crumbled under the peach scent, and the sun was mesmerized by the petals.

In the midst of crumbling and bewitchment, the King asked one last question.

".....I've already committed great sins. Too many have died. I don't deserve to live as a sage, so should I remain a dark monarch and atone in history? Just as the dead can't be resurrected, the spilt sins cannot be reversed. My death and a new ruler would be better for you."

"Ah."

It was the same curse once spilled by the witch.

Back then, Jaa Soo-Jeong had no answer.

“It’s okay, Your Majesty.”

Now, it was different.

“I can now care for those who have died.”

She had become a bit more competent.

“Not just for the dead, but for all beings.”

“How.....”

“Entrust everything to me.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong smiled coquettishly.

“Just love me.”

That December.

Jaa Soo-Jeong was bestowed the title of Duke.

The seventh Duke in the kingdom's history and the youngest ever awarded.

The Kaleidoscope Duke.

In the kingdom, it was customary to abbreviate a Duke's title to two characters\*\*. The Ultimate Sword Duke was the Absolute Sword Duke, and the Duke Min Shik was the Apathetic Leisure Duke. Similarly, the Kaleidoscope Duke was often called by the two characters created by the people, rather than the three bestowed by the King.

\*\*They abbreviate the 3 letter Korean titles to 2 letter Korean titles.

The Swaying Duke.

A Duke who tilted the nation.

# Chapter 214:

## Someone's Master (1)

---

My master.

My heart. My blood.

My everything in this world.

---

Drip-

Somewhere, the sound of water dropping could be heard.

As the droplets fell, it was as if they weren't plunging to the earth but leaping into eternity. Drip. Drop. During the brief moments when the sound of water echoed, gravity seemed to evaporate, and only time flowed languidly.



"....."

I suddenly raised my head. It was only when I did that I realized I had been bowing my head all this time.

Since when had I been doing so?

What time is it now?

I'm not sure.

[Warning.]

[The target's ego is unstable.]

"Ugh."

I reflexively pressed my temples.

My head throbbed painfully.

The sensation of undigested vomit floating in my cerebrospinal fluid.

"Baron Gu Won-Ha?"

Just then, a soft voice was heard.

"Are... are you alright?"

Struggling, I opened my eyes and looked to the side.

A child with rabbit-like white hair was looking at me with worried eyes.

I should not know this person, yet why?

My lips easily pronounced her title.

"Yes. I am alright..... Your Grace, the Marquis."

Marquis Baek Seol-To.

Merely sixteen years old this year.

Due to the sudden death of the previous Marquis, the mantle of responsibility fell on her too-young shoulders. According to the stories circulating within the family, there was even talk of her being a disgrace at one point.

If it wasn't for the care of the Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong, she might have been assassinated unnoticed...

[Warning.]

[The target's ego is unstable.]

[Trauma re-enactment will continue.]

Ziiiing-.

‘Ugh!’

Once again, my head felt like it was splitting apart.

I hastily raised my magical power. Crushing and chewing the bitter taste in my mouth, I recited a poetic phrase inside.

"Stability---together with---alleviation."

One phrase to stabilize the mind. Another to alleviate pain. And a connecting word. Upon activating a three-phrase magic spell, my headache slowly subsided.

‘Phew.’

I let out a sigh of relief.

There was no time to compose a sophisticated poem, so I hastily cobbled together some words, but fortunately, it was effective. At times like this, I truly feel like one of the top twelve mages in the kingdom.

"Are you really alright? Your face is very pale."

".....There is nothing wrong with me. Thank you for your concern."

"Really? You're sure you're not feeling uncomfortable anywhere?"

Marquis Baek Seol-To checked on my condition several times. Even as I reassured her, I coldly diagnosed any signs of abnormality in my head.

‘There's a problem recalling memories.’

The headache was gone. But there was a peculiar discomfort in my memory.

‘Could it be psychic magic?’

It's an unlikely possibility.

Magic that affects the minds of others is almost non-existent in the history of the kingdom.

Moreover, this place is the Grand Council Hall of the Platinum Tower.

A place where all the nobles of the kingdom gather for heated discussions.

The guards mobilized to protect the council were dazzling just to look at. The royal knights formed a formation so tight not even an ant could get in. If someone were to attempt any foolish acts here, even if they were the Dragon Emperor or Ashin, they would lose their heads.

‘Perhaps it's just fatigue.’

I activated a light spell.

If the problem is blurry memories, then I'll just revive them.

"Information---Baek Seol-To---restoration."

For some reason, the phenomenon of losing my memory felt familiar. It wasn't unfamiliar. I had even prepared a plan in anticipation of such situations.

My meticulous preparations surfaced before my eyes.

+

[Baek Seol-To]

Status: Noble. Marquis of the Capital.

Relation: Viscount's foster sister.

Danger Level: White.

Note: Head of the Rabbit Marquis Family. Lost her parents at a young age. Educated as an heir by her grandfather, Marquis Baek Mi-To.

Unlike her famous genius grandfather, Baek Seol-To was infamous for being a fool since her young lady days. At the age of 12 in winter, she whipped a child of a freeman to death. The reason was 'hating to see a peer crying happily with their family'.

It's presumed that her grandfather's education was quite strict. She was neither loved nor praised. Currently, she maintains a composed demeanor but craves the love and praise she missed from the Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong. She perceives the Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong as both a mother and a sister.

An ally.

No need to kill.

Strengths: [Self-awareness], [Strong ethics], [Connections], [Capital]

Weaknesses: [Freeman murder], [Child murder], [Guilt], [Helplessness], [Goodness], [Temporary regression to infancy], [Extremely low self-confidence]

Caution: Many nobles are living as dependents in the Marquis's house. Assassination is difficult.

+

"....."



As I was about to feel relieved after acknowledging the information.

I blinked, feeling an odd sensation.

‘Hmm.’

Indeed, something was off.

‘Did I have such an ability?’

Most likely, the information that appeared before me were notes I had recorded myself. Traces left by my past self. Looking at them should bring a sense of déjà vu like, [Ah, I wrote that], but.....

‘This is strange.’

Instead of déjà vu, the feeling of unfamiliarity only grew stronger.

Even as I thought about it at this moment, my mouth felt

uncomfortable, as if there was a fishbone stuck between my teeth.

‘What's this?’

Wondering if I was under some mental distortion, I checked with magic, but as expected, there was nothing wrong... Wait a minute. Magic? Being one of the top twelve mages in the kingdom? Me? No. I don't use such vulgar language. I should speak more politely, befitting a noble.....

[Warning.]

[The target's ego is being eroded.]

.....That's right.

Why have I been using informal language until now?

Magic is the craft of refining language into objects. One must always be careful in handling language, at any time and place.

Even if it's just mumbling to oneself, always positioning oneself lower ensures not forgetting the awe of this world. I am certain I have walked the path of magic with such a mindset.

‘I must regain my composure.’

A thousand words accumulate to form a hundred habits.

A hundred habits accumulate to solidify into ten patterns of behavior.

And these ten patterns of behavior determine one's life.

As a mage serving the Viscount at close quarters, I must not take even a single word lightly.

"What's the matter? It's noisy."

While I was gathering my thoughts, another figure approached.

Marquis Baek Seol-To recognized her and bowed first.

"Ah. Viscount Chun Heuk-Shin..."

"You have arrived."

I too bowed my head.

"It's the last break time today. Wouldn't it be better to rest a bit more in the lounge?"

"Resting in the lounge isn't really resting. Even if I just sit there, other nobles from different factions keep glancing over."

Viscount Chun Heuk-Shin let out a wry smile.

"It feels like they can hardly contain their desire to lash out at us. I'd feel better if they just openly hurled insults... I should've stayed in the council room like the Marquis."

"Ah. So, the atmosphere is a bit...?"

"Mm."

"Are members of the Banseok faction giving you a hard time?"

"Banseok faction, Naekyung faction, Religious faction, it doesn't matter the faction. They all look at us as if we're criminals. Sad to say, it's not entirely wrong."

I quietly listened to the conversation between the Marquis and the Viscount.

Both of them are senior members of our Geoulyeop faction.

Especially Viscount Chun Heuk-Shin, who holds the position of chairperson. A crucial role within the faction. Consequently, the Viscount also receives a lot of favor from me.

.....

Hmm.

Undoubtedly a favored noble, it seems.

Yet, for some reason, I don't remember her.

Hesitantly, I cast an information spell.

+

[Chun Heuk-Shin]

Status: Noble. Viscount of Near Capital.

Relationship: Viscount's lover.

Danger Level: Blue.

Note: Head of the Black God Viscount Family. The family that rebelled 20 years ago. The rebellion was suppressed by the Leisurely Duke, sent from the capital. At that time, Viscount Chun Heuk-Shin was the only survivor of the family.

Due to this event, Chun Heuk-Shin lost all her family and retainers. Swore vengeance against the Leisurely Duke and the kingdom, showing no mercy.

Disappeared on her own, joining under the wing of the Black Witch, leader of the rebellion.

Received the teachings of the 'Ritual of Darkness' from the Black Witch. The exact method is unknown, but for this ritual, more than 300 people were devoured by Chun Heuk-Shin.

Just before the ritual's completion, she was captured alive by the Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong.

Later, she fell to being a plaything for Leisurely Duke and Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong but regained her sanity after six months and was freed. However, her eating habits have not changed, and even now, the Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong occasionally provides her with 'feed.'

An ally.

Cannot be killed.

Strengths: [Genius], [Strong mental power], [Ascendant]

Weaknesses: [Descendant of rebels], [Cannibal], [Former criminal], [Music]

Caution: Has a highly competent assassin as a retainer.

+

"....."

Still feeling that odd sensation.

I understand the information, but it's as if I'm reading someone else's notes.

‘But why did I write something like [cannot be killed]?’

Similar phrases are also in Marquis Baek Seol-To's information. Hers says [no need to kill]. This makes it seem like I'm a madman deciding whether people can be killed or not.



I have a normal sense of ethics.

At least, that's how I perceive myself.

It's difficult to understand why such phrases were written.

"Of course, on a day like today, we can't just sit around lamenting."

Viscount Chun Heuk-Shin sighed and patted my shoulder.

Suddenly, an unpleasant emotion brushed through my mind.

‘How annoying. I wish she'd limit her familiarity. This person is always eager to show we're in the same boat. A murderer, no less. It's pitiful seeing someone who only feels alive when mingling with their kind. Well, if she wants to find her kind, she should start searching in hell after falling there. She clings to me because she doesn't want to fall into hell. Such a nuisance.’

.....

Huh?

What?

What was I just thinking?

“Hm? Baron Gu Won-Ha, you look unwell. Are you feeling sick?”

“Y-yes. You've been looking unwell since earlier. You should really rest in the lounge, Baron.”

“.....No.”

I barely managed to open my mouth. Words I hadn't even thought of flowed out on their own.

“We've already been given five breaks. Resting any more would be meaningless. The remaining issues are core to our faction, so I'd prefer to stay here as much as possible.”

“Indeed.....”

Viscount Chun Heuk-Shin seemed to understand me somehow.

“Today is indeed a historic day. The kingdom is welcoming a new duke for the first time in a thousand years. I too have mixed feelings.”

Viscount Chun Heuk-Shin turned her head.

Marquis Baek Seol-To and I naturally followed her gaze.

“---Amethyst, seems happy.”

In the center of the council hall.

There sat a blond noble.

No, it's more accurate to say 'reclined' rather than 'sat'. The noble was leaning her cheek on a throne with her buttocks barely touching the floor. And on the throne, the king smiled, stroking the noble's head.

To anyone watching, it was an image of a tyrant and her consort.

Showing off affection in the middle of the sacred council, conservative nobles might lament the downfall of the country.

Viscount Chun Heuk-Shin commented.

"Many nobles fled to the lounge, unable to bear watching that scene. I jokingly asked if they didn't find the loving sight pleasant, and they all turned serious. Such stuffy people."

Are you having similar thoughts to mine right now?

Thinking alike with a murderer... I should get my brain washed.

As I pondered how to cleanse my skull, I looked at the blond noble, the most precious person to me.

"Information---Amethyst---restoration."

Then words appeared before my eyes.

Compared to others, an exceedingly concise sentence.

Yet, the most accurate words were engraved in the air.

+

[Amethyst]

My master.

My heart.

My blood.

My everything in this world.

+

"....."

Eh?

‘My master isn't that person.’

At that moment, my mind cleared.

‘My heart's master is Raviel. What's all this?’

No, my mind became clear.

The fog in my mind vanished in an instant.

‘Who's Baek Seol-To? Who's Chun Heuk-Shin? Where is this place? What's with these honorifics? Mage? Gu Won-Ha? Baron? What's this, like some lord saying hello?’

I opened my eyes wide as if waking from a nightmare.

‘I'm Kim Gong-Ja. Kim Gong-Ja. The King of the City of Ascension. The Moon of the Ivansia Ducal Family, the Vice-Lord of the Demonic Cult, the Companion of the Earth Spirit Tribe!’

Finally, the voice of the Tower was heard.

[The target's ego is being restored.]

[The target's ego has remained intact.]

[Trauma re-enactment will continue!]

# Chapter 215:

## Someone's Master

### (2)

---

"Ugh."

I clutched my forehead. Applying pressure with my fingers, I pressed against my temples. This eased the headache and my consciousness gradually sharpened.

‘That's right. I am currently within a [Trauma].’

This place is another world. No, rather, it's a play reassembled to mimic some world.

The actors are unaware that they are actors, and the props do not know they are just props, but everyone here is essentially a part-time worker hired for this play.

‘This is the [Trauma of Jaa Soo-Jeong].’



I had been observing Jaa Soo-Jeong's life for some time.

How talented she was born. How she broke through political offensives in unbelievable ways. How she befriended someone, how she gained power, and even how she eventually snatched the authority of the dragons....

‘The tower was built by the power of dragons.’

Now, I can say this with certainty.

‘It's not built by a single power. Powers handling [Essence], [Memory], [Time]. Maybe even more than that. Dragons of different kinds. A comprehensive system formed by overlapping numerous dragons' powers.’

Thump.

A heart, not mine, beat in rhythm with me.

‘I am the first person to unravel the structure of the tower!’

Responding to my excitement, even within this Trauma, the tower's voice gladly acknowledged my discovery.

[Congratulations. You are the first to discover the structure of the tower!]

[If you accurately describe the powers (skills) sustaining the tower's structure, an additional bonus will be awarded.]

[Can you specify the four fundamental skills that make up the tower?]

I wiped the sweat from my forehead.

‘Jaa Soo-Jeong captured three dragons.’

Recalling the scenes I witnessed, I murmured in my mind.

‘One of them is the Earth Bone Dragon. A Dragon Emperor with the power to [store memories]. When someone approaches the Earth Bone Dragon, their memory is stored in a box.’

I thought about the power of the Earth Bone Dragon.

‘And the [size] of this box is not fixed.’

+

[Earth Bone Dragon's Skull]

Rank: SSS+

Effect: Stores the memories of the living. Stored memories are kept in a 'box.' This box can only be destroyed by the owner of this skill.

As long as the box remains intact, you can repeatedly produce bodies of individuals inheriting the same memories. The bodies can roam the world, accumulating new experiences, which can then be 'updated' into the box. Of course, only if you permit it!

Even if the body of the individual is destroyed, the box remains unharmed. Bestow the privilege of immortality on those around you.

\*However, memories of a destroyed body cannot be updated into the box.

+

I thought.

‘People living outside can enter the tower at any time.’

In contrast, those who enter the tower leave everything behind, entering with nothing but their physical bodies.

Like me. Like Marcus Callenbury. Like the Director.

Like all other people.

‘The only thing you can bring into the tower is [yourself].’

Meaning.

‘What if the tower is one giant box?’

I snapped my fingers.

‘And we are the contents inside it?’

At the moment of entering the tower, [my memories] are stored in [the giant box called the tower]. And, leaving their memories in the tower’s care, they wander around the world inside the tower.

‘This way, the tower completely seizes all the information of everyone who enters.’

The more I thought, the more certain I became.

‘This explains why I could regress 4000 days!’

Every time I go back a day, the tower I belong to is restored to a [data restoration point] of that day. Repeating this 4000 times, the tower regressed to a data restoration point 4000 days in the past.

However, during this process, due to the skill, only my data was 'updated' in the tower.

-Implement data restoration to a point 4000 days in the past.

-(Due to the skill) Maintain continuity for the character Kim Gong-Ja.

That's why I was able to regress without losing my memories.

'Okay. Then the tower is one giant memory box. Our memories are not in our brains, but in the tower. This place is a grand library that stores memories! No, a grand library of souls. This is one of my deductions about the tower's identity. How about that!'

The tower's voice promptly responded.

[Correct.]

[The tower acknowledges your breakthrough of the first gate.]

[The box of the Earth Bone Dragon forms the periphery of the tower.]

Okay.

‘Moving between worlds must follow a similar principle.’

I moved between the world of [Tales of Sormewin Academy] and [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon].

That movement, strictly speaking, is closer to 'transmission'.

‘The challenging part is, how did [Tales of Sormewin Academy] and [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon], like us, get incorporated into the tower?’

I furrowed my brow in deep thought.

Yet, I couldn't imagine it.

‘Really, how can a world be moved into the tower? Unless it's recreated.’

I frowned.

‘Recreated?’

My heart throbbed.

‘That’s right. Is there a need to physically shove the entire world into the tower? Isn’t it enough to implement a world exactly like [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon] within the tower? After all, my memories are also recorded in the tower. Same goes for the world; just record its time in the tower.’

That could be possible.

It was far easier to imagine than physically shoving a world into the tower.

‘But...’

There are still two unresolved issues.



First, the box of the Earth Bone Dragon [stores memories of the living]. That's how the skill is described. Whether a world is alive or dead is another matter, but it's a bit much to say a world itself is a [living being]. It's unlikely that a world would decide on its own to enter the tower.

Second, not to mention--- the personality of the tower's owner.

"....."

The Tower Master turned her head to look at me, her eyes glowing with youthful mischief,

Violet pupils.

A color too mundane to reflect anything. When facing her, one must look beyond the color of her eyes, stripping away the faint white hue, barely reaching her gem-like pupils.

Her eyes felt like a snake opening its maw to swallow mine whole. Impossible. The distance between our seats and the throne was quite far. Yet, despite that, it felt as if Jaa Soo-Jeong was looking at me from just in front of my nose.

“There’s an interesting smell coming from over here.”

From a distance, Jaa Soo-Jeong pursed her lips. She opens them. Pronounces. But her words seem to approach right in front of my nose and mess with my ears.

‘Aura sound.’

I gulped down my saliva. How did she figure out that I set my consciousness time to 0.1x? Jaa Soo-Jeong precisely matched her aura to my speed. The original owner of this body must have been an archmage genius. But Jaa Soo-Jeong was a monster.

“What interesting thing are you planning to show me, my second advisor? My advisor from behind the scenes? Advisor Gu Won-Ha is so interesting that he comforts my boring life with his mere presence, one of the few nectar-like existences for me. Is there something particularly entertaining?”

“.....I was contemplating the structure of the tower, Viscount.”

[The target's ego is antagonized.]

[Continuing the trauma re-enactment!]

I tried to speak in the manner of a noble, but my lips and tongue moved on their own. I became a genteel noble, aligning my hands neatly in front of me.

“The structure of the tower?”

From a distance, still flaunting affection with His Majesty, Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong tilted her head.

“Are you talking about the structure of the Platinum Tower? Ah, well. It's certainly an interesting structure. It was a building used by the dark lord even before the kingdom was founded, and because of that, it was designed to allow dragons to pass through easily, with its tall and wide structure....”

“It's not this tower.”

“Hmm? Then what? The Tower of Petition? Ah, the Netherworld Tower that I recently conquered?”

“I was thinking about the structure of the [tower] you will establish, Viscount.”

"....."

At that moment, Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong stood up from below the throne.

“Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong?”

The King, seated on the throne, seemed slightly flustered as he looked up at Jaa Soo-Jeong.

“I apologize, Your Majesty. I have something to discuss with my faction ally...”

“Hmm. Understood. Take your time.”

“Your grace is immense. For every second I am not with Your Majesty, I will extend it to ten seconds in my heart, so when I return, my heart will already be intensely yearning for Your Majesty.”

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong turned around.

Step.

Her attire was slit on both sides, with a long skirt trailing behind her, leaving a trace of fabric wherever she passed. It was a dress worn with the sole purpose of symbolizing [the king's concubine], not just a noble or a future duke. With the power and connections she had, she could demand such attire even in this sacred council chamber.

“Now, Advisor Gu Won-Ha.”

The noble with the strongest power in this council chamber filled with all the nobles.

She was my master, and I was her vassal.

While other nobles called me by the kingdom's official title of [Baron], only Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong called me [Advisor], a position within the family.

“If my ears did not sprout skewers, I am sure I just absurdly heard the word [tower]. Ah. Marquis Baek Seol-To and Viscount Chun Heuk-Shin, could you please step aside for a moment?”

“Ah, yes. Viscount...”

“Understood, Master.”

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong bent down and kissed Marquis Baek Seol-To on the forehead. Her face reddened with happiness as she laughed and quickly left the seat.

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong extended her left hand to Viscount Chun Heuk-Shin. She knelt down as if it was natural, kissing and licking her fingers, then left the seat with an indifferent expression of satisfaction.

"....."

“She’s adorable, isn’t she?”

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong covered her mouth with her sleeve and chuckled softly.

“So, about the tower. Advisor. As far as I remember, I have never discussed the concept of the tower with you. I haven’t spoken to anyone about it. So, I am a little confused right now. Don’t tell me, do you have the ability to foresee?”

“.....No, Viscount. I do not have the power of foresight.”

“That’s expected. There’s only one person in the kingdom who can see the future, the God’s Eye Prophet, who is practicing celibacy in the desert. That guy, even though he is a man, why is he so obsessed with protecting his virginity? [If I lose my virginity, the world will end], he said with such a serious face last time. Does it make sense, Advisor? You’re just trying to get rid of me with lies, right?”

“.....”

I listened attentively to the Viscount's words, my hands neatly aligned.

The Viscount naturally talks a lot, splitting a conversation into two, a hundred, a thousand branches once she starts. The best thing to do in such cases is just to wait for her to come back to the point herself... which the owner of this body knew.

“Ah. Anyway, about the tower.”

Just like now.

“If it’s not foresight, then mind reading? That would be harder than foresight. You know, Advisor, my mind is currently protected by at least four layers of barriers. The place where I am conceptualizing the tower is within the first layer, my innermost part. Even Jai would not know it.”

Jai is the real name of the Boundary Duke.

Only one person in this kingdom could casually call the Boundary Duke by his real name, the Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong standing before me. She’s also the only one who didn’t lose her head for saying his name.

The Boundary Duke has the ability to read people's minds, so it was natural for her to suspect [how could you know the plans in my innermost heart, which even the Boundary Duke couldn’t read?].

“Viscount.”

“Yes, my Advisor. My Advisor, though always the second, hoping to someday hit the predecessor from behind and become the sole advisor.”

“What about reversing our thoughts completely?”



“Oh? The complete opposite?”

“I didn’t foresee the tower [in advance], Viscount. The tower is already completed, and according to the logic of that tower, we are [belatedly] experiencing this situation now.”

"....."

Her violet pupils widened significantly.

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong looked around left and right, then tapped her lips with her left index and middle finger.

“Wow.”

It took just that long for Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong to organize her thoughts.

“That’s awesome.”

"....."

“Let's verify, Advisor. Are you from the future? In other words, did you come from a future where I have already built the tower and am successfully managing it?”

“That's correct.”

“But that's impossible. Even if the tower is built, you would never know about the [tower]. In this world, the only people who know about the tower's existence are the Golden Dragon, Earth Bone Dragon, Ice River Dragon, Viscount Sim An-Chal, and lastly, the God's Eye Prophet. No one else could possibly know. ....Hmm?”

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong stroked her chin.

“Indeed.”

And she smiled slightly.

“You are not Advisor Gu Won-Ha, are you?”

"....."

"You must be someone else possessing Advisor Gu Won-Ha's body. Hehe. Hmm. Indeed, such things do happen. Interesting."

".....Yes. I am not this person. I am Kim Gong-Ja."

"Not from this world, right? I could bet an arm and a leg on that."

"Yes. Correct. I am... a hunter from a tower named City of Ascension."

"Hunter? Ah, so they decided to go with that name. City of Ascension. Does it have a name in the outside world too?"

"Well. Um. I've heard some constellation call it the Pinnacle World, but...."

"....."

Hearing the term Pinnacle World, her purple eyes narrowed strangely.

“It seems it’s not entirely a coincidence.”

“Huh?”

“It’s nothing. Ah, I said it’s nothing, but I’m just trying to flip your insides out of sheer curiosity. This makes your curiosity seize both ventricles of your heart, causing it to flutter, right? The heart is healthiest when it flutters. I’ve just gifted you health, so you should be thankful to me.”

"....."

I understood.

This person talks a lot.

Not just a lot, but really scratches at one's nature.

“So, how did a human from inside the tower come to such a past? It’s so fascinating, almost unbelievable for me.”

“I didn’t come from the future, Viscount.”

“Meow?”

New information. The tower owner sometimes mimics a cat's meow.

Such a useless piece of information.

“This isn’t the world of the Viscount. Nor is it my world.”

“Then what is it?”

“This place is just a reenacted dream. Recreated memories. Viscount. Right now, I am in your trauma.”

"....."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong blinked.

“How?”

“I have a skill. Whenever someone kills me, I can glimpse into the trauma of the person who killed me. That's the kind of skill it is.”

“That sounds interesting. If someone had proposed creating such a skill, I would have readily welcomed it with open arms. But, Mr. Kim Gong-Ja. Saying this place is my trauma means [I killed Mr. Kim Gong-Ja], doesn't it?”

Slowly.

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong's head tilted to the left.

“That's almost impossible. Unless Mr. Kim Gong-Ja is a world germ... an evil deity among otherworldly evil deities, I have no intention of killing anyone from another world. Rather, if other people kill me, I die.”

“The Pinnacle World.”

I mentioned the world where the Director lived, where Kim Yul lived, where I lived, and where a middle schooler named Jaa Soo-Jeong lived.

“There, someone just like the Viscount existed.”

"....."

“I asked that person to kill me. Not for any other reason, Viscount. But to meet you.”

Silence.

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong stared at me intently. Complete expressionlessness was there. She let out a “Hmmm,” let her breath flutter, and finally nodded, “Indeed.”

“That’s interesting.”

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong reached out and gently touched my cheek.

“Quite. Very interesting.”

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong smiled brightly.

“How you managed to reach here, threading through a string of nearly impossible coincidences and errors, turning them into a possibility. No. Rather, how you summoned me to this place, you probably can’t quite grasp the reality of it. But, I commend you, Mr. Kim Gong-Ja. You have achieved a miracle.”

"....."

“Yes. So today is my [trauma]. Well, it’s plausible enough.”

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong's breath came closer to my face.

“So?”

"....."

“Hero who has broken through the miracle, what do you wish to do here?”

“I... want to know what kind of person you are.”



I swallowed.

“The person who built the tower... I want to know what kind of person you are, who decided to build the tower. That’s why I came here.”

“Haha.”

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong's eyes half-closed.

“How adorable.”

Then she slowly released my cheek.

“Alright. Feel free to observe what kind of person I am until you’re satisfied. The person you’re possessing is Baron Gu Won-Ha, my advisor. Since it’s the role of Advisor Gu Won-Ha to follow me anywhere and everywhere, there’ll be no suspicion for you to continue being with me.”

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong turned to look at me.

“Now, follow me, Mr. Kim Gong-Ja.”

And she extended her hand.

“I’ll introduce you to my world.”

# Chapter 216:

## Someone's Master

### (3)

---

This place is where the trauma is reenacted.

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong, walking in front of me, is, so to speak, no different from a character appearing in a dream. I've been through quite a few nightmares, but Jaa Soo-Jeong is the first to be [aware] that she's a character within a trauma.

“Do you feel strange or anything?”

“Huh?”

“Well, why. You don't really exist, right? This is the trauma created by my skill...”

“Not particularly? If there's any strangeness I'm feeling right now, it's that you, Mr. Kim Gong-Ja, are using the face of

Advisor Gu Won-Ha and speaking with her voice, but in your own manner of speaking. It's really weird."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong chuckled.

"Are you a man or a woman, Mr. Kim Gong-Ja? Considering the naming conventions of the Pinnacle World, I'd guess you're a man."

"Yes, I am a man."

"Figured as much. Then, I'll gift you a mirror."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong pulled out a small hand mirror from her pocket and reflected my face in it.

The mirror showed the face of the person I was possessing, namely Baron Gu Won-Ha.

"How is it?"

"....."

“Pretty, right? I know. Of course, it is. After all, she is my advisor.”

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong laughed teasingly.

However, the face of Baron Gu Won-Ha was no mere joke.

‘Beautiful.’

Her jet-black hair fell short to her shoulders. Even when light shone on it, her hair didn’t gleam or glisten with oil. It was just black. As if refusing to allow any light to slip through, Baron Gu Won-Ha’s bob cut glistened in a stark black color.

“Wow... um, ugh.”

In stark contrast to her black hair, her skin was pale white. People often say someone has a blank face, but her entire body seemed like a white sheet waxed over. She was a person made of only two colors: black and white.

“Fascinating...”

“How does it feel, Mr. Kim Gong-Ja, to have turned from a man to a woman? Is your heart racing? I was hoping you’d show me that cliché scene here, where you touch your chest with both hands and exclaim, ‘I’ve really become a girl!’ in surprise.”

“Why did I have to possess this body...?”

I cast a spell of information on myself.

Soon, a description of Baron Gu Won-Ha followed.

+

[Gu Won-Ha]

Status: Noble. Honorary Viscount.

Relationship: Advisor to the Viscount.

Danger: Black

Note: Head of the Gu Won family. During her ladyship, her uncle, the former family head, was implicated in the Black-White Plant War and deposed. Her father was associated with heretical sects and was purged along with them. All senior members of the family died. Gu Won-Ha reluctantly took over as head of the family.

It was a time of rampant rebellion and purges.

During this period, Marquis Si Bang-Pae, a close friend, approached her. They asked her to take care of a baby born to the leader of the rebels. Baron Gu Won-Ha accepted the rebel leader's daughter and secretly raised her as her own.

The daughter, along with Marquis Si Bang-Pae, secretly organized an army. When this army was exposed, the kingdom ordered its annihilation. This led to Marquis Si Bang-Pae's execution.

Baron Gu Won-Ha was stripped of her baronial title and demoted to a commoner. Despite being a fourth-tier magic user, she was expelled from the Magic Tower.

Having nothing, she wandered the streets and was kidnapped by the terrorist organization [Red Nails]. For over nine years, she was confined and abused in their hideout.

Then.

She met the Viscount.

Strengths: [Clear Judgment], [Execution Ability], [Second Ascension Being]

Weaknesses: [Rebel Successor], [Origin in Rebellion], [Party to Rebellion], [Family of Rebel Leader], [Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong], [Daughter]

+

She really had a tumultuous life.

“So, originally from a noble family, but three of them got entangled in rebellions...?”

“Ah, you're looking at the information notebook created by the advisor. Yes, that's correct. Uncle, father, herself. All three were conspicuously entangled in rebellions. What's funnier is, do you know what?”



“What is it...?”

“There’s a daughter listed as belonging to the advisor, right? Originally the daughter of a rebel leader, but reluctantly taken in due to Marquis Si Bang-Pae’s request. That girl eventually grows up to lead a real rebellion.”

“Shit?”

“The situation’s fucked up, right? I’ve never heard of such a family. I thought the entire family had a rebellion fetish.”

“With my father being a rebel, my daughter a rebel, and even myself implicated in a rebellion, how am I still maintaining my noble status?”

“Surprise?”

“That makes no sense!”

“Oh wow. There are two types of people who think the impossible is possible. One is a complete idiot. The other is a person in power. I’m a person in power, so I restored the noble status to Advisor Gu Won-Ha.”

"....."

"Understand?\*"

\*Jaa Soo-Jeong said this in english.

"Viscount, you know English..."

"Yes. I can roughly converse in German, English, French, Korean, and Japanese. It's trendy in the outside world to cross into other worlds, right? Conversely, here, it's trendy to host people from other worlds. I learned a bit of language from a teacher from another world."

"Oh. Then, are there English or French people living in this world?"

"No."

Click.

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong closed the hand mirror.

At the same time, the flickering letters before my eyes vanished.

“They all died. Except for one person.”

"....."

“At the moment of excitement thinking, ‘I’m going to have a fun adventure in another world!’ people realize that no matter where you go, the world is still the world, and death is still death. Knowing the knowledge of the other world, outsiders have to be quickly confined or killed, right? We have a lot to protect.”

"....."

“Anyway, let's end the grim talk here. Snap.”

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong put away the mirror, and this time, pulled out a cup. Where did that come from? I wondered what kind of physical space was hidden in her pocket.

“Mr. Kim Gong-Ja, please spread your arms for a moment. Make sure your body is visible.”

“Like this?”

“Yes. Now, this isn’t an ordinary cup, it’s made of rock. That’s why this trick is possible.”

For some reason, Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong pushed the cup towards my body.

Thump.

The cup entered my body.

“Huh?”

“Hm.”

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong stirred the cup inside my body. After a moment, when she pulled her hand out, the cup was full of water.

“!?!?!?”

“How about that? Pretty amazing, right?”

“What, what, what is this!”

“For your information, it tastes incredibly good. This water. It's so refreshing it could slap the face of even top-grade pure water.”

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong drank the water taken from my body. I was utterly baffled by the incomprehensible phenomenon before me.

“Phew... Refreshing. This is why I can't go around without my advisor.”

“Baron Gu Won-Ha is an Ascendant. An Ascendant. In this world, there's a law called Ascension, where those who overcome trials become [people who can do a bit more]. Most importantly, they receive the grace of [not dying even if they die once].”

“Not dying even after dying once...? What does that mean?”

“Just as it sounds. When an Ascendant dies once, they just

become tiny. If they die again in that state, that's when they truly die. No more miracles occur, and they die just like any ordinary person."

"....."

"But amazingly, in the kingdom, there are a few who have ascended beyond Ascension. Beyond heaven. Those who have stepped onto the second heaven!"

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong dramatically gestured and grabbed my hand.

"That is you! Baron Gu Won-Ha! In this vast world, one of the very few, extremely rare, second-tier ascendant mages is you, Baron Gu Won-Ha!"

"...I understand I'm extraordinary. But why does water come out when you put a cup into my body?"

"Second-tier ascendants start to depart from humanity. You can think of them as becoming somewhat divine. For instance, my first advisor had a core of [fire], so she could just burn down a city like a phoenix if she wished. On the other hand, my second advisor, Baron Gu Won-Ha, her core is [water], and very pure and cool water at that."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong softly stroked my cheek with her index finger.

“How ironic that the two pillars supporting me happen to be fire and water. I must have been born under a lucky star?”

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong applied the water droplet on her fingertip to her lips.

Her already pink lips shone even more with the droplet sliding down.

"....."

“My exclusive lip balm. My exclusive washbasin. My exclusive restroom. To ensure I always maintain a fresh scent as if I just stepped out of water, Baron Gu Won-Ha is at my service. Unfortunately, we can't use the bathtub today. Because of you, Mr. Kim Gong-Ja.”

That's right.

I fully understood.

‘Baron Gu Won-Ha is Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong’s protector, advisor, and one of the incredibly rare second-tier ascendant archmages in this world. Despite being a person from a heinous family that instigated rebellion over four generations.’

Baron Gu Won-Ha loves Jaa Soo-Jeong.

‘The water constituting my body is only used to please and comfort the Viscount.’

In other words, the master of Gu Won-Ha is Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong.

Whether it's good or bad for Gu Won-Ha, there were countless others who also served Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong.

As soon as we entered the lounge, numerous nobles and their servants crowded around.

“Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong!”

“About the matter we discussed last time, for casting your affirmative vote...”



“The situation in Baron Sinnoa’s domain is still dire, how will the royal family address this...”

“I have secured the meat as instructed, in cooperation with the Royal Palace. It was easy to obtain since you said even rotten meat would do. Viscount, where should this be...”

Bustling.

It was as if every matter in this world needed to be consulted with Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong, judging by the crowd’s chatter.

Jaa Soo-Jeong responded to each with a bitter smile.

“Yes, here’s my signature.”

“For Baron Sinnoa’s domain, we won’t just send a new lord. The kingdom is showing deep interest in the void areas around the domain. The Minister’s office will provide support, so don’t worry too much and just wait.”

“Good job. Transport the meat to the Royal Palace as it is. Not to the Inner City, but store it somewhere close where it can be brought to the Assembly Hall at any time. I’ve already

spoken to the Palace Head Maid. The maids and attendants there will help you.”

Those who had made requests all expressed their gratitude or apologies before rushing off somewhere else.

The other dozens of nobles in the lounge had been silent the whole time. Many looked at Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong with dissatisfaction.

“Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong is busy saving the kingdom even today. Amazing. Anyone would think she’s at least a Duke, not just a Viscount. How caring she is towards her people...”

“Count Ah Ru-Ho.”

Viscount Chun Heuk-Shin had already returned to the lounge. Centered around her, dozens of nobles, part of [Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong’s Faction], were seated, sipping tea.

“No matter what anyone says, the noble who has achieved the most remarkable feats this year is Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong. She deserves corresponding rewards and treatment.”

“Normally, the one who kills the most is the boss in war. Don’t the nobles even know that?”

“Ha. The leader is vulgar, so the subordinates are the same. How dare a mere honorary Viscount interrupt a Count's conversation?”

“Want to challenge me to a duel? Go ahead.”

I checked the information whenever people from Jaa Soo-Jeong's faction spoke.

“Just today, I've been soaking my feet in water for 13 hours in that meeting room. 13 hours. It's tough for you, me, and all of us, so why bother our Party Leader, who's the most exhausted? Want a beating?”

+

[Dae Ha-Ran]

Status: Noble. Honorary Viscount.

Relation: Student of the Viscount.

Danger Level: White

Note: Former Platinum General of the royal army. Led the vanguard 60 years ago during a major rebellion and quelled the rebels. There were 60,000 casualties combined from both armies. Including civilians, it was 210,000. However, when it was revealed that the rebellion itself was a ploy by the royal family, the royal army was disbanded, and Dae Ha-Ran became jobless.

Dae Ha-Ran argued that it made no sense for the kingdom to be without a royal army, claiming that leaving national security to the private armies of nobles only awaited destruction. She planned to conduct extreme violent protests to highlight the need for a royal army... but was preemptively stopped by Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong.

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong took Dae Ha-Ran as her youngest student, but is having a hard time because Dae Ha-Ran just doesn't get it.

Ally.

Can be killed.

Strengths: [Survival], [Martial Arts], [Combat], [War]

Weaknesses: [Mass Murderer], [Pillager], [Impatient], [Dumb in Everything But War]

Caution: Currently a guest at the Marquis Baek Seol-To's house.

+

And then.

I slowly started to notice.

“Wait, hold on. Aren't you all getting too heated?”

A nobleman with a gentle demeanor played a string instrument.

“Today is the day when His Majesty the King personally attends the Assembly for the first time in 60 years. If news spreads that nobles fought a duel in the lounge on such a day,

wouldn't it embarrass His Majesty? Even if we don't care about that, Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong will be sad.”

+

[Hae Myeong-Seom]

Status: Noble. Baron of the Royal City.

Relation: Colleague of the Viscount.

Danger Level: Blue

Note: Former head of Hae Myeong-Seom Sect. The sect was a small elite group primarily deployed for special operations like assassination of important figures, destruction of bases, arson in harvest-ready farms, and soil contamination with poison. It was one of the six major mercenary groups known as the Six Heavens Gate in the past.

Joined Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong when she promptly recruited the Six Heavens Gate and was ennobled as a Baron.

Ally.

Can be killed.

Strengths: [Survival], [Agility], [Definitely Protects the Assembly], [Ascendant]

Weaknesses: [Arsonist], [Poisoner], [Wanderlust]

Caution: Started to see Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong as someone special.

+

With so much information gathered, it had to become apparent.

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong's lovers' 'common feature.'

In the lounge, each person who spoke had different appearances, personalities, and lives, but there was an indelible red line strongly drawn across them all.

“Hmm. Since I’m a newcomer who just received my title today, if a duel is really necessary, send me instead. The rumor will end with foolish newcomers being disrespectful.”

Baron Gu Se-Ju. Slave of the Viscount.

Directly tortured and killed hundreds as the right hand of a rebel leader.

“Is a duel really necessary? I think Count Ah Ru-Ho is angry because they feel they can’t do anything and are being one-sidedly pushed by their teacher. If we just give them a one-sided victory in return, that will solve the problem. I’ve heard Count Ah Ru-Ho is skilled in royal techniques, so why not have a match with the teacher?”

Former Viscount Se Ah-Gwi. Student of the Viscount.

Like Viscount Chun Heuk-Shin, was kidnapped by [Red Nails]. Learned ‘Ritual of Darkness’ during that time, and even after returning to the royal city, continued the ritual.

Together with her subordinate nobles, ate thousands of humans.



"....."

Even young Marquis Baek Seol-To has a history of beating a commoner child to death with a whip.

"Mr. Kim Gong-Ja?"

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong, observing the tension among the factions, turned to look at me. Despite having just handled numerous petitions on the spot, she showed no signs of fatigue. Instead, she was smiling broadly.

"No, I should call you Advisor Gu Won-Ha here. That's right, Advisor Gu Won-Ha. Is there something strange on my face? You're looking pale. Or perhaps..."

In other words.

Those who love Jaa Soo-Jeong are all...

"Is it as you wished, have you now come to understand?"

Murderers.

Or rather, mass murderers.

"Do you now have a bit of understanding of what kind of person I am?"

# Chapter 217: Golden Rule (1)

---

"Why..."

I had to ask.

"Why did you choose only such people as your lovers?"

Tower Master Jaa Soo-Jeong.

She once built a tower and gathered all the abandoned people from every world. Children sacrificed to religious fanaticism, martial artists who died in irrational disasters, women whose lives were confined by inevitable miracles... She called these broken and abandoned lives into the tower and gave them a new world.

'The one who built the tower for the victims.'

Why, of all people, did she choose murderers as her lovers?

I expressed my doubt, looking at Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong.

"Such people..."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong smiled.

"Exactly whom are you referring to, advisor?"

"People who have committed grave sins. Those who beat children to death with whips, who turned people into human flesh and ate them. Those who waged wars leading to the deaths of countless civilians. Why do you love such people? Why do you still let them sit above the nobles? You are going to build a tower. You have almost omnipotent power. Yet, why don't you punish them..."

"Advisor."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong suddenly said.

"You are a very kind person."

"Yes?"

"Those climbing the tower with someone like the advisor must be very happy."

Confused by her words, I tilted my head.

However, Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong did not explain. Instead, she just sat in her chair, looking forward. I too, drawn by her gaze, saw the scene before my eyes.

"It's ridiculous to appoint someone not even 20 years old as a duke!"

The lounge was hot with heated debates.

A noble of the conservative faction... Surely it was Count Ah Ru-Ho.

A noble with hair wild like a lion's mane snapped irritably.

"Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong is eighteen. Eighteen. No matter how many rebellions she has suppressed and how many dragon countries she has conquered, there are ranks and order in the kingdom."

"Indeed."

Hoo-.

A noble from Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong's faction took a drag from a water pipe.

"The Count's words are right. I never understood why the rebels were not subdued over the past decades, but having heard the Count's words today, it's enlightening. While an eighteen-year-old child was fighting against the rebels, shedding blood and sweat, nobles like the Count were maintaining the order of the hierarchy. Thanks to this, the kingdom has not perished and has prospered."

Laughter erupted here and there.

Joining in the mockery, the nobles of Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong's faction sneered.

"Indeed. I felt guilty for having burdened a young girl with everything, but now I see she dared to gain military merit at such a young age."

"Exactly. If our party leader hadn't stepped in, there would have been 200,000 casualties in subduing the Golden Dragon. Or, if the Red Nails weren't subdued, millions of citizens would still be groaning in pain. But what's the use? Even if she saved the lives of hundreds of thousands of soldiers and millions of citizens, she's still just an eighteen-year-old child. A dukedom is absurd."

"Right. The Count's deep concern for the kingdom's order is truly admirable!"

The nobles launched a fierce attack.

All of them were Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong's lovers.

[Child Murderer] Marquis Baek Seol-To glanced around cautiously, [Cannibal] Viscount Chun Heuk-Shin backed up her colleagues, and [Mass Murderer] Dae Ha-Ran laughed openly. Their reactions varied, but they were all gathered there for Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong.

"Ha..."

Count Ah Ru-Ho's face contorted with anger.

Was it the humiliation of losing the argument?

The Count muttered in a flash.

"The dogs of a courtesan... their barking skills are indeed first-rate."

With that one sentence, the atmosphere turned silent.

The nobles who had been mocking the Count with ease all suddenly turned cold. Their faces lost all traces of laughter. Anger simmered beneath their neutral expressions.

"How about it, Kim Gong-Ja?"

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong whispered to me.

Her voice was so soft that only I could hear it.



"Isn't it interesting?"

"....."

"All those people defending me, as you said, are all murderers. Mass murderers. Criminals. But, look. Look at their faces right now."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong leaned towards me, lifting her hips.

"They are in pain."

Her lips whispered, drawing closer to me.

"Just because I was insulted as a courtesan. It's not exactly a false accusation.

I have captivated numerous nobles and royals with music, dance, sweet whispers... An entire life spent enchanting people with various arts. So, a courtesan. Even though, Count Ah Ru-Ho was being careful with their words. In the streets, I am openly called a prostitute."

Gently.

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong tugged on my sleeve.

"Look. Kim Gong-Ja."

Pulled by a small force, I had to bend down. As my shoulder reached her face's level, Jaa Soo-Jeong whispered in my ear.

"The one who whipped a child to death, the noble who feasted on humans, the general who massacred civilians, they are just hurt because I was called a courtesan."

"....."

"It's too funny."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong whispered, hooking her arm through mine.

A snake seemed to be slithering up my arm.

"There are hundreds of legal codes in the kingdom. According to the stated laws, we can calculate the sins of those [criminals], measure their faults, and determine their responsibility. It's tedious but an easy task. If I wish, I can execute the criminals right now. What do you think, Kim Gong-Ja? Should we kill them all?"

"That would be..."

"Yes."

The snake smiled with her eyes.

Beneath her long eyelids, the snake's pupils sparkled purple.

"[Is that a bit too harsh], you think?"

"....."

"In my opinion, Kim Gong-Ja, you are that kind of person. Kind-hearted. The point at which you feel that killing those who have committed wrongs is [too harsh], you are already a completely different species from me."

"What do you mean?"

"Just killing them off isn't too extreme."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong grasped my cheek.

And she forcibly turned my gaze.

Where our eyes landed, there was a noble with snow-white hair like a rabbit, Marquis Baek Seol-To, looking flustered, surveying people from both factions.

"Marquis Baek Seol-To was a minor when she killed another minor. The marquis' family paid a settlement to the victim's family. One side, a prominent noble family in the capital, and the other, a normal family of free citizens. It's called a settlement, but in reality, it was more like an ultimatum, right?"

That must have been the case.

"The criminal was a minor at the time of the crime. Moreover, being a noble and having reached a settlement with the victim's family, the sentence Marquis Baek Seol-To would

receive would be... what? At most, a revocation of her title? Ta-da. That's the punishment guaranteed by the law."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong spoke playfully.

"Conversely, the victim's family was ruined."

"....."

"Unlike a noble family, a commoner's family is shockingly easy to destroy. That family... they lived with a granddaughter, a grandfather, and a grandmother. The granddaughter was their only descendant. And she was killed by Marquis Baek Seol-To."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong whispered in my ear.

"Do you see, Kim Gong-Ja? That family was ruined. Destroyed. Shattered. What use is receiving a fortune in settlement money? Can you assemble a broken child's body with gold? According to the great and dignified laws of the kingdom, aah, under the majestic judgment of the righteous judge, even if you miraculously succeed in revoking Marquis Baek Seol-To's title, does that resolve the family's resentment?"

"....."

"The criminal who wrecked my life and destroyed my family. Even if that criminal is killed, the resentment won't be resolved. Think about it. The granddaughter died? One winter day, on a snowy white field, beaten by the whip of a noble, her back flesh torn apart, her spine shattered, dead. Can all that be settled with just one death?"

"Then... what should be done?"

I understood the viscount's words.

It echoed the dilemma I faced while gathering the Constellation Killer.

Those who had already committed crimes. The people they had victimized.

What could be done to compensate for the shattered lives?

Even a righteous person like the Black Dragon Witch had blood on their hands. I share a friendship with such a Black Dragon Witch. Whether that is right or wrong, and if not,

what should be done, I had not yet found an answer.

"Pain."

The owner of the tower answered.

"Only pain is the only solution."

She stroked the side of my head.

"The pain of losing a granddaughter. The pain of the last six years after the granddaughter disappeared. The pain of the remaining life, never seeing the granddaughter again. Inflicting [exactly the same pain] on the criminal. That is the law that should be enforced in this world, and the law that I want to establish in the kingdom."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong spoke as if advising a junior she cherished.

But her pupils, her purple eyes, had the power to make even the kindest care seem like a curse imbued with malice.

That's probably why. Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong looked both like a senior caring for a junior and like a demon seducing passersby.

"I will rebuild this kingdom, the world, under the law of pain. Not just this kingdom but the entire world. Not just here but every other world as well. Everywhere my feet tread and my eyes see, the entire universe."

"....."

"The tower is a means to that end."

I was momentarily at a loss for words.

"Is such a thing... possible?"

"There are two ways to make the impossible possible. One is to go mad. To be lost in delusion, to realize the impossible in fantasy."

"And the other?"



"To become a person of power."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong giggled.

"Power is something you possess. Something you control. I have bewitched six dukes, seduced an emperor, and captivated three dragon emperors."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong raised her fingers.

"All to become the most powerful person in this world."

Thump.

Thump.

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong tapped the armrest of the chair twice.

"....."

At that, the nobles of the Jaa Soo-Jeong faction immediately looked this way.

"....."

Those glaring at Count Ah Ru-Ho stopped their actions and words instantly upon hearing the two taps. They turned their heads to their master's signal.

The opposite faction did the same. Initially, they kept talking, but as the other side turned their gaze all at once, they too sensed something unusual and turned to look at Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong.

The nobles, servants serving drinks, musicians selecting music, and others all looked at Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong.

13 seconds.

That was the time it took for hundreds of people in the vast lounge to focus solely on Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong. Fierce arguments and cunning mockery came to an abrupt halt.

Silence filled the room.

"My dear noble colleagues."

With hundreds of eyes on her, Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong opened her lips.

"I came out to the lounge for a break, but seeing you all so actively debating even here, I feel proud as a member of the kingdom. I'm worried whether the council should pay you overtime. You can't be doing overtime in such a place without pay."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong used my shoulder to stand up.

"Enough rest. Let's return to the main council chamber and resume our primary duties."

Simultaneously, the nobles of her faction stood up.

They left behind empty wine glasses, half-filled glasses, and untouched glasses as they gathered around Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong.

Considering their immense power compared to commoners, it was a truly bizarre scene.

"Alright."

In the midst of this strange scene, Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong grabbed my wrist.

"Kim Gong-Ja."

"Tonight, I will show you a miracle."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong was beaming brightly.

# Chapter 218: Golden Rule (2)

---

We entered the main council chamber.

Thud. Every time Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong stepped forward, dozens of nobles followed suit. No one spoke while the sound of footsteps intermingled.

Like elite soldiers facing their final battle.

"....."

The moment we entered the council chamber, I felt suffocated.

The nobles from other factions who had already arrived all turned to look at us simultaneously.

Some looked with anger boiling in their eyes.

Some stared with jealousy tainting their gaze.

Others looked up, soaked in admiration and longing.

If there were a hundred emotions in the world, a hundred gazes were directed at Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong.

"Good day, everyone. It seems the meeting will resume soon."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong smiled leisurely.

"I've come with the members of my faction. Is it too late?"

Silence.

No one could respond.

However, it seemed like Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong never

expected a reply in the first place. Smiling cheerfully, she found her place.

"What are you doing, advisor?"

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong looked back at me as she moved.

"Yes?"

"Your place is right next to me. Hurry up and follow. You're not thinking of leaving my side cold, are you?"

Ah.

'She's considering that my memory is somewhat vague.'

I nodded quietly and followed Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong discreetly.

As I approached my assigned seat, the scenery of the council chamber began to come into focus.

It was quite different from the [council] I usually knew.

Firstly, it wasn't semi-circular but a complete circle, resembling the Colosseum. A throne was firmly placed in the center, surrounded by the seats of the noble council members.

But the most peculiar part was something else.

‘...Water?’

Yes. There was flowing water.

A canal was installed beneath the seats. If you sat down, you had to immerse your feet in the water. The canal spread like a spider web through the council, flowing down and eventually connecting to a drain at the throne.

"Amniotic fluid. Ugh."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong took off her leather boots and sat down. Looking around, other nobles were also familiarly removing their shoes.



"Amniotic fluid?"

"Yes. Amniotic fluid. There's a giant lake beneath the capital. Water is drawn from that lake and channeled throughout the city, with the first place it reaches being here, the main council chamber of the Platinum Tower."

I followed suit, taking off my shoes.

"What's the significance?"

"It has several meanings and uses. We make laws in the council, and laws create the kingdom. The kingdom is born right here. [Always remember that we are birthing the kingdom]. That's why it's called amniotic fluid."

I removed my socks and dipped my feet into the canal.

Splash, the warm water seeped between my toes.

"It's warm..."

"Yes, it's winter now. It's cool in the summer. It also serves to regulate the temperature of this vast meeting hall."

"That's amazing."

"Not just the temperature, the color of the water changes depending on the seriousness of the agenda. For example, if the council decides to subjugate a Dragon Country, the amniotic fluid turns red like blood. The canals throughout the capital also turn red. It informs the citizens that a critical situation has arisen."

"Wow."

"In short, the citizens use water that has been touched by the toes of nobles in their daily lives. For some select few nobles and citizens, this fact provides a fetishistic satisfaction. It's quite practical in many ways."

No. That's a bit...

Seeing my disgusted expression, Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong chuckled.

"Kim Gong-Ja, you don't seem like Gu Won-Ha, the advisor, right now."

"Yes?"

"My advisor would never make such a face. It would be fun if your identity gets exposed, but we have a meeting to attend to. I'd appreciate it if you're careful not to let others notice."

Hmm.

"What kind of tone does Mr. Gu Won-Ha use?"

"Oh? Don't you remember?"

"Yes, it's a bit fuzzy. The amniotic fluid also feels like I'm seeing it for the first time."

"Hmm."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong smiled with her eyes.

"Well, it's simple. Generally, speak courteously. Mostly expressionless. With a tone of indifference to worldly affairs, while using slightly formal language."

I furrowed my brow.

"...Do I speak like this?"

"Good. A bit lacking, though."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong rested her chin on her hand and looked at me.

"Just a bit more expressionless would be perfect. My advisor really doesn't attach any value to the world."

"Not valuing the world..."

"Yes. Whether it's people, the populace, or the kingdom, nothing is of value. Only my daughter and I hold weight in the advisor's heart. Everything else is just meaningless noise."

"....."

Suddenly, I recalled the information magic marked by the original owner of this body.

She had written this about Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong:

+

My master.

My heart.

My blood.

My everything in this world.

+

Thump.

Recalling that note made my heart strangely ache.

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong watched me with an interested look.

"Your expression acting is excellent. Have you had any training in acting?"

".....Yes. I had opportunities to immerse myself in theater while climbing the tower."

"Unexpectedly versatile, Mr. Kim Gong-Ja. Right now, you really resemble advisor Gu Se-Ju."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong's eye-smile deepened.

"From now on, may I continue to call you [advisor] instead of Mr. Kim Gong-Ja?"

Why?

My heart throbbed again.

"....."

Just making eye contact with Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong made my chest feel tight. Like when I had first been possessed in this trauma world, my mind was clouded with fog.

Fortunately, a voice that brought my attention back just before I was completely enveloped in fog emerged.

"The King has arrived!"

The meeting resumed.

---

As soon as the meeting started, the nobles from other factions launched an all-out attack on Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong.

The first to open fire was Count Ah Ru-Ho, who had been sizing up their arguments since the lounge.

"Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong has arbitrarily taken in rebels. Not just the Red Nails, but Stone Assembly, Bandol, Waek, Celestial, Heart. All the recent rebel leaders have become her subordinates. We cannot elevate such a noble to a dukedom."

Hundreds of nobles looked at Count Ah Ru-Ho. The King of the kingdom, too, silently let the count speak.

It was more like an inquisition against Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong than a meeting.

"It is only right to immediately capture the traitors hiding under Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong's shadow and punish them according to their crimes. If the viscount is a loyal subject of the kingdom, she should willingly cooperate. Isn't that right, Viscount? If there's no ulterior motive, why else would you hide traitors?"

"Count. All those I've taken under me were personally captured by me."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong rebutted with a smile.

"Prisoners of war become the property of the capturing general. What's wrong with me handling my own property as I wish?"

"Even if they are traitors who have drawn swords against the kingdom?"



"A thing has no sin. A skilled warrior's sword may have absorbed the blood of tens, hundreds. But no one blames the sword. It would be the warrior's fault, if any. I've merely collected swords that have absorbed a bit too much blood."

"Are you calling living people things now!"

"Yes."

"....."

"They are my property. If you're jealous, you should have captured them yourself. Or abolish slavery. Right?"

Ah, Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong blinked naturally.

"Count Ah Ru-Ho's territory relies heavily on a slave economy, doesn't it? It's unfortunate not to have reformed the economy of your land earlier."

"How dare you advise the Count's management..."

"It's the same. The prisoners I've captured are my private property. What right do you have to interfere in my family matters? Wouldn't it be better for both you and me to respect each other's boundaries?"

Count Ah Ru-Ho gritted his teeth.

".....What if a living person who is your property commits a crime?"

"Hmm??"

"Your Majesty."

Count Ah Ru-Ho looked towards the throne.

"I respectfully have something to report to Your Majesty."

"Speak."

"Creating a new dukedom is an extremely significant matter, unprecedented in the kingdom's two thousand year history.

Such a critical process requires a thorough examination of the moral character of the dukedom candidate."

The Sun King listened silently to the count's words.

He had not left the palace in the past 60 years. There is no success for those who do not work, and no authority for those who do not succeed. The Sun King had no authority.

And nobles do not respect those without authority.

"I have come across several reports casting serious doubt on Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong's moral character."

"....."

"Therefore, if Your Majesty permits, I would like to summon witnesses to this assembly."

The Sun King turned to look at Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong.

It was a look asking for her thoughts.

Jaa Soo-Jeong smiled as if to say there's nothing to worry about.

".....I grant permission."

"Your Grace is magnanimous."

Prepared witnesses began to enter the council.

The first to step into the amniotic water was a neatly dressed old man.

Count Ah Ru-Ho asked the old man.

"What is your name, witness?"

"I am called Nam Seok."

"Your status and origin?"

"A freeman. Forty-one years ago, I moved from Barom Saa Jo-Seoung's territory to the capital and settled down."

"Nam Seok. For a mere citizen to stand in this place, you must not take lightly the grace bestowed upon you."

The old man knelt and touched his forehead to the ground.

"I am unworthy of such grace."

"You must have submitted a petition to the nobles about your grievances."

"I lost my only granddaughter, my world crumbled, and I dared to defile the eyes of the noble with my humble words."

"....."

I turned my head, hearing those words.

Next to me, Marquis Baek Seol-To's face had turned deathly pale.

"Marquis."

"Yes.....?"

"A citizen here says his granddaughter was killed by your flogging six years ago. Is this true?"

"Ah. That. I, I am....."

At that moment, Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong stood up.

As the viscount rose, water splashed beneath her feet.

"Your Majesty."

"Proceed."

"The Marquis Baek Seol-Toate resides under my shadow. My family being the main house and the marquise a branch, it's only proper that I should be reprimanded for the wrongdoings of my subordinates. I must object to Count Ah Ru-Ho chastising those under my authority."

".....What are your thoughts, Count?"

"Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong is too generous. I, too, would like to question the viscount rather than the marquis."

Count Ah Ru-Ho seemed triumphantly expectant of this response.

"Viscount."

"Yes, Count."

"Were you aware of the marquis' actions?"

"I was aware."

The water stirred again.

"Since when?"

"I knew even before I took Marquis Baek Seol-Tounder my wing. The marquis confessed to me directly."

"Not true. You knew of the marquis' crime yet still took her under you?"

"That's correct."

Bang!

Count Ah Ru-Ho slammed his fist on the desk.

"Why? The marquis beat a young citizen to death with a whip. How could you accept such a cruel noble?"

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong smiled.

"You might not know... but at that time, the Lady Marquis was famously wayward. Idiot Lady, Dumb Lady, Brain-dead Lady... She endured all sorts of ridicule. After meeting her, I thought I had to properly raise this child."



"Properly raise?"

"The Lady grew up almost abused in her family."

Marquis Baek Seol-To twitched, trembling.

"Marquis Baek Seol-To' grandfather, Baek Mi-To Marquis, was a genius, in a bad way. He couldn't understand anyone less intelligent than himself and didn't try to understand his less intelligent granddaughter. Criticism, verbal abuse, mistreatment. Marquis Baek Seol-To' childhood was colored by her grandfather's malicious neglect."

Count Ah Ru-Ho frowned.

"So? Because the marquis is pitiful, we should forgive her?"

"No."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong covered her mouth with her sleeve, chuckling.

"If left alone, Marquis Baek Seol-To would have forever lived as a [Brain-dead Lady], without any regrets or self-reflection, comfortably meeting her end by an assassin sent by someone."

"....."

"I thought that wasn't right."

"What do you mean..."

"I took the marquis on a journey for fifteen days."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong hummed.

It was like reminiscing about a pleasant past.

"I showed her reality, a life she'd never experienced, where not working meant not eating. Forced her to experience the harsh reality of the outside world where even working hard might not suffice. Thanks to that, Marquis Baek Seol-To realized that even if she felt unhappy, she was in a [bearable misery]."

"And I regularly held lessons with the marquis. Sometimes we visited the northern port to see the merchants' daily lives, occasionally dragging her to thief subjugation to witness people's lives being brutally lost."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong's breath was fiery.

Like a priest intoxicated with something, she murmured in a low voice, colored with hot breath.

"Do you understand? Marquis Baek Seol-To is only fifteen. Yet, she's already experienced the death of a commoner, merchant, and thief. I dare say, even if she becomes one of the kingdom's top twelve nobles, she'll never consider herself a good person. Naturally. The fact that she killed a child remains unchanged."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong neatly folded her hands together.

As if praying somewhere.

"I'll raise Marquis Baek Seol-To to be the kingdom's finest noble. And also make her grow into the most miserable noble. As days pass, her misery will dye her. Guilt and self-loathing will color her face, for sure."

"....."

"Count. Imagine such a marquis. Every gesture she makes leaving traces of unhappiness, her past shadowing her every step. Can you picture it?"

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong shone like a saint as she smiled brightly.

"Isn't it lovely?"

# Chapter 219: Golden Rule (3)

---

The surroundings fell silent.

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong's remarks had unsettled many nobles.

"Lovely...?"

Count Ah Ru-Ho's expression was uneasy, similar to most of the nobility present.

However, those personally taken in by Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong.

Only her lovers, who received her love and loved her in return, showed no change in their expressions. They were impassive. 'The necessary story is being told, and the needed words are being heard.' It seemed that's how the viscount's lovers perceived it.

"Yes."

Amidst the perplexed atmosphere, Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong spoke.

"A noble, crumbling under the misfortune they caused themselves, always stirs the soul when seen. Marquis Baek Seol-To is, to put it metaphorically, like a honey rice cake. Once you bite, sweetness fills your mouth."

".....What in the world are you talking about?"

Count Ah Ru-Ho was flabbergasted.

"Sigh."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong sighed and shrugged her shoulders, clearly belittling and looking down on Count Ah Ru-Ho.

"If you don't know, never mind. Some adventurers embark on a quest even if a treasure map falls right in front of them, while some commoners mock those adventurers. Is this where the story ends?"

"What?"

"I'm asking if you have nothing more to say, Count. [There is a poor citizen.] [Lost a granddaughter to a noble.] [That noble is under me.] That sums up the story so far. If there's nothing more to add, please step down. It's already late, and we can't afford to delay the meeting further."

"You, you..."

Count Ah Ru-Ho bellowed.

"I lost my only granddaughter!"

"That day was my mother's birthday. Did you know? My granddaughter was running to give her grandmother a birthday gift when she was struck down by Marquis Baek Seol-To!"

"....."

The old man, who knelt obediently below the throne, never received a glance from Count Ah Ru-Ho. The count, ignoring him, pulled something out of his pocket.

A hairpin. An ornament typically worn by women in their hair.

"Look! This hairpin here was the birthday gift prepared by my granddaughter. She was running to give it to her grandmother when she unfortunately bumped into Lady Baek Seol-To!"

Count Ah Ru-Ho passionately argued his case.

Whether the count truly empathized with the old man's plight, I was doubtful.

Yet, for whatever reason, a person's desperate state holds persuasive power. Gradually, the nobles shifted from dismissing Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong's remarks to pitying the old man with compassionate gazes.

"My granddaughter fell in the snow, smiling innocently, apologizing [I'm sorry], [I should have watched where I was going] to Lady Baek Seol-To. Had she been forgiven for apologizing, it would have been a common accident that could happen anywhere."

Count Ah Ru-Ho now fully regained his conviction.



The pathetic back of the old man, the sympathy pouring over him, and Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong's face, seemingly indifferent to everything.

All these elements gave Count Ah Ru-Ho the assurance of victory.

"But Lady Baek Seol-To grabbed the child. And then..."

"It's tedious."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong muttered.

It was a fleeting voice, like the flutter of a dragonfly's wings, heard only momentarily.

No one but me heard the viscount's murmur.

Count Ah Ru-Ho continued his vigorous speech, capturing the attention of the audience. Therefore, when I looked at Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong, I could solely focus on her monologue.

"The person who prepared the gift that day wasn't just Ari."

I tilted my head in confusion.

"Ari... who is that?"

"The granddaughter. The child who was whipped to death by Lady Baek Seol-To."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong casually replied.

"That day was also the birthday of the Lady's grandfather. Coincidentally, both girls had prepared gifts. Lady Baek Seol-To made a brooch with the family crest but couldn't give it to her grandfather."

".....Why?"

I sensed something peculiar in the viscount's eyes.

It was as if she wasn't recounting a story heard from someone else.

But rather describing a scene she had witnessed firsthand.

"The grandfather punished her for not solving a math problem correctly. The Lady couldn't bring herself to give him the brooch. How could any child give a gift to an adult scowling with displeasure?"

"....."

"When the noble girl and the common girl collided in the street, the brooch fell into the snow. Not just falling, but it happened to be stepped on by the common girl. It broke."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong spoke with a face devoid of heat.

"It wasn't a particularly expensive-looking brooch. Hard to say it was well-made. Just a trinket that wouldn't matter much if broken. But the Lady picked up the broken brooch and thrust it at the common girl."

"And she said."

You broke it.

"The common girl was startled and bowed her head."

I'm sorry, miss.

I'm really sorry.

"But children know how to apologize, not how to accept an apology. And back then, Lady Baek Seol-To was a complete ruffian, known as the [Brain-dead Lady]. Her response was far from gracious."

You shouldn't have broken it, it was important!

"The Lady had a guard with her, essentially the sole heir of the marquisate. The guard's loyalty was deep. The Lady reached out to him."

Guard!

The whip!

"Without hesitation, the guard handed his mistress the

whip. The Lady grabbed it, struggling with its thickness compared to her small hands."

A child's whip struck another child's back.

"One exerted all her strength to strike, the other convulsed under the blows."

Just smash it all! Why! Why! Like this, why!

"It hurts, miss."

"It hurts. I'm sorry, Lady, it hurts."

You're all fools.

Just a bunch of idiots.

Grandfather is, grandfather is a fool!

"No one stopped the Lady."

They say the snow was stained with blood.

Lady Baek Seol-To's guard took back the whip. The servant attending the marquis picked up unguarded relics from the battered body. Not out of sympathy for the common girl, but a sudden thought to pass them on.

"Look!"

Now, that relic was in Count Ah Ru-Ho's hand.

"Can't you see the resentment bound in this relic! Viscount!"

The hairpin had decayed over the past six years. What was likely once polished to shine for a grandmother, now lost its luster, gathering dust on its surface. Worn and old, just a common trinket found anywhere.

"Is your blood that of a cold-hearted creature!"

"....."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong only listened to Count Ah Ru-Ho's outcry, smiling strangely.

"Is your mind filled only with the wisdom of the sages and classical scriptures! Or else, how can you sit there so calmly upon seeing this relic, these traces of blood, these remnants of death!"

No, that's not it.

"Viscount, you truly lack human empathy!"

It wasn't that.

Count Ah Ru-Ho... and the people were misunderstanding something.

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong [could see everything].

She knew far more than what Count Ah Ru-Ho was aware of.

Even more than the old man lying there, she had witnessed the granddaughter's death from much closer.

And it wasn't just that.

What the granddaughter thought at the moment of her death, her last words, what Lady Baek Seol-To screamed as she swung the whip.

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong knew much more than the others.

'Because.'

Amid my dizzy thoughts, I barely managed to articulate my conclusion.

"Viscount. You possess... [The Eyes of the Golden Dragon]."

"Hmm?"

Then Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong turned to look at me.



"What do you mean, advisor?"

I swallowed hard.

Far away, Count Ah Ru-Ho was still shouting loudly. She cursed her for not understanding human nature, called her a bastard born without roots, criticized her for not caring about the citizens, and declared it preposterous to nominate such a person for a dukedom.

The surroundings were noisy, creating the perfect environment for our secret whispers.

"The Eyes of the Golden Dragon."

"Yes, the Eyes of the Golden Dragon. Is there a problem with it?"

"The Eyes of the Golden Dragon can see everything. From an omniscient perspective. I understand now how you can encompass the entire tower while being in one body. Viscount. You've been granted the ability to intuitively perceive the entirety of existence."

"Not a wrong statement. So what?"

".....And you also have [The Breath of the Ice River Dragon]."

My heart pounded.

"[The Breath of the Ice River Dragon] allows you to move to any desired point in time. Eyes that can see anything. Breath that can take you anywhere. You possess both. If you wish..."

"If I wish?"

"You could have witnessed the very moment the granddaughter was whipped to death, right in front of you."

I said.

"That is your omniscience."

The reason why the tower's master had such an all-seeing ability.

"With [The Eyes of the Golden Dragon] and [The Breath of the Ice River Dragon], you can observe every death and despair in this world from the closest point."

"....."

"Both powers allow you to oversee every event occurring in the tower."

At that moment:

[Correct.]

[Acknowledged as having passed the 2nd gateway.]

[The Eyes of the Golden Dragon and The Breath of the Ice River Dragon form the observational mechanism of the tower.]

A brief silence followed.

Purple irises pondered over my face.

"Correct."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong slowly opened her lips.

A smile hung on the corner of her soft lips.

"Not bad. Given the limited information you had as an advisor, you've managed to piece together and guess the project I had planned."

"You..."

"Rewards are due for a hero who guessed correctly."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong gently grasped my wrist.

"---I'll show you the death of that granddaughter."

A squishy sensation crawled up from my ankle. It was as cold as a snake's skin. Startled, I looked down to see a shadowy figure, like water's shadow, climbing up my skin from the surface.

"Follow me."

In the next moment, I was swallowed by the shadow.

---

With a slashing sound, the whip flung the snow around.

The snowflakes, heavy with blood, rose but didn't fly high. Clumped together, they plummeted back into the already crimson-stained pool.

"It's your fault!"

"Please... save... me..."

"You, you, you! It's your fault! You! It's all because of you! If it weren't for you!"

The whip struck through the air.

In the blood pool, the snowflakes melted away.

A small child convulsed.

The last bit of warmth in the child's body dripped into the snow, spreading a thin stream around.

"....."

"That's the child."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong pointed. We were submerged in the darkness of an alley. Passersby were there, but they all avoided the alley due to the intimidating presence of the Marquis Baek Seol-To's guard.

"Marquis Baek Seol-To. Now Lady Marquis Baek Seol-To. The child she whipped to death at the age of 10 is lying right there."

Instinctively, I tried to rush out.

But it was impossible.

A grip much stronger than mine held my wrist.

"No."

"Why, why not? We must go now. If we take her to a physician, maybe..."

"Maybe she could be saved. Yes. Maybe after suffering through the winter, her body recovers, and she continues a happy life. Perhaps the marquise would even generously compensate, offering a more comfortable life than before."

"Then, why are you holding my wrist right now?"

"Advisor."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong smiled.

"Kim Gong-Ja."

The sound of whipping echoed in the winter sky.

"How many times do you think I have seen such scenes?"

The corpse of a child, virtually already dead, was being savagely whipped by a young lady. Someone's winter was dying there.

"I'm eighteen. But I've lived far more lives than that number can hold. Just like now, I've witnessed the death of a child, hundreds, thousands, millions, billions, trillions, an endless number of deaths right in front of me."

"I have seen every infanticide, robbery, victory, defeat, retreat, massacre since the kingdom's founding in the winter of 2001 years ago, until now, December 24, 2001, of the kingdom's calendar. So far, it's only the history of this kingdom. Someday, I'll watch every death in this world. No, in all worlds."

"And I won't do anything."

I felt hoarse.

"Yes...?"



"I could have stopped that child's death at any time. I could have reversed all those unjust deaths. Returning again and again, until all irrational deaths disappeared, and a single righteous world line was established."

But.

"I won't."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong grinned.

"Never."

"....."

"Never interfere."

"Why not...?"

"It's because only then, every misfortune in this world is solely [my fault]."

The child died.

Lady Baek Seol-To, in her rage, kicked the body and walked away. The falling snowflakes covered the young lady's back.

"What was the reason for that child's death, advisor? What went wrong that led to her death?"

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong's voice was coated with falling snow.

"Was it a mistake to encounter Marquis Baek Seol-To? Is that the mistake? What about Marquis Baek Seol-To's fault? Growing up under a degenerate grandfather? Not being born with a brain that could please him? Then, was her very birth a mistake?"

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong released my wrist.

"No. All those are just coincidences. We can't blame coincidences. None of you were born wrong. There are no wrongly born lives in this world."

"....."

"The only one at fault is me alone."

She clasped her hands over her chest.

"I could have approached that granddaughter and said, 'This path is dangerous, go another way.' Then the little girl would have easily avoided her impending misfortune. I could have also become an unnamed friend to Lady Baek Seol-To, providing her with private tutoring every step of the way. Then she would have grown smarter every day and eventually gained her grandfather's recognition."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong brought her hands together as if in prayer, then looked up at me.

"I have the ability to do so."

"....."

"But I won't."

"Never. No matter what."

The scenery around us changed.

The blood-stained snowfield vanished, replaced by the flowing water of the grand hall.

Count Ah Ru-Ho was still pointing fingers at Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong, berating her. She lamented that she really lacked humanity, questioning how a human could not grieve over a child's death, not try to help...

"Advisor."

Amid the noise and bloodshed of the council, Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong whispered to me.

"There are no accidental deaths in this world. Not even accidental misfortunes. Every death and misfortune is intentionally overlooked by me."

"....."

"All the misfortunes you have experienced are my fault. Because I didn't move, because I didn't care, because I ignored, countless misfortunes and innumerable despairs have

occurred. At least in this kingdom. And eventually, in all worlds."

"....."

"Do you understand what I mean, my advisor?"

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong smiled like a saint.

Then, the scenery shifted again.

This time, it was Viscount Chun Heuk-Shin eating human flesh.

"Come."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong stroked the back of my hand.

"Now blame me."

My heart raced.

"Exclaim why I didn't help. It's not a meaningless outcry. I had the power to help, and I was really there at the very moment of your misfortune. Ask why I didn't save you. It's not a meaningless question. Because I could have resolved it."

She gripped my hand tightly.

"Because of my existence."

I felt breathless.

"Now, all of you possess a [sinner] to point your fingers at without a shred of falsehood or doubt, unmistakably."

A god spoke.

"I am [The God Who Never Returns]. I do not return for anyone, I only watch over your misfortunes."

The god declared quietly.

"That's why you can condemn and despise this god."

The name of the god was Jaa Soo-Jeong, the Amethyst.

# Chapter 220:

## Golden Rule (4)

---

I looked at the girl.

The scenery rapidly transformed: from the snow-covered streets where Marquis Baek Seol-To whipped his subjects, to the cave where Viscount Chun Heuk-Shin devoured human flesh, and then to the battlefield where Viscount Dae Ha-Ran led his troops, indiscriminately slaughtering both soldiers and civilians.

"Kill them all without exception!"

The competence of a general lies in two things: the ability to kill effectively and the lack of hesitation in doing so.

Viscount Dae Ha-Ran was a competent general.

"This place is a rebel territory. We cannot allow the leakage of our military intelligence to the enemy. Regardless of their status, age, or gender - peasants, the poor - kill them all! I will



take the responsibility."

Thousands of cavalry pursued the rebels.

Surrounded by soldiers, the villagers trembled in fear. Among them were those who genuinely conspired against the kingdom. Many more were just common folk who believed if the lord said there was a war, there must be one.

"Please spare us! My lord! We are just simple villagers who know nothing!"

The competence of a politician lies in distinguishing between friend and foe, and acting in the interests of allies.

Viscount Dae Ha-Ran was an incompetent politician.

And when a person is competent in one aspect and incompetent in another, they become most cruel.

"Burn it."

The village was set ablaze.

The very palisades built for their protection now trapped the villagers inside. Kingdom soldiers, wielding long spears, pushed back the residents trying to escape through the palisade gaps.

"Oh, God!"

Old men and women choked on the black smoke within their burning hometown.

The soot filled the elderly village chief's lungs. Until his last moment, he couldn't tell whether he should have rebelled against the lord's command to join the rebellion, or if dying by the hands of the lord's men was a more dignified death.

Did he ever have a choice?

"Please save us, oh God....."

God was indeed present.

Jaa Soo-Jeong sat far away on a tree branch. As she had declared herself, she was a [God Who Does Not Return]. More precisely, [A God Who Does Not Move for Anyone Even If She Returns].

Immovable.

"Viscount."

I pleaded, gripped by the wrist by the deity.

"Please help them. This is unjust."

"I know."

"Why should General Dae Ha-Ran live and they die? Why must they alone suffer and die in agony?"

"Advisor."

I tried to activate my Aura to break free from the Viscount's grip.

But Jaa Soo-Jeong, with a gentle touch, never let go of my wrist.

Her divine grip was stronger than my powerlessness.

"There's no reason that one must live, another must die, and yet another must suffer. Such reasons don't exist, do they?"

"Then....."

"Still, it seems you people often need a reason to blame."

Ashes from the burning village drifted all the way to the forest.

Jaa Soo-Jeong lifted her index finger, gently capturing the grey ash.

"You can't accept the fact that the world just flows by chance, can you? That there's malice behind one's misfortune, manipulation behind another's luck, and thus one is deserving of sympathy while another deserves all the curses in the world? That's right."

The scenery changed once again.

"You are right."

Inside the kingdom's grand parliament.

"I'll make you right."

Witnesses requested by Count Ah Ru-Ho entered the parliament.

An old man who lost his granddaughter was just the beginning.

The Count, utilizing his power, or rather, his faction's power, had gathered the victims. Among them were descendants of refugees who had lost their homes due to General Dae Ha-Ran.

"Your misfortune is not just a happenstance, but a result of my negligence and tacit approval."

The parliament turned more chaotic.

Count Ah Ru-Ho, leading the charge, denounced Jaa Soo-Jeong. Behind him, many nobles scolded her.

"There's no direct crime committed by Jaa Soo-Jeong!"

Count Ah Ru-Ho argued.

"But she covered up for the criminals. And not out of ignorance, but knowingly. Why does she protect Marquis Baek Seol-To? Why does she favor a mere cannibal? When they have clearly committed evil, isn't she, who protected them, also an utmost villain?"

Unspoken by Count Ah Ru-Ho, but included in the list of criminals, was the Sun King himself, seated on the throne.

A monarch secluded for sixty years. Under his rule devoid of politics, landlords exploited peasants without restraint, and nobles squeezed the people without interference. Over those unattended sixty years, riots and rebellions brewed throughout the kingdom.

"....."

The Sun King sat alone on his throne, enduring the silence.

And not just the king.

Duke of Apathetic Leisure, having lived as an ascendent for a thousand years, had committed numerous slaughters. Among the six Dukes, none were innocent of murder.

Within this grand parliament of the kingdom, among the hundreds of nobles, there was not a single person who hadn't caused someone's death.

"Jaa Soo-Jeong is at fault!"

Count Ah Ru-Ho was no different.

He, a robust warrior, had personally led several battles. There's no way there weren't unjust deaths in those wars. She had ruined lives, destroyed families, and thus bore the weight of many people's misfortunes.

"Even so, she dared to call the guilty 'lovable'! How shamelessly does she flaunt her love for the criminal! Even now, rather than repenting and correcting her mistakes to

uphold the kingdom's ethics, she dares to love a criminal!"

Count Ah Ru-Ho attacked Jaa Soo-Jeong. But in reality, she was stabbing himself, and all the royalty and nobles present, more than anyone else.

"Viscount is a criminal!"

Count Ah Ru-Ho showed no pain.

Licking the blood from his own wound like a dog intoxicated by the hunt, she relentlessly tore into Jaa Soo-Jeong.

"Yes."

Jaa Soo-Jeong, who knew all of this better than anyone in the world, did not retort with [Aren't you the same kind of sinner?].

Nor did she declare [We are all the same sinners].

"That's right."



She simply affirmed.

"It's my fault."

The young deity willingly accepted all the finger-pointing and cries of the victims, as if savoring a sweet beverage.

"I am the sinner."

The evil deity was reveling.

"Then, I must be punished."

Perhaps Count Ah Ru-Ho was too focused on his rhetoric.

"....."

Had she paid a bit more attention, she might have wondered why the nobles belonging to Jaa Soo-Jeong's faction did not utter a single word of objection.

".....? What?"

Despite the king's lack of authority, he is still the sovereign of the kingdom's land. He had rights guaranteed by the law. He had numerous opportunities to interrupt Count Ah Ru-Ho's speech and defend Jaa Soo-Jeong.

But the Sun King did not defend the favorite he met for the first time in 60 years.

"Why do you say that, Count? I just agreed with your opinion."

The Duke of Apathetic Leisure was a mass murderer and a duke. Furthermore, she was a powerholder who did not regret a single killing or slaughter she committed.

She enjoyed rolling dice to decide people's fates, a habit long established and intended to continue far into the future. If anything had changed for the Duke of Apathetic Leisure, it was only that she no longer rolled the dice for Jaa Soo-Jeong alone.

However, even the Duke of Apathetic Leisure did not defend his pet of a thousand years.

"By agreeing with your view, you mean..."

"Everything is my fault, my responsibility, and as I am a sinner, I should rightfully be punished."

Marquis Baek Seol-To, who killed a child at a much younger age, had since become the head of her family. The Rabbit Marquisate had monopolized the northern port of the capital for generations. Three-tenths of the great river flowing through the kingdom belonged to her. The Marquis was very wealthy.

Viscount Chun Heuk-Shin, a former cannibal, knew how to use her infamy to her advantage. She eliminated the deep-rooted rot in her territory. She purged landowners owning windmills and executed local tyrants controlling the waterways. The Viscount took control of all the mills and waterways in her territory and offered them to the peasants at a cheap price. She had a lot of rice.

Viscount Dae Ha-Ran, a general of the royal army, once plotted a rebellion within the capital. She still excelled at killing people. She knew how to divide united enemies, collapse consolidated territories, and annihilate trained soldiers. The Viscount was very skilled in warfare.

".....So, you're acknowledging my argument?"

"Completely."

Yet, none of them defended their master.

If it wasn't due to a lack of love for their lover or loyalty to their master, there must be a reason for their collective silence.

"As such a heinous criminal in the history of the kingdom, I will submit a bill."

Jaa Soo-Jeong commanded silence.

"Clerk, please distribute the bill I've prepared."

Had the Count paid more attention.

No matter how notorious Jaa Soo-Jeong was as the [Madwoman of the Capital], it was unlikely she would keep smiling amid a stream of witnesses and evidence unfavorable to her. Perhaps she would have suspected that the entire political battle in the parliament was exactly [what Jaa Soo-Jeong wanted].

"A bill.....?"

"Yes. I propose this bill as a party line."

The Count didn't suspect.

"The bill's name is the Golden Rule."

And thus, she was hunted.

"Dear fellow members of the Noble Parliament."

Papers were distributed among the nobles. Splashing! Royal clerks hurriedly moved about, distributing the document equally to all factions.

"Someone might question."

As the highest-ranking individuals in the kingdom flipped through the pages, Jaa Soo-Jeong began her speech effortlessly.

"Do we really need a new duke in this era?"

Some nobles didn't read the document. They even lowered their eyes as if terrified to see it. Among the nobles were the Duke of Apathetic Leisure, Absolute Sword Duke, Inner Duke, Steadfast Duke, and Black Dragon Duke.

This indicated that the bill had already been discussed among the Dukes.

"My answer is clear. Yes, a seventh Duke is needed."

"....."

Among them, the All Gods Duke, the leader of the Religious Faction and part of the same faction as Count Ah Ru-Ho, looked up at his party leader in a daze.

The All Gods Duke, resembling the Heretic Inquisitor, grinned broadly.

"Sorry, Count! My sister asked to keep it a secret!"

"....."

Only then did the Count realize.

How easily the witnesses and evidence related to Jaa Soo-Jeong were assembled. Who had planned this political victory. The kingdom was already in Jaa Soo-Jeong's possession.

"If there are no particular problems in the current era, yes. There's no need to establish a new ducal position."

The deity who controlled the kingdom from the shadows spoke.

"But there's been too much rebellion, reaction, and rotten stench accumulated. Isn't that right? Respected members of the Noble Parliament. There are hundreds of thousands involved in the rebellion and millions of citizens who have lost loyalty to the kingdom. Someone must take responsibility for this era."

Impatient nobles read the summary on the last page first.

"The way to take responsibility is simple."

And then, confused, returned to the first page.

"Those sacrificed by the kingdom's administration in the last 60 years. Those unjustly involved in rebellion and had their lives ruined. Their families and descendants. Soldiers sacrificed under unjust orders. People who lost their homes due to public policies. Those who were robbed, physically harmed, displaced from their hometowns, or had relatives killed due to neglect or silence from royalty and nobility. Victims of racial discrimination. Enslaved and serfs. Specific examples include two Golden Dragon subjugation decrees, an internal war, three noble rebellions, and chaos caused by Red Nails and other rebel factions. Citizens who were unwillingly sacrificed."

In other words, all unjustly sacrificed citizens of the kingdom.

"The kingdom fully acknowledges its responsibility for them and will delegate all these responsibilities to the newly established seventh Duke."

In other words, Jaa Soo-Jeong.

"The principle for undertaking responsibility is as follows."



The kingdom's nobles looked at Jaa Soo-Jeong.

"Those whose lives were ruined by the kingdom can transfer as much pain as they've suffered to the seventh Duke."

Torture.

"The method for delegating responsibility is as follows."

Nobles in Jaa Soo-Jeong's faction bowed their heads.

"Any citizen who wishes to avenge the seventh Duke can identify the main culprit who ruined their life and demand their attendance at the execution of the Golden Rule. For example, a freeman named Nam Seok can force Marquis Baek Seol-To to attend as a witness."

Vengeance.

"And no matter how much pain the seventh Duke suffers, the witness cannot stop the citizen or interfere with the execution of the Golden Rule. The witness can only observe."

The cost of sin.

"The date and place for implementing the responsibility are as follows."

The reason why today is a particular evil deity's trauma.

"Every year on December 24th, the last day of the Noble Parliament's year. From midnight of this day, the seventh Duke will make a round trip around the capital in a clockwise direction. The starting and ending point is the Platinum Square in front of the Platinum Tower. During this trip, any citizen of the kingdom, regardless of age, gender, or status, can approach the seventh Duke and demand the execution of the Golden Rule."

Today is December 24th.

"I will judge whether the citizen has the right to execute the Golden Rule."

Jaa Soo-Jeong possesses the [Breath of the Ice River Dragon].

She can directly witness the other person's past.

She can know if the kingdom truly ruined that citizen's life.

"If they are eligible, I will judge how much pain they suffered, and therefore, how much pain they can return to me. An arm for an arm, an eye for an eye. If once is not enough, continue next year, and the year after, until it's sufficient."

Jaa Soo-Jeong possesses the [Eyes of the Golden Dragon].

She can understand the color and size of the other person's emotions.

She can know how much pain the kingdom caused the citizen.

"While executing the Golden Rule, my body will be damaged, and I probably won't be able to walk properly, so I'll designate someone to support me. The one who caused the most pain to the citizens will support me."

Jaa Soo-Jeong had asked every powerholder she met to love her.

She asked for nothing else.

Now, they must smell the blood of their beloved lover from the closest place.

"I, as the leader of the Mirror Faction and the head of the Amethyst family, rightfully request you to vote on this bill according to the rights granted to all nobles by the Founder King. If passed, the Golden Rule will be implemented tonight."

The parliament fell silent.

The sound of flowing water echoed.

Perhaps outside, the snow of December was falling.

"Dear colleagues of the Parliament."

The Swaying Duke.

The noble who would become the seventh Duke smiled brightly.

"Let's punish the sinner."



# Chapter 221: The God in the Square (1)

---

When Jaa Soo-Jeong spoke of sacrificing herself for the kingdom, she was beaming with a bright smile.

Looking at her smiling face, I suddenly recalled all the memories of my trauma.

'Yes.'

Beyond the mere fact that I am Kim Gong-Ja, the Vice-lord of the Demonic Heaven and the Moon of the Ivansia family, I remembered the hallucinations I had witnessed during this trauma.

'I've almost completely seen through the life of the Tower Master.'

The moment when Jaa Soo-Jeong ascended to the nobility.

First receiving the title of Baron, swiftly plunging the capital into a whirlwind of political strife, marrying a relative of the same sex.

'In every memory, Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong was smiling.'

And I saw all the moments she smiled happily.

Despite my ability being to see [trauma].

'But that's not all.'

I knew that Jaa Soo-Jeong would eventually receive the title of a duke.

Even the moments that follow, I had already [seen] once.

'Why?'

Why did I see the moments when Jaa Soo-Jeong was happy?

Why did I even see what comes next?

'Could it be...'

Realizing the possibility regarding Jaa Soo-Jeong's authority, I came to a realization.

It was a possibility close to impossible, something a normal person would hardly think of.

But as someone who had undergone 4000 days of return, I could easily reach this conclusion.

'The life of the Tower Master is entirely a trauma.'

No matter how happily she smiled.

'From birth until now, continuously, there has been no [time that isn't trauma].'

The moment I realized this, I unwittingly spoke out.



".....Until when?"

Jaa Soo-Jeong turned to look at me.

I asked her.

"How long do you plan to execute this Golden Rule?"

Jaa Soo-Jeong smiled.

"Forever."

"Until there is not a single aggrieved citizen left on this earth?"

"Yes. Not just the citizens. As I told you before, advisor, no, Mr. Gong-Ja?"

Jaa Soo-Jeong leaned towards me and whispered in my ear.

"I will encompass all worlds, beyond just the kingdom."

"....."

"I'm sorry, but I peeked into your memories, Mr. Gong-Ja. Since you're looking into mine right now, I suppose we've made a fair trade."

I had expected this.

Jaa Soo-Jeong has the power to intuitively understand someone's past.

It's unlikely she wouldn't look into the past of an irregular like me.

"The Vice-lord of Demonic Heavens. You are leading an interesting group, Mr. Gong-Ja. Well, it must take such a relationship to become this beautiful."

Jaa Soo-Jeong looked at me as if watching a beloved junior.

"I know you want to stop me. Someone like you couldn't tolerate the sight of others suffering. But Mr. Gong-Ja, please stay true to your role."

My role.

"You should be the one siding with the powerless people more than anyone else. You should be the first to execute the Golden Rule. To voice the screams of the weak. Isn't that the burden you've taken on?"

"I am....."

"Don't try to stop me. This is a warning."

Jaa Soo-Jeong toyed with my ear.

"I have a habit of inadvertently breaking things I find adorable."

"....."

"Don't think you're the first to try stopping me. Do you know how many tears His Majesty on that throne has shed? The tears I've received from my lovers alone could end next year's drought."

That wasn't likely a lie.

Nor was the warning she sent me a bluff.

Gods always warn once before breaking a human.

She had already once tried to stop me from seeing the trauma, warning me.

"You are....."

And like that time, considering the warning, I spoke.

"Are you happy doing this?"

"Yes."

Her little fingernail gently scratched near my ear.

"Don't you feel it? I'm happy. I possess the happiness and misfortune of my lovers. Just one smile from me is enough to make them happy, and just one gesture from me suffices to make them miserable. How could this not be enjoyable?"

"Even if you're tortured continuously in the future?"

"Even if I'm tortured continuously."

"Why... Why do you accept even pain as happiness?"

Jaa Soo-Jeong smiled.

"Pain is painful. But there is a sweeter reward right before me."

"What is it?"

"The tears of my lovers. Watching them crumble and break while observing my agony. Such a sweet scene that I want to

keep watching forever."

".....But you love your lovers. To bring pain to those you love is....."

"It's wrong, but all my lovers have killed or ruined someone."

"....."

"Isn't it natural justice for such people to suffer?"

"....."

"I've told you, Mr. Gong-Ja. You're not the first, nor will you be the last to try persuading me. I've crafted myself for this moment."

"Crafted.....?"

"Yes. A hobby of indulging in misfortune. A taste for admiring the ruined. Appearance and eloquence that can captivate them. Talent. Achievements that no one can deny

and skills that no one can protest. I've strived and achieved all that."

"....."

"Shall I prove it?"

At that moment, a commotion arose in the middle of the seats.

"The chaos has all passed!"

He was a noble with horns on his head and an incredibly large stature. With a voice as thunderous as his size, the noble's declaration made the surface of the waters ripple.

"The rebellion has been suppressed! All the major disturbances have ended! We just need to clean up now. There's no need to prepare such an extreme law for....."

I used Baron Gu Won-Ha's information magic to read the noble's identity.

+

[Pa San-Woo]

Status: Noble, Borderland Count.

Relation: Viscount's adversary.

Danger Level: White.

Remarks: Head of the Cow Count family. Deeply involved in a past incident involving the abduction of another family's young lady. Facilitated or condoned the kidnapping, resulting in the complete ruin of one of the estates. Resides in the northeast, famous for mining, neighboring the Bear Count's territory. Captures all runaway mine slaves coming from the neighboring territory and returns them to the Bear Count.

Neutral.

Can be killed.



+

It wasn't just Count Pa San-Woo.

"This is ridiculous. No, even if..."

A noble of similar age to Jaa Soo-Jeong muttered in dismay. Flipping through the legislative documents, they quickly turned one, two, then four pages at a time, eventually grasping the entire stack.

"The parliamentarians of the Mirror faction... What about you all? This?"

The attendants behind Jaa Soo-Jeong remained silent, prompting the noble to clench his teeth.

"How could you, a young girl not much younger than me, regardless of the reason. No, even if it wasn't a young girl, it's the same. Any logic doesn't matter. I... I just dislike this bill. I just do!"

I read that noble's information too.

+

[Seon Jo-Hae]

Status: Noble, Nearby Duke.

Relation: None.

Danger Level: White.

Remarks: Head of the Crab Marquis family. Adventurous in his youth, they roamed the seas and was cursed by an Energy Dragon. Lost his memory and sense of self. Due to the reckless actions of a lady, the Duke's family fell into decline, and since then, the Dragon Kingdom has spread its influence, eroding the foundation of the Duke's family and territory.

His mental age is below 13, despite his appearance.

Failed to notice the rebels gathering in his own territory, inadvertently contributing to a major rebellion in the eastern sea.

Neutral.

Can be killed.

+

Many other nobles spoke up after that.

Each time, I read their information and found a [common point] in all of them.

'None.'

Not a single one.

'No one is innocent.'

That was the record left by the original owner of this body.

Baron Gu Won-Ha.

'In this vast parliament. Not a single one.'

Marquis Baek Seol-To murdered a child. Viscount Chun Heuk-Shin practiced cannibalism. Viscount Dae Ha-Ran massacred civilians. Count Pa San-Woo devoured an entire estate. Marquis Seon Jo-Hae failed to prevent a rebellion. Baron Hae Myeong-Seom, Duke of Apathetic Leisure, the Sun King...

Some were ignorant. Some were incompetent. Some were simply indifferent. A hundred nobles had a hundred reasons, and a thousand excuses for each reason.

But the commonality was clear.

Among them.

Not a single one was innocent.

"Everyone."

That's why Jaa Soo-Jeong was so composed.

"For the past thousand years, especially in the last six hundred years, and even more so in the last sixty years, you've been far too negligent."

No one here saved more citizens than Jaa Soo-Jeong.

"What did you all do when tens of thousands of human slaves in the Bear Duke's territory were mining and dying? Didn't you know? Lacked the power to intervene? Weren't prepared? Maybe. But such excuses are too weak for centuries."

No one here was more capable than Jaa Soo-Jeong.

"The turmoil has all passed? The rebellion has all ended?"

"....."

"You think the turmoil is over just because you defeated the noticeable enemies? Do you think they're gone? Everyone. They haven't disappeared, they are just enduring. A person who has been whipped never forgets the pain."

Indeed.

"A person whose family died never forgets the temperature of the soil that made their grave."

That's why in some other world, someone called the Heavenly Demon prayed.

"A person who had to step aside on the road to avoid a carriage never forgets that humiliation. A mother never forgets the day her son, drafted and never returned, lay in bed. A person never forgets the pain in their mouth from the tree bark they had to peel and eat during a winter day with no food."

Thus, someone like the Heavenly Demon prayed.

"Have they disappeared? Is it all a story of the past? Are their grievances so stale that they don't need to be resolved, their resentments so tedious they're not worth listening to?"

Impossible.

"That's impossible."

That's why they offered prayers.

"Don't make me laugh."

This world is no different. No world is different.

Someone is offering prayers.

This world too.

In Baron Sin Wol-Seok's territory, an untouched rock rolled by itself. In Steadfast Duke's territory, stones moved on their own, and the people whispered of ominous signs.

And Lady Baek Seol-To beat a commoner's child to death with a whip.

The river boiled every night for no reason. Frogs leaped in every waterway, only to crash their heads and die. In the capital, lightning struck twenty-six times in a day, "The number thirteen overlapping above and below makes twenty-six, an ominous sign," said a fortune-teller at the north gate.

And Viscount Dae Ha-Ran massacred civilians.

The fortune-teller was severely punished for recklessly predicting the country's fortune. The royal guards beheaded him. That day, even though the rainy season had not yet arrived, the river overflowed greatly, blocking all roads leading to the capital.

And the Sun King did not leave the palace.

"You all, those in power, must bear the responsibility of the past times."

Famines repeated. Epidemics were continuous. Time was like a rotten spine, with pus accumulating at every joint that recurred and continued.

The corpses of citizens flowed over the flooded river.

"Someone orchestrated all these events, neglected them, and therefore, you all must choose the one who deserves the condemnation of the entire population."

In the middle of a collapsing world, on a December day, a pillar in the shape of a girl stood, trying to support it.



"You will choose me."

The waters fell silent.

How much time had passed?

Marquis Seon Jo-Hae spoke with a trembling voice.

"I dislike this."

Jaa Soo-Jeong nodded.

"Yes. That's right."

And then she said.

"What other ending did you expect?"

---

The original owner of this body must have searched

desperately.

'Even just one would be fine.'

Baron Gu Won-Ha loved Jaa Soo-Jeong.

I didn't know the reason or see the cause, but from the Baron's writings, I could feel the weight of her love.

'Even if it's just one, there must be an innocent ruler in this damned kingdom.'

So the Baron began to record.

Using her magic, she investigated the actions of each noble, documenting her findings.

I, too, who inherited her body, looked at each noble attending the parliament. I read their information.

But the records left by Gu Won-Ha remained unchanged.

'Murderer.'

Mass murderers.

'Those who started a rebellion.'

Those who suppressed civil unrest.

'Those who bought slaves.'

Those who sold slaves.

'Those who erred out of ignorance.'

Those who created wrongs due to incompetence.

The information recorded by Baron Gu Won-Ha was a revelation of crimes. Among the hundreds of feet in the waters, not one was free from the blood of citizens.

So, Baron Gu Won-Ha gave up.

She couldn't stop her master.

'Maybe that's why I regained control of this body now...'

As I thought up to that point, I moved.

"Eh?"

Jaa Soo-Jeong tilted her head slightly.

Her violet eyes reflected me, standing in front of her.

"Didn't I warn you, Mr. Gong-Ja? I am-"

"Trauma."

I said.

Jaa Soo-Jeong tilted her head even more.

"Huh?"

"Viscount. I have seen your trauma."

"I know. You're seeing it now, aren't you?"

"Not just this moment. The moment you first received the title of Baron, the moment you married your wife... I've almost entirely seen through your life."

I grasped Jaa Soo-Jeong's wrist.

"If you were truly happy, those scenes wouldn't have appeared before my eyes."

"Maybe?"

Jaa Soo-Jeong cocked her head.

"Maybe I've only started to become a bit happier recently? Despite appearances, my life has been a display of hardships. From today, true happiness begins."

"No."

Your smile hasn't changed since that day.

"I saw that you eventually received the title of Duke."

Your smile hasn't changed since then either.

"Even today, and from here on, you will continue to experience times of trauma."

"That's a strange thing to say, King of Death."

Jaa Soo-Jeong called me by a nickname I had never revealed.

Her claim of reading my past was no lie.

"Are you saying that I'm actually unhappy and just pretending to be happy? That's a bit offensive. If I had lied like that, my lovers would've noticed, wouldn't they? I am-

"[The God Who Never Returns]."

I moved closer to Jaa Soo-Jeong.

"The reason your entire life is pain is simple. It's obvious. You're always seeing [someone else's past]. You've seen the past of Marquis Baek Seol-To, Viscount Dae Ha-Ran, and even my past, which I wasn't aware of."

In essence.

"You've never had a moment where you weren't witnessing someone's death."

"That must be painful. That's why your life is stained with hundreds of millions of traumas."

Closer.

"But, it's strange. You only acquired the powers of [Golden Dragon's Eye] and [Ice River Dragon's Breath] relatively recently. The ability to freely peek into others' pasts is a fairly new development. Yet, you've been in pain throughout your entire life."

I had seen the era of Jaa Soo-Jeong before she gathered the dragons.

Even then, she suffered from reading others' pasts.

How?

Without the dragons' powers in that era, how could she have suffered the same way as now, inheriting others' pain?

There's only one possibility.

"The God Who Never Returns? That's a ridiculous lie."

"....."



"You are [The God Who Continuously Returns]."

I looked at the young noble.

"You returned to the past with the dragons' powers. Thus, from your childhood to now, you've continuously been able to see others' traumas."

When she faced the Duke of Apathetic Leisure, Jaa Soo-Jeong instantly deciphered her life.

As if she had always known.

When she met the Sun King, she already knew his life.

As if she had long suspected.

"You've been incessantly repeating this life."

"....."

"Regressing, returning. Living the same life each time. Knowing exactly what to say, how to act. You're eternally repeating this life, continuously watching others' pain."

"....."

"That's why your entire life is a trauma."

Jaa Soo-Jeong fell silent.

I asked her.

"How many times have you repeated this life, Tower Master?"

Jaa Soo-Jeong did not smile.

"Have you counted, seen how many times?"

Expressionless.

Time in the parliament hall had seemingly stopped.

Marquis Seon Jo-Hae, with their head bowed in anger, tears streaming, the Sun King, silently sitting, everyone had frozen in time.

"Mr. Gong-Ja."

In the time broken like a stopped clock, Jaa Soo-Jeong spoke.

"Have you ever counted the sand grains in the river that flows to Nirvana?"

Ganges sands.

"My answer is predetermined."

Jaa Soo-Jeong's face, expressionless as if she was born that way, bore no emotion. Her violet eyes indifferently reflected the world, her lips neither mocking, blessing, nor scoffing.

"Forever."

In that moment, the scenery shattered.

# Chapter 222: The God in the Square (2)

---

The world shattered like a mirror.

Craaack-.

Slowly, bit by bit, the scenery of the parliament hall crumbled. The amniotic fluid flowing underfoot shattered. Marquis Baek Seol-To trembling beside me shattered. The nobles shattered. Craaack! Crack...

As if shedding its skin, the world transformed through the shattered windowpane.

Through the fissures of the fracture, a different landscape peeked through, not of the parliament. The sight of Marquis Baek Seol-To wielding a whip. Viscount Dae Ha-Ran burning a village. The world split into a hundred, a thousand fragments. From each crack, screams leaked out.

"That's right, Mr. Gong-Ja."

Kaleidoscope.

This was Jaa Soo-Jeong's world.

"Your deduction is correct."

Splash.

Jaa Soo-Jeong, with amniotic fluid on her feet, walked to the center of the parliament. As she stepped, the world shattered around her, crack, crack, and through each broken scene, another place was revealed.

"This life of mine isn't the first."

"....."

I inhaled sharply.

"How many times has it been?"

“I'm not sure. Well, I could find out, but I wonder if it would be the answer you're seeking, Mr. Gong-Ja. Are you worried that I, after repeating countless lives, will eventually collapse in exhaustion?”

Indeed.

Raviel is a strong person. Even Raviel, trapped in a repeating cycle of ten days, had her heart rot away. What if someone, not just for ten days but for an entire lifetime, is perpetually repeating it?

What would gather in their heart?

What foul stench would emanate?

“I was bestowed with an innate ability from the beginning.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong had reached the center of the parliament by now.

Even the central throne was shattered like glass. The armrest of the chair broke off, and through the void, glimpses of Viscount Chun Heuk-Shin engaging in cannibalism

flickered. One leg of the throne was also broken. There, too, someone unknown was dying.

“In this world, many dragons have lived and existed.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong sat down.

On the throne with broken armrests and a shattered leg.

She rested her arms on the sight of people killing each other, and her legs on the sight of people being killed.

“There are those who have made special contracts with dragons. The Dragon Emperor's guards, Dragon Knights. The titles vary by region, but they share one thing: their descendants inherit the Dragon Blood.”

“Dragon Blood?”

“Yes. It's like a minor copy version of the powers possessed by dragons.”



Jaa Soo-Jeong caressed the armrest of the glass throne.

“For example, imagine a dragon that can build a vast library, stocking it with records of everything in the world. That's the dragon's power. In contrast, the ability of Dragon Blood would merely allow one to enter that library and occasionally borrow books.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong was expressionless.

Her lips, no longer smiling, parted.

“The relationship between the Dragon Emperor and the Dragon Knights can be likened to that of a god and its followers. Hence, those who receive Dragon Blood are sometimes called apostles.”

I flinched.

“Apostles...”

“Among the apostles you know, Lady Goldencup would be one.”

The image of the lady, wielding a giant hammer and cursing the world, came to mind.

Goldencup's power. It was a body impervious to physical damage.

“My ability is [Perfect Memory].”

Jaa Soo-Jeong said.

“I remember everything I've seen, heard, and felt. Not only remember, but I can also revisit those memories as if in a lucid dream.”

“Doesn't it sound familiar, Mr. Gong-Ja?”

There was.

Very close by.

I recalled the face of a part-time worker who now greets customers with a beaming smile in some café.

The former owner of the Grand Library that once collected records of everything in existence. The Great Librarian of All Knowledge.

“Hamusutra.....”

“[The Pond Where Memories Gather].”

Jaa Soo-Jeong spoke the librarian's true name.

“I inherited Hamusutra’s powers. Long ago, an apostle who worshiped Hamusutra as a god descended into this kingdom. Although the apostle was eventually defeated and perished, they left behind a descendant before dying. If you trace my lineage, it leads to that apostle.”

Thanks to that, Jaa Soo-Jeong said.

“Things like this are possible.”

It was the moment she raised a finger.

Craaack-.

The glass window that covered the whole world shattered once again. A shard of glass fell, touching another identical shard. When the two shards collided, they suddenly shone brightly, turning into a pure white butterfly.

The two shards of glass became the wings of the butterfly. The world, shattered into millions of pieces, fell, and from them, hundreds of thousands of butterflies fluttered.

Craaack, crack...

Like flower petals carried by the wind, white butterflies bloomed all over this world.

"Come here, Mr. Gong-Ja."

Jaa Soo-Jeong beckoned.

"....."

I took a deep breath and headed towards the mirror throne.

Crackle.

Around me, white butterflies already fluttered chaotically. One passed right in front of my nose. A voice leaked from the butterfly's wings. -The count has fallen in battle, young lady.

The butterfly was made of two glass shards. Each silvery wing harbored its own scene. On the wings of this butterfly was portrayed Count Ah Ru-Ho.

The young count's lips moved slightly.

-What about my eldest brother?

-No news. He led a squad to retrieve the count's remains, but we've yet to hear back. I must disrespectfully say, it's likely...

-Ah.

-Young lady. It's unavoidable. You are a dignified member of

the Tiger Count's family. Misfortune befalls everyone, but a tiger swallows the incoming misfortune, chews it up, and then spits it towards the world that dared challenge them.

-I'm ignorant of politics. I'm not ready.

-People are born into the world unprepared, and meet death unprepared. Life isn't about preparation, but endurance. Young lady, ascend to the seat of the count.

The white butterfly lightly flew away.

Into the midst of countless butterflies fluttering like dense flower petals.

"....."

On the wings of one butterfly was the image of Marquis Baek Seol-To, holding back tears. Viscount Chun Heuk-Shin, clenching his teeth, was there too.

Viscount Dae Ha-Ran muttered, suppressing his anger.

-During the rebellion, those cowardly bastards did nothing. In the parliament, they all act like great generals and decorated heroes. Damn, should I just wipe out these bastards?

Hundreds of thousands of butterflies, each emitting their own sound, fluttered away.

“As you can see.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong spoke to me, who had reached the throne.

“All the past events I've experienced are recorded here. Originally, I could only remember my own life, but after acquiring [Golden Dragon's Eye] and [Ice River Dragon's Breath], I began to encompass others' lives as well.”

"....."

“This is a world where my memories are recorded. Only two people, including you, have ever stepped foot here. You can take pride in it, Mr. Gong-Ja.”

“Am I invited into the lady's consciousness right now?”

“Yes. That’s right.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong spread her palms.

“In your terms, you're peeking into my skill.”

A card, glittering in gold, formed there.

Among the skills possessed by the Tower Master, this was the last card.

+

[All Lives ]

Rank: EX

Effect: Originally, it was just an ability of ‘perfect memory.’ However, it has blossomed into a completely higher-dimensional skill through the overlap with various other skills. This is a glass garden where every human, object, and event you've experienced is faithfully recorded. If you wish,



you can replay any of the memories stored here.

But there's more.

+

Flutter.

Something landed on the back of my hand.

It was the butterfly I had seen earlier.

-Aaaaah!

From the transparent surface of its glassy wings, a red scene flowed. A scene now somewhat familiar to me. The playback of Marquis Baek Seol-To whipping.

Only.

The face of the child groaning under the whip was different.

-Ugh, huff! Ah, aaaaah!

It was Jaa Soo-Jeong's face.

Much younger than now.

I involuntarily gasped.

“Lady, what is this...?”

“If on that day, it wasn't a commoner child but I who faced Marquis Baek Seol-To's daughter.”

Whack!

The thick whip tore into young Jaa Soo-Jeong's back, blood staining the snow.

"This is a scenario flowing under the assumption of 'what if'. I completely grasp the cause and effect of the past. 'What if someone else had been there then.' 'What if something else had happened.' I can reconstruct countless IF scenarios."

"Why would you view such IF scenarios...?"

"To know."

A scream burst forth.

"How much pain the child killed by the marquis had endured."

In the scene reflected by the glassy wings, Jaa Soo-Jeong foamed at the mouth and collapsed to the ground.

"People don't want to be easily understood. They dislike when someone hastily says 'I understand you', without truly grasping how much they've suffered, how much pain they've endured. It's understandable. To each other, they are strangers."

Whack!

The small back convulsed.

Struck by the whip, Jaa Soo-Jeong clenched and twisted the snow on the ground, as if trying to grasp onto a dying life.

"I will stand before those who have suffered in this kingdom and say, 'I know how much pain you've endured.'"

The snow gripped in her hand melted from her body heat.

It trickled down.

At the end of the melting snow, a pool of blood had formed.

The clear water slowly spread over the crimson surface.

"I know the pain they have experienced, the pain they have endured, the pain they will endure. Only when I fully understand all of it, can I finally speak to them without any lies."

I know how much you've suffered.

"Now tell me to endure the same pain."

"The Golden Rule..."

"Yes. That's right. Only through me can the kingdom's marginalized and sacrificed people finally feel understood."

"....."

"Those with grievances and hatreds that had nowhere to go, nobody to direct them at, can now vent on me. Do you see? I don't just console them with mere sympathy or with words alone."

Jaa Soo-Jeong said.

"I truly understand."

With transparent eyes.

"They can be truly understood."

"....."

"By ascending to the position of the duke, not a single person in the kingdom will be neglected anymore. Of course, misfortune will not stop. Someone will suffer. But now, through me, the kingdom will understand their pain. Accept it. Alleviate it."

I...

Once again, I looked around blankly.

-Save me! Please, general, save me!

It was hell.

-Aaaaah!

-Ugh, .....huff. Ah.....

In this glass garden, Jaa Soo-Jeong bled, screamed, and died on behalf of others. From the pillars of the garden, from the

arches supporting the dome, from the countless glass windows forming the walls. Around the pillars, under the dome, beside the walls, from the fluttering wings of hundreds of thousands of butterflies. Everywhere, Jaa Soo-Jeong bled.

-My, my name is Baek Seol-To, the marquis's daughter.

It wasn't just that.

-In your position as a commoner. Consider it an honor!

In an IF scenario on one of the glass wings, Baek Seol-To visited Jaa Soo-Jeong to apologize.

In that world, Jaa Soo-Jeong didn't die.

Compared to the original commoner child, Jaa Soo-Jeong was stronger and healthier. Although her body was damaged from the whipping, it wasn't fatal.

-My name is Jaa Soo-Jeong.

-Jaa Soo-Jeong? What a strange name.

-You are, lady...

In that world, Jaa Soo-Jeong and Baek Seol-To grew closer.

Born a commoner, Jaa Soo-Jeong was intelligent and capable enough to fill the gaps in Baek Seol-To's knowledge.

Thanks to secret tutoring from Jaa Soo-Jeong, Baek Seol-To managed to complete the homework her grandfather assigned.

-I, I got praised by grandpa for the first time! What do I do!? I'm so happy. I can't stop smiling...

-Congratulations, lady.

-Yes! It's all thanks to Jaa Soo-Jeong!

Baek Seol-To grabbed Jaa Soo-Jeong's hand and jumped for joy.



There was no sign of the haughty, prejudiced noble lady, only disdainful of mixing with commoners.

A small coincidence created change.

A small change led to an encounter.

A small encounter was creating a human.

-I will live for you.

Viscount Chun Heuk-Shin, who met Jaa Soo-Jeong a bit earlier, smiled brightly.

No, she was no longer a viscount. Chun Heuk-Shin abandoned her noble status and joined the special forces with Jaa Soo-Jeong. The two became close colleagues and caught criminals of the kingdom, one by one.

-Civilian massacres should be avoided, general.

-Why?

Viscount Dae Ha-Ran, with Jaa Soo-Jeong as his advisor, pursed his lips.

-Isn't it faster to massacre?

-Faster, but not right. It will make things much more difficult later. This may be enemy territory now, but it will eventually be reclaimed as royal land. General, you must create citizens for the kingdom, not enemies...

Countless glasses.

Countless white butterflies.

In countless worlds, Jaa Soo-Jeong bled, screamed, and died. This was the left wing of the butterfly.

And on the right were slightly better possibilities. Scenes without victims, without murderers, continued. This was the right wing of the butterfly.

Her world was filled with many butterflies, and with them, many deaths and lives.

"Because I wasn't there."

Glass and butterflies. Blood and screams. Death and life.

"Because I was too late. Because I was born too late. Every tragedy in this world happened."

Under the white fluttering butterflies.

The god clasped her small hands together as if praying somewhere.

"If I had been there, you all would have met a slightly better ending. Lived a slightly happier life. It's my fault, my sin for not always being there with you. So, I will scream as much as you have suffered."

Forever.

"....."

I read the rest of the words engraved on the card.

+

[All Lives ]

Rank: EX

Effect: Originally, it was just an ability of 'perfect memory.' However, it has blossomed into a completely higher-dimensional skill through the overlap with various other skills. This is a glass garden where every human, object, and event you've experienced is faithfully recorded. If you wish, you can replay any of the memories stored here.

But there's more.

You know how past events were constructed through various causes. The more precisely you understand these causes, the more accurately you can construct IF scenarios.

You can simulate the world.

\*However, this skill can only be activated when possessing [Golden Dragon's Gaze] and [Ice River Dragon's Breath].

+

There, lay a skill that could create hell.

“Mr. Gong-Ja.”

The owner of All Lives spoke.

“You asked how many times I have repeated this life.”

"....."

“It’s pointless to answer how many times. I don’t just repeat my own life. The kingdom’s citizens, everyone who lived and died in the kingdom. I eternally live their lives on their behalf.”

Therefore.

That’s why Jaa Soo-Jeong’s life was a trauma.

The reason why her entire life was chosen as a trauma unlike others.

"Always..."

I was at a loss for words.

"Are you always replaying these scenes, even while sitting in the parliament just now?"

"Yes."

"And even while smiling in front of your lovers?"

"Yes."

Jaa Soo-Jeong said.

"I'm sorry."

Thud.

A word fell from Jaa Soo-Jeong's expressionless face.

"I'm sorry."

"....."

"I'm sorry for being born late. For not living with you. For not being able to save you."

I'm sorry.

The butterflies fluttering around the glass garden all simultaneously uttered that one phrase. Happy IF scenarios faded. The silvery wings reflected reality, where Baek Seol-To whipped a young commoner, Viscount Chun Heuk-Shin devoured human flesh, and Viscount Dae Ha-Ran burned down a village.

"I'm sorry."

The young god apologized to everyone.

For all the deaths that occurred in this kingdom, all the disasters, all the catastrophes. To those killed by people. To those who killed people. To those killed by non-human entities. To non-humans.

For everything.

“I'm sorry, everyone.”

That was the only sound left in her heart.

“Lady...”

Unable to endure, I took a step forward,

“I'm sorry, Mr. Gong-Ja.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong grasped my left hand.



“Because I wasn't by your side, Mr. Gong-Ja.”

A warm something passed from her hand into mine.

Looking down, in the grip of our hands, a white butterfly had folded its wings and curled up.

“That's why you were killed by Yoo Soo-Ha.”

For a moment.

My breath stopped.

“That's why you had no choice but to kill Yoo Soo-Ha.”

Rustle.

The butterfly slowly opened its white wings.

And the world reflected in the glassy wings unfolded.



# **Volume 10 – Chapters 223-248**

# Chapter 223: If (1)

---

Looking back.

Jaa Soo-Jeong, the Viscount, had clearly warned me.

-Don't try to stop me. This is a warning.

Right before I unlocked her lock.

She already knew I held the key in my hand.

If she had been a brute, she would have made the key unusable. She wouldn't have answered my questions or given me the correct answers to my probing.

Jaa Soo-Jeong could have done that.

But she didn't.

She just calmly forewarned that the lock I would open would lead to a secret room, and the person who would get hurt in that room would be none other than me.

-I have a habit of inadvertently ruining lovely children.

I unlocked the lock.

And received the consequence as the god warned.

---

-Yoo Soo-Ha.

A familiar bar.

A dim atmosphere.

There were many expensive bars on the first floor of the tower. Fully operated bars, indistinguishable from those in the outside world, importing high-end bottles from the outside, selling them at eye-watering prices.

A rip-off.

But as in the world, there were customers who sweetly accepted being ripped off, like a shoulder massage. No matter the price, there were customers lining up.

The outside world, now unreachable.

The illusion of stopping by an ordinary bar outside, spending an ordinary day, was worth pouring in several gold coins.

-Yoo Soo-Ha.

-Ahh...?

The bar where Yoo Soo-Ha woke up was a beer house.

A so-called 'Hof'.

In the vast Babylon, the only place that replicated a Korean-style Hof. There was a large fridge, and inside it, familiar

branded beer cans were stacked neatly.

Cheap silver cans pretending to be cool with blue lettering. Cans with tacky gold trim, boasting their 'gold' as a sign of luxury. And so on.

Ironically, none of the brands had Korean labels, all in English.

-Oh, what now...

For Yoo Soo-Ha, those beer cans were proof of his homeland.

The country he fled from, where people had to loudly proclaim their love for their native script. In other words, the homeland's script wasn't much loved.

Everything born in that land wasn't loved.

Citizens disliked their fellow citizens. People disliked other people. They hated the children they birthed, the parents who gave them birth. People who hated each other gathered and built schools. They hated it there too.

-Why wake me up, whyy...?

Yoo Soo-Ha learned only how to hate people in that country.

Born among people who hated each other, growing up with them, what else could he learn? Math? Language? As useless as moral science classes. Essentially, Yoo Soo-Ha learned nothing but hatred there.

Among the parents who bore them, how many could loudly claim,

"I love humans."

How many parents could sincerely say they love humans, without any falsehood?

Not just parents, but teachers too. For 12 long years, numerous teachers occupied Yoo Soo-Ha's time. He inhaled their breath into his lungs.

Yoo Soo-Ha wanted to ask,



"Do you really love humans, teacher?"

Probably not.

But the opposite question could be easily answered.

"Do you hate humans?"

Then his own parents would be the first to raise their hands. "Yes." The father of the classmate behind him would too. "Yes." And finally, among all the parents and students, the teacher at the podium would nod.

-Of course, I hate humans too.

So.

Screw you.

-Yoo Soo-Ha, you're totally drunk.

Someone patted his shoulder.

Small hands.

-This isn't a classroom, Yoo Soo-Ha. Do you see me?

-Ah, shit... Damn it... what... where is this?

-Right. This is actually a school. Yes. It's the high school classroom you attended.

-You said it wasn't a school before, didn't you?

-Which school would serve beer cans for lunch?

Thud.

Someone placed two giant beer cans on the table.

The drunken Yoo Soo-Ha twitched his shoulders. His bleary

eyes focused on the two pillars in front of his nose and sniffed.

-Eh...?

-It's beer. Korean beer that you can't live without. I think it's the worst beer in the world, but just like people from an island country love their hometown food, there must be one or two who love Korean beer the most. Here. Drink up.

-Woah... where is this?

-Two possibilities.

-Tell me! My manager!

-First, you skipped night study at school and rode a scooter with friends to a bar street in Samcheong-dong. Decided to drink beer instead of soju, entered a seemingly decent Hof, and drank till you were wasted.

-Drunk! Drun-k! Drunk!

Yoo Soo-Ha shook the beer can like an ancient barbaric warrior.

The can overflowed, and Yoo Soo-Ha happily received the holy water bestowed by Dionysus on his head.

Yoo Soo-Ha didn't care, the bar owner didn't care, and the person speaking to Yoo Soo-Ha didn't care.

-The second possibility is, you're no longer a high school student, not in Samcheong-dong's cheap bar street, not even in Korea, but already an S-Rank Hunter. You stormed into this Hof for no reason to taste the hometown flavor and got wasted.

-Hmm.

-Which scenario do you prefer, Yoo Soo-Ha?

-What was the weather like outside... in the outside world?

-The current weather in Korea is simply rainy. Yesterday's rain is still falling today, and today's rain falls twice. The sticky humidity fills the neighborhood, just passing by the street will

stress you out. Your stress level will drop by -1, -1, -1, from the dot damage.

-Did I bring an umbrella...?

-You didn't. Neither did I.

-Dammit. Then let's go with the second possibility! Damn it!

Yoo Soo-Ha emptied another can and turned around.

-Owner! Er, here's the payment!

-First, let's see if you can walk in a straight line.

A girl snatched Yoo Soo-Ha's wallet. Inside were numerous bills printed by the Bank of Korea. After counting the bills, the girl asked.

-How much is it, boss?

-He drank a lot. Including side dishes, it's 60,000 won.

-My goodness.

The girl looked back at Yoo Soo-Ha and glared.

-You drank that much?

-Sorry. I feel like I'm gonna burp...

-It's not burp but alcohol you'll vomit out. Then maybe you could get a discount. Ordering five side dishes and eleven beer cans by yourself. Can all that fit in your stomach?

-Ugh... Glu... Hu... Cough! Weh... Cough! Waaah!

-Disgusting.

The girl's expression soured.

-I'll clean it up. Don't worry, owner.

-No, no, it's okay. It's all part of the service. Anyway, it's 60,000 won.

The girl took out the Korean bills from the wallet and handed them over.

And from then on, the [illusion of a bar] unfolded its magic.

-Ten thousand won worth of Korean bills is one gold coin, right?

-Recently the exchange rate has risen a bit. It's not easy to get Korean money here.

The bar owner whispered.

-Chinese or Japanese money can be easily brought in, but Korean money is really only for collection purposes in Babylon...

-I'll give you two more gold coins. Please prepare a good amount of cash. That way, customers can pay in Korean money and receive change in Korean money too.

-Ah, you're Yoo Soo-Ha's manager, indeed. So smart and attentive to our business needs.

The bar owner repeatedly bowed to the small girl.

Indeed.

A bar in Babylon Tower is a space of [magic].

This place is Korea. They only accept and give out Korean money. Thus, customers can taste common beers found in Korean Hof bars, domestic beers, Belgian style beers, and bottled Chinese beers. They can also enjoy boneless chicken, seasoned chicken, and somewhat oddly flavored pizzas, all cooked by the chef.

-Recently, the military provocations in the Korean Strait are escalating day by day...

Even the bar's television broadcasts outside world news,



Korean news specifically.

It was a bizarre sight.

This Korean-style beer house had few Korean drinks on the menu. The few Korean drinks were all branded in English. The side dishes were either chicken or pizza, neither of which originated in Korea.

In this beer house, payments were made in Korean money. At least upfront. Behind the scenes, they counted the exchange value between gold and Korean money, trying to ensure the [casino chips] named Korean money didn't run out.

None of the people clinking their beer glasses and cheering in the bar were Korean. Not a single one.

Those who abandoned their country to enter the tower had their nationality revoked for one reason or another.

In a land without a country, the patrons cried out the patriotism of some country, got heated about politics, argued, and sometimes even came to blows.

-Yoo Soo-Ha.

A city of exiles.

-Are you sober now?

-Uh, well... more or less... Ah, usually I'd just use Aura to wash away the hangover. But I can't today because of our promise... Thought I was gonna die from drinking.

-Because you promised me.

Someone with the girl's voice spoke calmly.

-Today, under no circumstances, use Aura.

-Yeah, well... Hey, damn. How did I make such a promise? I don't remember.

-On the way back from the floor raid, you bet with Black Dragon Witch whether assassins would attack or not. You bet they would. I bet they wouldn't.

-Ah, ah.

Yoo Soo-Ha grimaced.

-Remember now. Damn it. Black Dragon Witch. That daughter of a bitch. That dog-like bastard. Hey, Jaa Soo-Jeong, do you know? The characters in [dog-like bastard] look like a real puppy? Look. [Dog] is the head and front legs. [like] is the body and hind legs. [ard] is the buttocks and tail. Look. Dog-Like Bastard. Wow. I'm a genius. It's really like a puppy, isn't it?

-That's right. Yoo Soo-Ha really is a son of a Yoo Soo-Ha.

-Umm...?

-I'm somewhat relieved you're regaining your senses, but that 'somewhat' makes me anxious. Don't tell me, Yoo Soo-Ha. You forgot about the interview tomorrow, right?

-Tomorrow's... intervieweeew...?

-Yes.

The girl.

A hunter with the appearance of Jaa Soo-Jeong answered briefly.

-We're interviewing for a new manager.

Snap!

Yoo Soo-Ha grabbed Jaa Soo-Jeong's small shoulder.

-I don't need a new manager!

-It hurts.

-Hey, Jaa Soo-Jeong! Is there something you're unhappy with? If you're unhappy, tell me. I'll listen to anything. Is the salary too low? Should I pour cash into your mouth until it tastes like salty water? Someone bothering you? Who is it, these damn little bastards...? Hey? I'll cut off their limbs and throw them away in the hunting grounds of Floor 2... Hey? Jaa Soo-Jeong! I'm a generous man. Just tell me!

-I...

-Yes! What, what? Anything, I'll listen!

-I lack strength to move things, it's hard.

-Oh...?

-And driving with Yoo Soo-Ha sitting behind me is a nightmare. My butt, back, and neck hurt when I drive.

-Ah...

-We need a new manager. Yoo Soo-Ha. For a star hunter like you, it's inevitable to need manpower.

-I can just carry that stuff myself.

-And drive yourself too?

-Yeah.

-You sure?

-Yeah, but it won't look cool. Sorry. Can't do it... I can do anything else, but killing my style is something I can't accept...

-If we don't hire a new manager, I'll die of overwork. Hire someone. Otherwise, I'll resign.

-Ah! Ah! What! Why are you even considering resigning, Jaa Soo-Jeong Deputy!

-When did the title of Deputy come between us?

-Just now. It's my guild, I'm the boss, I'm the king. From now on, you're Deputy Jaa Soo-Jeong.

-Haa...

Jaa Soo-Jeong sighed.

-Then, as planned, I'll enter the manager interview tomorrow.

-That's what I'm doing too, right? Huh?

-Of course. It's about hiring Yoo Soo-Ha's manager.

When we returned to the guild building, a flashy banner was already hung.

[Recruiting a manager for the world's No. 1 S-Rank Hunter, the Tyrant of Babylon Tower, Hunter Yoo Soo-Ha.]

# Chapter 224: If (2)

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[Recruiting a manager for the world's No. 1 S-Rank Hunter, the Tyrant of Babylon Tower, Hunter Yoo Soo-Ha.]

Looking at the banner, Yoo Soo-Ha frowned.

-Jaa Soo-Jeong.

-Yes.

-Deputy Jaa Soo-Jeong.

-Speak.

-Doesn't this kind of miss the mark of the event's purpose?

-Is there a problem?



Jaa Soo-Jeong's expression remained calm.

-I prepared it splendidly, considering Yoo Soo-Ha's status as a figure of the century's attention. Reporters will come at the appointed time tomorrow, and there are even planned articles about who will be selected as Yoo Soo-Ha's close associate. For the next two weeks, Yoo Soo-Ha's face will decorate the main portal sites. Congratulations. It's well done.

-Where does such a damn competent manager come from, ah, damn, Jaa Soo-Jeong. This uncle loves you fiercely! You know that, right!?

-It's hot. I can't breathe. It's dirty. Don't come any closer. If you do, don't breathe.

-Hey! Why am I dirty!?

-Since when has someone who flaunted a triple axel overflow been expected to emit a fragrant scent?

-Damn. Should have showered first...

-So, you don't like the banner?

-No, it's not that I don't like it... Just a moment.

Yoo Soo-Ha went into the guild's storage and returned with a paint can.

-Here we go.

With the handiwork of someone who's painted walls in his youth, Yoo Soo-Ha brushed the banner. As the strokes continued, the banner lost its original content and was completely smeared with new words.

-Good. Done. Looks amazing.

-.....

[Recruiting a servant for the world's No. 1 S-Rank Hunter, the Tyrant of Babylon Tower, Hunter Yoo Soo-Ha's manager.]

Jaa Soo-Jeong was momentarily at a loss for words.

-Yoo Soo-Ha.

-Hmm.

-Guild Master Yoo Soo-Ha.

-What.

-The content of the banner has completely changed.

-I told you, you're the deputy. Since there's a deputy, there should be subordinates.

Yoo Soo-Ha spoke as if stating the world's most natural truth.

-How can some newbie, uh, expect to be treated the same as a manager who has been taking care of me for a long time? Huh? Social life isn't that easy. Deputy Jaa Soo-Jeong.

-Indeed...

-Our guild always respects seniority. I'm forever the damn powerful guild leader, His Majesty. Jaa Soo-Jeong, since you're

the second to join, you have the right to boss around the underlings. Whatever the position, manager or whatever, call it whatever you want. Just pick a decent servant. Someone who can do some heavy lifting. And driving. Huh? Anyway, select a proper servant.

-Understood.

-Okay. Then I'll go... Oh... Uweeek!!

That day, right where Yoo Soo-Ha vomited for the fourth time, the interview took place.

Of course, since Jaa Soo-Jeong had meticulously cleaned up with a mop, the guild's 100 gold coins per tile floor shone brightly. Sparkling.

-What motivated you to apply for this job?

Jaa Soo-Jeong sat in the interviewer's seat, looking at the applicants.

The faces of the applicants sparkled just like the freshly cleaned tiles.

-I-I am a hunter from the same East Asian region as the Flame Emperor! East Asia can do it! Given the same conditions in the tower, East Asia has an advantage! I'm here to prove that...

-You're talking nonsense.

-What?

Jaa Soo-Jeong shook her head.

-Our guild leader dislikes his homeland. He also dislikes the countries surrounding his homeland. He dislikes the earth that hosts these countries and the universe where the earth exists.

-.What?

-And he'll probably dislike you too. Next.

Disqualified.

-What motivated you to apply?

-I have always deeply admired the Flame Emperor.

-What about him do you find humanly attractive?

-First of all, I'm mesmerized by his Apollo statue-like refined beauty.

-The Apollo statue comparison is so overused that even hearing it makes my eardrums cringe, but fine. This isn't a poetry sensitivity test. Continue.

-Most of all, his beautiful heart that cares and looks after others...

-That's bullshit.

Disqualified.

-Honestly, I applied because I want to sleep with the Flame Emperor just once.

-Is that so?

-Yes, it is.

-.....

-.....

-Please sign here.

-What's this document? Is it the acceptance document?

-No, it's a confidentiality agreement. A document created by top-tier hunters with their skills. If you divulge anything you hear here, about thirteen holes will spontaneously appear in your body, resulting in your life [Oh, there's an exit here? I gotta leave!] fleeing from you.

-.....

-Are you going to sign?

-I'll sign.

-You really signed.

-Yes, I really did.

-Then I'll tell you.

-I'm listening.

-Yoo Soo-Ha is impotent.

-.....

-.....

-.....

-.....



-What?

-Impotent. Erectile dysfunction. Should I explain it using not just nouns but verbs and adjectives too? Would that help you understand?

-No, I mean. I. That's... uh...

-Remember the thirteen holes.

-By the way, the thirteen holes don't include eye sockets, nostrils, ear holes, belly button, pee hole, or anus. It's the other holes that make up the thirteen. Aren't you curious about how evolutionarily grand your body can be in terms of holes?

-I won't divulge anything even if it kills me.

-Next.

Disqualified.

-I am...

And then...

-I mean, that's... uh...

A scruffy man sat in the interview seat.

-Um, just once... even if it's just once, I want to breathe the same air as the highest person in this world.

Jaa Soo-Jeong looked at the man.

-Why do you think that?

-Compared to where I live now... there's something different... I don't know exactly, but there must be something. No, there will be. There has to be.

-.....

-I, I have no talent and only strange skills... I can't ascend to that [height], but I can assist someone who is ascending. No.

The man stood up from his chair, bowing deeply.

-I must, want to assist! Please let me be there! I'll do any menial task! My salary? Just enough not to starve or freeze to death is sufficient! Please, I beg you!

The girl looked down at the man.

Jaa Soo-Jeong looked at Kim Gong-Ja.

-What do you think about the Flame Emperor's personality?

Kim Gong-Ja blinked.

-Uh...

-Please be honest. Really honest. I need to accurately understand the applicant's mindset. If you lie here, you might get accepted now, but you'll be kicked out in a day or two

anyway. Let's save each other some time.

-...A bit.

-A bit?

-He has a bad personality.

-Hmm.

Jaa Soo-Jeong rested her chin on her hands for the first time since the interview began.

-In what way?

-Firstly, he dislikes being called the Flame Emperor, right? But that's not genuine, it's just for show... because people praise him as amazing and great, chanting 'Flame Emperor! Flame Emperor!', but he coolly dismisses it with a comment like [Whoever coined that nickname is fucking stupid]...

-And if he dismisses it?

- 'I don't like my alias.' With just that, he reduces everyone who praises him to mere underlings. And the fans love it, finding it too cool... It's a perfect cycle... No, a vicious cycle, isn't it?

-Hmm.

Jaa Soo-Jeong interlocked her fingers and placed her chin on them.

This was also a new posture since the start of the interview.

-Interesting.

-Yes?

-I understand your thoughts. Kim Gong-Ja. But can you still work for Yoo Soo-Ha?

-Oh, yes. I...

-Yoo Soo-Ha might be far worse than you think.

-.....

-Once you join our guild and act together, you'll inevitably see Yoo Soo-Ha's true colors. Depending on the situation, outcome, or reaction, you might be silenced through death.

-.....

-I ask again. Can you still work for Yoo Soo-Ha?

Kim Gong-Ja thought for a long time.

After a long thought, he spoke.

-I came to work under Yoo Soo-Ha, but not for him.

-Oh?

-If Yoo Soo-Ha turns out to be much worse than I thought... I'm not sure. Maybe I'll try to stop him. At least once, I'll give him a chance to regain my trust. I have a strong tendency for that...

-Hmm.

-So, sorry, but I can't give a positive answer to your question.

-Even more interesting.

Jaa Soo-Jeong tilted her head.

-Why should I choose you as a manager?

-Because...

The man looked up at the girl.

Kim Gong-Ja gazed at Jaa Soo-Jeong.

-You're probably the same as me.

-.....

-You don't work for the Flame Emperor, but under him. Since becoming a manager, you've never once whitewashed Yoo Soo-Ha's character. No public relations, no hiring part-timers. So...

-I'm listening.

-You're looking for a comrade, not a minion for the Flame Emperor.

Jaa Soo-Jeong smiled.

-Passed.

And then.

-What? Rank F? Jaa Soo-Jeong. Didn't I specifically ask you to bring a strong servant last night? Why did you bring this trash? Trash belongs in the recycling bin over there. Go throw it away.

-Just so you know, recycling day is Wednesday. Today is Monday.



-How am I supposed to know that!?

-Just watch him for two days, Yoo Soo-Ha. Harass him for two days, then decide.

-No, decision my ass. He doesn't look much younger than me...

Yoo Soo-Ha looked at Kim Gong-Ja with displeasure.

-If he's still F-rank at that age, his life's estimate is clear. Trash, just trash. Sometimes working part-time, strolling through the second-floor hunting ground, picking up items for daily food. Holed up in a room, tinkering with the internet. Wow, damn, I'm getting goosebumps just talking about it. Hey, Jaa Soo-Jeong. Really? You want me to keep an eye on this guy for two days? Managing my eye health is also a part of a manager's job... Argh, damn, what the hell!?

-It's orange juice.

-Why are you shooting orange juice into my eyes!?

-Oranges are good for the eyes, Yoo Soo-Ha.

-You lunatic would crack open my skull to shove in ginseng if it's good for the body! Hey, I've been pampering you lately, and you're getting way too overconfident, aren't you? Want to die? You think I can't kill you?

-Yes.

-Damn!

And then.

-But this guy is kinda fun to harass.

-Huff, huff, huff, ah, ah, huff...

-He crawled all the way to the 31st floor even though I told him not to follow me. Why is he like that? It's amusing to watch. Hey? Did you pick this trash on purpose to amuse me?

-Yes.

-As expected, I chose a great manager. Jaa Soo-Jeong, no,

Vice President Jaa Soo-Jeong. Our Jaa Soo-Jeong should even try being vice president! I'll make a nameplate for you out of Arimentalrium. Vice President Jaa Soo-Jeong. President Jaa Soo-Jeong. How fitting does it sound? Both have a nice ring. This means Jaa Soo-Jeong is destined to be president.

-Huff, huff, huff, huff, huff!!

-Kim Gong-Ja is dying over there.

-Let him die. That's his luck.

-You're right. Kim Gong-Ja, good luck.

-Good luck, part-timer.

-Damn...

And then.

Time passes.



# Chapter 225: If (3)

---

And then.

Time passes.

-Everyone! Believe in the sacred Tower!

Jingling, jingling.

A man in short sleeves roamed the square, ringing a handbell.

-Why is the [Tower] called the Babel Tower? Do you know the reason? It's simple. Here, we humans can communicate freely. It's a miracle bestowed by God!

-God once destroyed the Tower of Babel. But after thousands of years, he mercifully granted humans another opportunity to ascend to heaven! Let's be thankful for God's mercy!

That day, Kim Gong-Ja was in the guild.

Yoo Soo-Ha's guild, named [Yoo Soo-Ha], which audaciously bore just his three-lettered name, had only four registered members. Yoo Soo-Ha. Jaa Soo-Jeong. Kim Gong-Ja. And a pet slime.

Despite having only four members, the guild's office location was impressive.

In the heart of Babylon, the City of Ascension on the first floor of the Tower, the guild occupied a three-story building at the central square intersection.

It was an extravagant expenditure.

But one man's folly is another's joy. Kim Gong-Ja, having ordered a White Mocha Frappuccino Venti Quad Java Chip with half chocolate drizzle through a delivery app, sat elegantly on the guild terrace, overlooking the square.

-What's that nonsense?

-Just a cult.

Jaa Soo-Jeong, also on the terrace, responded briefly.

She sipped carrot juice through a straw while working on her laptop.

-Don't pay attention to them, Kim Gong-Ja. They lure in curious prey, wondering what that nonsense is, to trap them.

-Really?

-They use seemingly nonsensical parts as bait. People think, [I'm smart enough to debunk all this crap!] but then they get trapped, brainwashed, and one day, they find themselves preaching God's words in the square.

-Do these people really employ such sophisticated strategies? Seriously?

-Religions grow from guilt, and cults thrive on human arrogance, Kim Gong-Ja.

-Whoa!

Then, Yoo Soo-Ha approached and looked down from the terrace.

-These types of fanatics are still in Babylon. I saw them often outside. Myeong-dong, was it? Hey, part-timer, have you been to Myeong-dong?

-No.

-It's a bit like hell. Anyway, it's fascinating. Cults like these get smacked down by the Temple of All Gods\* the moment they're seen. How do they have the nerve to preach openly in the square?

\*Temple of the Omnipotent God has been changed to Temple of All Gods as it's the more accurate translation when keeping in consideration the hanja. It will be fixed in all previous chapters as well. Apologies for the inconvenience!

As expected.

Before Yoo Soo-Ha could finish speaking, a whistle sounded from across the square. Tweet! Tweet! Members of the Temple of All Gods Guild, clad in white uniforms, came running.



-What are you doing here! This is against the rules!

-Oh, you're the ones who should be questioned. The Tower is a miracle that has descended most sacredly in the new millennium. Brothers and sisters, you stand amidst a miracle! Yet why don't you appreciate it?

-This guy is unbelievable...

-Repent, everyone. Reflect on your arrogance and prejudice. The Tower isn't just a hunting ground or a playground! You are brothers clad in God's miracle! Be humble! God grants you a second chance!

-Do something. Take him away!

The Temple members dragged the preacher away.

Even while being taken, the preacher remained devout, shouting with a face full of conviction, "Repent! There's still time for repentance. Everyone! Repent!"

-Hmm.

After the commotion subsided.

-That's suspicious.

Jaa Soo-Jeong muttered.

-Yes?

-Too intellectual.

Responding to Kim Gong-Ja's question, Jaa Soo-Jeong rapidly typed on her laptop.

-Normal cult preachers are full of antagonism. They believe the world has clear enemies, from whom all sins originate, and attacking them is their duty. But the preacher just now was different.

-In what way?

-There was no antagonism at all.

Tap-tap.

Jaa Soo-Jeong looked down at her emotionless laptop.

-He only showed genuine concern and tried to persuade others. This is a stance only a fairly large religious organization could take. They don't need to designate enemies, simply believing in [their righteousness] deeply in their bones...

Jaa Soo-Jeong pressed a key on the keyboard.

-Indeed. This person just entered the Tower today.

The laptop screen displayed a few photos of a man.

It was the same man who had just been ringing the handbell in the square.

-Damn?

Surprised, Yoo Soo-Ha from behind asked.

-Jaa Soo-Jeong, no, Deputy Jaa Soo-Jeong, what are you doing?

-I just dug up information on the person who was taken away by the Temple just now.

-I see that. But where did you hack into? You didn't touch the Vigilante Corps' server, did you? I mean, I'm not scared or anything, but those guys are a hassle if you mess with them.

-Don't worry.

Jaa Soo-Jeong closed the laptop and brought another from a desk drawer.

-Regardless of what you think about hacking, I didn't hack into any server, let alone anything related to the Vigilante Corps.

-Then how did you get the personal info?

-I simply accessed the Tower Entry Management Office's data with a legal ID.

Jaa Soo-Jeong opened the second laptop and connected somewhere.

-People who come from the outside world have their basic personal information stored in the Tower Entry Management Office until they're officially registered as residents. It's stored for a minimum of one hour to a maximum of one week. Once registration is complete, the data is destroyed and transferred to a subsidiary of the Vigilante Corps.

-.....

Kim Gong-Ja looked uncertain, as the conversation seemed like a story from a world he knew nothing about.

-Is that data easy to access?

-Relatively, as long as you have an ID from the management office.

-Where did you get that ID...?

-Office staff are humans, Kim Gong-Ja. There are surprisingly many ways to persuade humans.

Kim Gong-Ja glimpsed the guild's darkness.

-Of course, due to the lax security, there's not much valuable information. At most, it includes basic details like which country they came from and whether they graduated from school.

But, Jaa Soo-Jeong added.

-Sometimes, among those basic details, there are SNS IDs.

The laptop displayed a blue screen.

Jaa Soo-Jeong nodded once.

-Found it.

She showed the screen to her colleagues.

The SNS profile displayed the familiar man's photo.

+

Following: 26.

Followers: 5,313,046.

+

Kim Gong-Ja's eyes widened in surprise.

-Whoa. Five million...? Isn't that a lot?

-That's quite a lot. He's the vice-president of the Clean Tower Association. Let me do a quick search.

Jaa Soo-Jeong's eyes became serious.

-It's an organization that became active seven years ago. One of the recently trending internet religions.

-Internet religion...?

-Specifically, religions that don't establish branches in any country, but essentially use SNS or video site accounts as their 'branches.' They only preach online. For instance, when the leader uploads a particular video, the followers bring as many viewers and subscribers as possible. They call this 'preaching.'

Jaa Soo-Jeong found the organization's official video account.

-Look, a volunteer video.

-.....

-Usually, only a few individuals like the leader or vice-leader are active on-site. Like this...

Jaa Soo-Jeong played the video.

There, a neatly dressed gentleman was presenting a disaster site in some country, like a live broadcast.



Numerous videos were uploaded.

[Disaster Relief at Earthquake Sites], [How Your Donations Are Being Used], [Top 10 Preaching Cases], [Conversation with a Tibetan Monk!], [Checking If the Himalayas Are Really Melting], [Is the Tower a Proof of Divinity?], and so on.

-This is...

-They mix in many volunteer activity videos, so they can't be banned from the account. They don't make radical claims in the videos. The leader or vice-leader uploads them, and they spread it on SNS, radicalizing their claims among themselves.

-.....

-Kim Gong-Ja, you asked if cult groups employ sophisticated strategies? Yes, they do. Not all, but some like these do.

Kim Gong-Ja felt an ominous premonition.

Yoo Soo-Ha also frowned, feeling the same.

-So? What's the story with this follower star leader with over 5 million followers, abandoning the glory and honor of the outside world to crawl into the Tower?

-He's actually the vice-leader.

Jaa Soo-Jeong corrected.

-And his purpose for entering the Tower is right here.

Click.

Jaa Soo-Jeong pressed the enter key.

-From now on, I dedicate myself to the Tower. Brothers and sisters.

A video started on the laptop screen.

The man speaking in the video was the vice-leader.

-As you all know, tomorrow marks the day of the ancient fall of the Tower of Babel. Like thousands of years ago, God will decide tomorrow whether to destroy the Tower of Babel again. To beg for God's mercy, to prove that there's still hope in humans, I will personally enter the Tower and awaken the residents of this corrupt Tower.

The vice-leader spoke devoutly.

-I may be arrested. I might even die. But, if I succeed in preaching, I will prevent the collapse of the Tower. And if I die failing, God will know that there was at least one believer who sacrificed for humanity. I live for humanity and die for humanity. This is how we serve God.

The vice-leader formed a triangle with his hands.

It seemed to be their sacred sign.

-We have witnessed the Tower's atrocities. We waited for them to repent and purify themselves. But now, with the second collapse of the Tower of Babel imminent, we can no longer just watch. Once my sacrifice is confirmed, you too must immediately perform the entry ritual.

Kim Gong-Ja opened his mouth.

-Do not fear death. What we must fear is not the death of each individual, but the tragedy of humanity betraying God's love again. Stop the tragedy with your blood and bodies. Purify the Tower by eliminating as many corrupt ones as possible! I will go first. I will die first. Everyone! I...

The video was abruptly cut off.

Yoo Soo-Ha had stopped the video.

-These guys are totally insane.

On the TV in the guild office, a Korean baseball game was being broadcasted.

Ah, out! Out! The caster shouted.

Next to the TV lay Yoo Soo-Ha's baseball cap.

-This is a declaration of war.

Kim Gong-Ja muttered.

-This could lead to big trouble.

-Yoo Soo-Ha, we must go to the Temple of All Gods and inform them right now.

-Hmm.

Yoo Soo-Ha reacted nonchalantly.

-Forget it. This isn't the first time something like this has happened. It's been countless times madmen crawled into the Tower.

-.....

-Go if you want, but I'm not joining.

Kim Gong-Ja and Jaa Soo-Jeong did just that.

They ran out of the guild. Fortunately, the Temple of All Gods knew how to splurge. The temple was located on expensive land, and Jaa Soo-Jeong, known as

"Yoo Soo-Ha's Secretary," easily met the temple leader.

-Good day, Secretary! And the newly hired part-timer too!  
How are you both?

-Long time no see, Temple Leader. Sorry to say this right away, but there's something urgent to discuss.

-Oh?

The Heretic Inquisitor, busy with some task, had dirty hands.

Specifically, red liquid stained his left hand.

-What's this urgent matter?

-Did you just take away a religious person preaching in the square?

-Yes. We arrested him according to the regulations.

-Is that religious person still intact?

-Ah. He was fine.

The Heretic Inquisitor laughed heartily.

-Until 40 seconds ago!

-.....

-I hurriedly finished my work as you requested an urgent meeting. Ah, no need to worry! Everything was conducted properly!

-Did you kill him?

-Yes!

The Heretic Inquisitor was cheerful.

There were no excuses or justifications. Not even a hint of necessity or reluctance.

Just a straightforwardness stemming from having done what needed to be done.

-You...

It was unclear who spoke those words.

But before the sentence was finished, something buzzed.

Woo-woong.

-Hmm? Part-timer, seems like you have a call!

Kim Gong-Ja hunched over. Indeed, his smartphone in his pocket was vibrating.

He had followed the video account and SNS account that Jaa Soo-Jeong had just searched. The notification was from there.



Feeling an ominous premonition, Kim Gong-Ja took out his smartphone.

-...A new video has just been uploaded.

Jaa Soo-Jeong also took out her phone.

While the Heretic Inquisitor looked puzzled, the new video played.

-Brothers and sisters.

A man with an unfamiliar face appeared in this video.

Was he another believer, not the vice-leader?

A young man spoke gravely.

-Just now, our vice-leader was taken away by the heretics. As expected, there's no hope in them. The vice-leader didn't resist or throw a single punch. He only preached out of concern for them.

Though the young man's face was unfamiliar,

the background visible in the video was very familiar.

Kim Gong-Ja narrowed his eyes.

-This is... Babylon Square, right?

-Yes. This is bad. Very bad.

Jaa Soo-Jeong muttered.

In the video, the young man continued to speak.

-I will now begin the promised purification. Brothers and sisters! I love you.

The young man reached into his shirt.

-I love you. I love humans, humanity, and God. Please love us

too. Don't betray God's love. I love you!

Then the video cut off.

There was no need to wonder why.

A tremendous roar came from beyond the temple wall.

-.....

It was in the direction of the square.

Silence ensued for a moment.

-Aha. I understand.

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled brightly.

-I seem to have made a fucking mistake!

Immediately after, sirens blared.

# Chapter 226: If (4)

---

Kuwaahhh!

The next explosion sounded even closer. The entire building shook.

Priests of the Temple of All Gods Guild quickly activated their auras to form protective shields. Inside the barrier, the Heretic Inquisitor, Kim Gong-Ja, and Jaa Soo-Jeong struggled to stand.

-American products are indeed superior!

Even amidst a terrorist attack, the Heretic Inquisitor was cheerful.

-Glad we equipped the building to withstand destruction!

-Thank you, Heretic Inquisitor.

Jaa Soo-Jeong dusted the dirt off her face.

She was as composed as usual.

-But this is not the end. The organization behind this terror is about 5 million strong. The explosions can escalate.

-Five million followers, you say! How many of them are actually believers, and of those, how many will actually act? Ahaha. Faith is abstract, but death is real.

-But let me remind you again, even if one in a thousand, no, one in ten thousand acts, that's 500 people. 500 explosions.

-Yes.

The man responsible for the Tower's religion adjusted his hat.

-And 500 is a number we can [handle].

-.....

-It would have been better if we could've anticipated and neutralized the terror beforehand. But it's too late now. So, I will take responsibility for my mistake and handle the aftermath!

Jaa Soo-Jeong hesitated for a moment.

A rare occurrence for her.

-By aftermath, you mean...

-Of course, kill all suspects. Reducing 5 million to 2.5 million is difficult, but bringing down 500 to 250, then 125, and further below 50 isn't that hard.

-.....

-I'll request a martial law from the Black Dragon Guild Master! It's been seven years, huh? Quite a long peace!

Kim Gong-Ja was at a loss for words.

Once again, Kuwoong, the wall trembled.

Another bomb.

-How can...

Kim Gong-Ja spoke instinctively.

-How can you speak so casually about this?

-Hmm?

The Heretic Inquisitor turned to Kim Gong-Ja.

Innocent eyes, befitting the term, but Kim Gong-Ja clenched his teeth. Even the eyes of a reptile could be innocent. The Heretic Inquisitor, retaining the naivety of an animal, smiled broadly.

-Why shouldn't I speak this way?



-.....

-This way of thinking and speaking leads to quick and clear conclusions. Why shouldn't we discuss in this manner? Is it because it upsets you, part-timer?

-It's not about that...

-Yes, it is. Someone has to do it eventually. If it has to be done, it's faster to do it without unnecessary euphemisms. Caring about public sentiment is a politician's virtue, but we left [that] to the Black Dragon Guild Master long ago!

Kim Gong-Ja clenched his teeth harder.

A gentle touch caught his agitated shoulder.

It was Jaa Soo-Jeong.

-Kim Gong-Ja.

-.....

-Don't try to change it. There's no time now. Rather, you should use him.

-Use...

-Incredibly, the man in front of you is [persuadable by words].

Hearing that, Kim Gong-Ja struggled to think.

'I need to minimize the victims of the bomb terror. But also minimize innocent people being sacrificed on mere suspicion. How? How to persuade the Heretic Inquisitor, how to use this person...'

Use him.

-.....

At that moment, Kim Gong-Ja realized something.

-It's the Temple of All Gods.

The Heretic Inquisitor stopped in his tracks.

-What?

-The Temple of All Gods.

Kim Gong-Ja spoke urgently.

-The vice-leader you captured. He's dead. But he must've died inside the Temple, and by your hand, right!

Just moments ago, the vice-leader's blood was on the Heretic Inquisitor's left hand.

The Heretic Inquisitor tilted his head.

-Yes, that's right, but?

-Then how did [the young man who played the video in the square] immediately know about the vice-leader's death! He couldn't have clairvoyance, nor could he have peeked inside the Temple's torture chamber,

Kim Gong-Ja saw the Heretic Inquisitor's eyes waver.

-A traitor inside the Temple informed him! To his own comrades!

The Heretic Inquisitor was about to make the sign of the cross. Whether he intended to deploy a protective barrier or kill his own close associates, the Temple executives, remained unclear.

It became unclear.

Explosions and roars.

The world turned upside down.

Kim Gong-Ja found himself fallen, something warm covering his back. Apart from feeling something warm on his back, he could barely sense anything.

It felt like cicadas were droning somewhere.

Beyond the shattered hearing, someone muttered.

-What a sharp-eyed bastard among the Flame Emperor's lot.

Kim Gong-Ja couldn't identify who it was.

But it wasn't the Heretic Inquisitor, nor Jaa Soo-Jeong. Then it must've been one of the Temple priests.

The owner of the voice walked away, making footsteps.

-What a pity. Could have used him for a while longer.

To whom was he speaking?

-You just had to act and move like a puppet, Temple Leader.

-.....

-But a marionette without strings is useless. Time for

disposal. Fortunately, today's a big day, so the time loss is minimal...

And Kim Gong-Ja forever lost his chance to see the traitor's face.

A flash burst, and screams followed.

The man enjoying the success of his betrayal no longer made a sound. The fact that if he could betray his superior, his superior wouldn't trust him completely, let alone the fact his superior never truly trusted anyone, was overlooked by the betrayer till the end.

-Ahaha...

A small hand tapped Kim Gong-Ja's cheek.

-Are you alright? Are you alive?

-Ugh... Fuck...

-Starting with a curse, you really are the Flame Emperor's subordinate. What's your name?

-Kim Gong-Ja...

-If you can swear and state your name, you're pretty much living half a life. Can you open your eyes, Kim Gong-Ja?

Kim Gong-Ja opened his eyes.

In his blood-tainted vision, the Heretic Inquisitor smiled.

The redness in his view wasn't just because he was bleeding. Kim Gong-Ja slowly realized this.

-Good. I'm glad. There's one more person besides me who's aware of the current situation.

The Heretic Inquisitor was also drenched in blood.

His voice was heavily laced with the scent of blood.

-Temple Leader...

-Yes.

-Manager Jaa Soo-Jeong...?

Kim Gong-Ja struggled to speak. Jaa Soo-Jeong? Just now, the Heretic Inquisitor said it was fortunate that [one more person besides me] was left. Kim Gong-Ja desperately hoped for an error in that count.

-This is not the time to worry about others.

The Heretic Inquisitor coughed up blood, Kelok.

The blood was too vivid.

Not just blood, but also several pieces of flesh were mixed in.

-We need to treat.....



Kim Gong-Ja barely managed to speak.

The Heretic Inquisitor raised a hand to stop him.

-No need. It's not the right time. I cannot come back to life.

-But if we don't try.....

-Even without trying, I know. It's more efficient to do what can be done now.....

Once again, the Heretic Inquisitor coughed up blood.

The blood splattered on Kim Gong-Ja's cheek.

-Ugh.

Unconsciously, Kim Gong-Ja got up, supporting himself on the ground. He remembered a time when he was very young, going to an amusement park with the director, feeling like he was inside a squirrel cage, struggling to keep his balance in a world spinning with dark red.

As he got up, something that had been covering his back slid down and fell to the floor, but he desperately tried not to pay attention to it.

Kim Gong-Ja fixed his gaze on the Heretic Inquisitor.

He was sitting right in front of Kim Gong-Ja. However, whether his posture could still be called 'sitting' was something Kim Gong-Ja couldn't tell.

From the waist down, torn apart, the Heretic Inquisitor spoke.

-As you pointed out, Mr. Kim Gong-Ja, it seems this terrorist attack was more deeply planned than expected. A real oversight.

-Don't speak... Your body right now.

-On the contrary. Since I'm in this state, I have to speak. That way...

Blood and coughs.

-Ah, how proud. Even the internal systems of the U.S. explode like this, the extent of the damage... Considering this place has become like this, I wonder how it is in other areas, uh.

-Temple of All Gods, please, just be quiet for a bit, I'll call someone—

-Instead of calling, take these.

The Heretic Inquisitor pulled out something from his pocket.

There were two items.

A small doll and a hand mirror adorned with a pitch-black Black Dragon.

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled as he handed them over to the unexpectedly receiving Gong-Ja.

-The first is called The Idol. It means my proxy. The Temple of All Gods is now yours for the time being.

Kim Gong-Ja froze.

-Why, to me?

-Just as I said before. Right now, you're the only one who can move here.

Kim Gong-Ja clenched his teeth.

He didn't look around or look back.

The Heretic Inquisitor continued speaking.

-But honestly, I'm not sure if that mark will have any meaning... whether the system I set up will continue to operate after my death. But still, it's better than nothing, so for now... More importantly, this second item. A mirror.

-A mirror.....

-It's called the Black Dragon Mirror. To communicate with the guild masters of other guilds... it's an emergency tool given

to us by the Black Dragon Witch. Tell them you're my proxy...

The Heretic Inquisitor stopped talking.

Kim Gong-Ja waited for the rest of the sentence.

It took him a while to realize that it wouldn't come.

-.....

Kim Gong-Ja spoke.

-Temple Master?

There was no answer.

And there would never be.

-Temple Master.

Life is mercilessly persistent, yet it can disappear without warning.

Kim Gong-Ja looked down at the two relics left in his hand. Staring blankly in the ruined room.

It wasn't for long.

Determination set on his face.

-I must move...

But how?

And where to?

That was something an E-Rank Hunter like him couldn't know. Fortunately, the people who died at this moment weren't just the Heretic Inquisitor. There were others still alive, moving desperately. As a result of their movements, a voice came through.

-Damn it...

The voice was coming from the mirror in his hand.

-Hey. Is there anyone alive there? If so, respond.

Kim Gong-Ja recognized the owner of the voice.

Probably every resident of the Tower would know.

-Black Dragon Guild Master?

-Huh? What? Who are you?

Kim Gong-Ja took a deep breath.

And briefly explained the situation.

There was a moment of silence from the other side of the mirror, then the voice continued.

-I see. Well. It wasn't a child meant to live long.

-.....Do you believe me?

-Yeah. I have a skill I got from Paladin before. I can roughly...  
Ah, damn it.

The Black Dragon Witch let out a long sigh.

Not just a thin sigh, but a thick, bloody sigh.

-Are you hurt?

-A bit. It's been a long time since I got stabbed by an assassin...

The second-ranked Hunter.

The most powerful figure in the Tower, in both name and reality.



Even in the reality of such a person being assassinated, Kim Gong-Ja kept his composure. Perhaps his reason was paralyzed by the continuous catastrophes.

Either way, only the voices of the Black Dragon Witch and Gong-Ja flowed through the Black Dragon Mirror. Even as time passed while Gong-Ja explained the whole situation, no one else joined the communication. The Black Dragon Witch quietly voiced what that implied.

-It's a big problem. Maybe the second biggest since the Tower was built.

-.....

-I've made a lot of enemies over the years...

Coughing.

-The guy who stabbed me was a director and deputy director in the American Foreign Service. I thought he was just a nobody kicked out of power, living a normal life, but fuck... these damn CIA bastards... now they even use cult freaks to screw us over...?

-Black Dragon Witch, where are you? I'll come to you.

Coughing and laughter followed.

-What are you going to do if you come? Unless it's your secretary or your master.

Kim Gong-Ja knew this better than anyone.

-Still, I can't just stand by.

-You're young...

There was a touch of sorrow in the Black Dragon Witch's voice.

A brief sigh.

That sorrow was soon replaced by cold calculation.

-But you lack power. Therefore, you're not needed.

Before Kim Gong-Ja could respond, the Black Dragon Witch continued.

-In a situation like this, guild masters usually meet and decide on a leader. But considering the current situation...

-Black Dragon Witch...

-I'll take command.

The Black Dragon Witch breathed heavily.

-From this moment on.

The ruler of the city spoke.

Her voice didn't just come through the Black Dragon Mirror.

It started to flow from the destroyed Babylon Square, from the streets, from the slums, from the streetlights installed everywhere, from the speakers attached under the streetlights.

-I declare martial law. I am the Guild Master of the Black Dragon Guild, the Black Dragon Witch. Once again, I declare martial law effective from this time.

There were sounds of spitting blood between the Black Dragon Witch's words.

-Currently, unknown enemies have carried out several explosions inside the Tower. All guild masters are out of contact. Casualties could be in the thousands, maybe tens of thousands.

The sound of coughing.

-Anyway. The Tower was nobody's from the beginning. There were those who killed humans saying the Tower was God's, those who killed enemies saying the Tower was the United States', and even those who trampled humans saying the Tower belonged to thugs.

The fact that the commander was bleeding to death echoed through the speakers and resounded even in the shattered

Babylon Square.

-But now, after more than a decade, we can say it firmly. This Tower is ours. Our territory. We are the humans of the Tower. The sky of the Tower is our airspace, the streams of the Tower are our territorial waters. The land of the Tower is our territory. And we call those who defile our sky, water, and land enemies.

The Black Dragon Witch swallowed once.

Maybe she swallowed blood.

With a scent of blood, from beyond the speakers, the Black Dragon Witch's declaration burst out.

-It's war.

The echo exploded simultaneously in every alley of the speaker-installed city.

-This is war.

The echo fell even on the back of a mother tightly holding her child under the speaker.

-In this situation where the Tower's security is seriously compromised, we, the Black Dragon, declare martial law and announce that we will achieve the fastest victory in this war. And I promise. I will show merciless revenge to those who dared to shake the Tower.

# Chapter 227: If (5)

---

As soon as martial law was declared, hunters flooded the streets of Babylon.

-Kill them all!

The hunters were dressed in black uniforms. The Black Dragon Guild. Among them were not the scouting or raid teams, but the conflict resolution and extermination teams.

These were hunters in the Tower, but they were certainly not trained [to climb the Tower].

-Anyone who cannot present a resident card will be killed, no questions asked! The same goes for those who received their resident card less than a week ago!

-The Guild Master has been attacked!

-This is war!

-All dissidents will be annihilated!

Bang! Bang!

Gunshots rang out across the square.

In the Tower of Babel, the manufacture and storage of firearms were strictly controlled. Making a gun illegally was a crime punishable by death.

However, the major guilds were an exception, always ready for war with their firearms.

-These damn Black Dragons! What the hell are they doing!

The Vigilante Corps was also among them. They drew their guns and aimed at the Black Dragon's suppression team.

-Move aside! We must carry out the Guild Master's orders!

-Shooting people indiscriminately, is that right!



-It's a necessary measure to protect the Tower! Even your Vice-Captain of the Vigilante Corps has been attacked and killed!

-Even so, the Vice-Captain wouldn't have wanted this!

-Our Guild Master wants this! Move!

The Vigilante Corps didn't move aside. The Black Dragon Guild didn't try to persuade them further.

The two guilds clashed. Other large guilds, having lost their owners, joined in. In a situation where it was impossible to distinguish friend from foe, they tore at each other like starving dogs.

-.....

Emerging from the half-destroyed Temple of the All Gods, Kim Gong-Ja faced such a hellish scene.

Kim Gong-Ja wiped his face.

-Ugh....

People had died.

People were dying.

More people were dying.

-Dammit...

There was no hesitation in the actions of people aiming at each other. Every time a gun spat fire, people were hurt. Died. Lives vanished so easily.

Kim Gong-Ja couldn't understand.

'They are all guilds supporting the Tower.'

He had heard rumors that the major guilds didn't get along. He didn't know what had happened in the past, and occasionally heard through gossip that old feelings had built up between the guild masters.

But to this extent...

'Just waiting for a trigger, ready to kill each other.'

The top hunters, each a legend, so-called heroes.

Why hadn't these heroes resolved their feelings over the years?

Was there really not a single person who could mediate between them?

Kim Gong-Ja couldn't understand, but he knew that imagining such a [hypothetical mediator] now was utterly useless.

He felt like he was going to explode.

The dam blocking the center of his heart broke down.

At that moment, the body of Jaa Soo-Jeong, which he had been carrying, slipped down his back.

-Eh.

Unintentionally, Kim Gong-Ja saw the body.

---Deputy.

Jaa Soo-Jeong's body was torn apart.

The left leg, left arm, left chest, even the left side of the face. Jaa Soo-Jeong had died a death that did not allow any trace of humanity, her lips tightly closed. Only her lifeless purple eyes, like jewels, stared up at the sky.

-.....

Silence.

Lowering his head, this time, he saw the body of the Heretic Inquisitor.

Looking at the last moments of a man who tried to do something until the end, Kim Gong-Ja clenched his teeth.

-No. Right, first things first.

Do what needs to be done.

-Right.

Do what can be done.

-What can I do?

He reviewed everything he had.

The Idol. It seemed like something that could oversee the Temple of the All Gods as a proxy, but the Temple was in ruins. Even if he met the priests outside, it was uncertain if they would obey this Idol.

The Black Dragon Mirror. It seemed like a means to communicate directly with the Guild Master of the Black Dragon and other major guilds. But since the Black Dragon Witch's declaration of war, it had been silent.

Meanwhile he was just an E-Rank Hunter. Powerless.

-Power...

He knew of someone who had that power.

Kim Gong-Ja turned his head.

The first floor of the Tower of Babel, Babylon. In the central square, where land was as precious as gold, there stood a three-story building.

How much magic had been applied to it, it was relatively intact even after the explosions in the square.

The always seemingly unshakable face of that man also came to mind.

-The Yoo Soo-Ha Guild...

Kim Gong-Ja ran towards it.

---

-No, damn it. What's this crap?

Yoo Soo-Ha spoke.

Annoyed at being disturbed from his nap, Yoo Soo-Ha was irritable.

-.....

Kim Gong-Ja felt his heart flutter again. The death of Jaa Soo-Jeong. The death of the Heretic Inquisitor. And countless other deaths. He had offered to help and wanted to, but the Black Dragon Witch bluntly refused.

[You're young.]

[But you lack power.]

[Therefore, you're not needed.]

If he had been Yoo Soo-Ha instead.

If he had power comparable to the Flame Emperor.

-.....

Kim Gong-Ja clenched his teeth.

He had no time for self-pity.

He forced out his voice.

-It's an emergency... President Yoo Soo-Ha.

-I know about the martial law. But I also know that I have the ability to fuck with it. Gong-Ja, why did you come here looking like a mess instead of taking care of your guild? Where is Jaa Soo-Jeong? Deputy Jaa Soo-Jeong?

-Here...

Kim Gong-Ja laid down the body of Jaa Soo-Jeong. And also the Heretic Inquisitor's.



Yoo Soo-Ha fell silent.

-When?

Yoo Soo-Ha's eyes were calm.

Kim Gong-Ja found it hard to gauge what that calmness meant.

-Right after we entered the Temple of the All Gods... There was a traitor inside. A bomb went off, and the Heretic Inquisitor died, and Jaa Soo-Jeong big sis also...

-Why are you unharmed?

-Thump!

Kim Gong-Ja was on his knees. Yoo Soo-Ha had kicked him in the shin.

-Ugh.

Enduring the pain, he looked up to see Yoo Soo-Ha still looking down at his subordinate with a calm face.

-A guy, huh.

-.....

-Big sis? Since when did you two get so close to call her big sis? Hey, Kim Gong-Ja. Jaa Soo-Jeong is much younger than you. She looks older because of her speech and demeanor, but she's a newbie compared to you. What are you...

-.....

-Never mind. So what? Did Jaa Soo-Jeong leave you any last words? Like, please do your best to resolve this situation. Or something about saving people...

-Manager Jaa Soo-Jeong would have wanted that too.

-Of course, she would. That's why she still looked after trash like you.

Kim Gong-Ja couldn't bring himself to look up at Yoo Soo-Ha.

He had lost Jaa Soo-Jeong because he lacked strength.

On the other hand, Jaa Soo-Jeong had strength. The power to save a person's life if she ignored her own. Whether it was her innate reflexes or just that she had spotted the perpetrator before Kim Gong-Ja, the outcome was simple.

Kim Gong-Ja couldn't do it, but Jaa Soo-Jeong could.

-.....

Feeling bitter, resentful, pathetic, and sorrowful, Kim Gong-Ja couldn't look at Yoo Soo-Ha.

His gaze drifted into the void.

Because of that, he saw something else.

-Anyway, brat. I know what kind of person you are. You'll fit

in just fine. So, I'm going to—

A flash.

Incredibly fast.

-Dodge it!!

Kim Gong-Ja interrupted Yoo Soo-Ha.

At the exact same moment, a blue spear flew out of thin air.

Whooooosh-

The spear, wrapped in blue aura, was immensely powerful. The Flame Emperor quickly raised his aura to protect himself, but he must have missed the timing by a fraction. The walls of fire he created were torn apart by the blue flame spear.

-Ah.

Kim Gong-Ja saw that moment.

And then.

-Ugh!

He stamped his feet, straightened his knees, leaned back, and reached out his hand to hit the blue flame spear.

The spear was swirling with a storm of blue aura. The storm, like a blender, shredded the human flesh that approached it.

-Aaaaaah!!

After a scream, Kim Gong-Ja, who had lost his arm, knelt down. Pieces of pale flesh fell to the ground.

The slowly settling pieces were probably his bones.

-Damn it! Did you dodge it!

A hunter landed from the sky with a thud.

Yoo Soo-Ha glanced at Kim Gong-Ja, who was kneeling, then turned his gaze to the hunter.

-Who are you?

-I am the Saintess!

Yoo Soo-Ha looked at the bleeding Kim Gong-Ja, then back at the hunter who declared herself as the Saintess.

-What bullshit. Just shredded a guy in half and now you're a saintess? What a joke.

-It's a title given by the Tower.

-The Tower really has a shitty naming sense. So? Why is the Saintess here causing trouble?

The Saintess took a deep breath.

As if she had waited a long time for this moment, she shouted.

-Yoo Soo-Ha! You murdered my only grandfather!

The Saintess boasted brilliant golden hair. Yoo Soo-Ha had rarely seen such blonde hair. There were some, but none who would call him [grandfather].

-My apologies, but I've made many orphans and widows. I don't recall who your grandfather is.

-Marcus Callenbury!

The hunter claiming to be the Saintess's eyes blazed.

Yoo Soo-Ha raised an eyebrow at the name.

-The Sword Saint?

-Yes! My grandfather's name!

-Wow. That old name brings back memories. You're his granddaughter? Ah, right. He was already of that age, so it makes sense to have a granddaughter like you.

-You devil...

-Yeah, I'm a bit like that. Speaking of devils.

Yoo Soo-Ha glanced again at his subordinate's corpse, and the corpse becoming one.

-Is this burning hell outside your doing?

The Saintess clenched her fist.

She wanted to tell him. The power and influence accumulated by the Callenbury family's wealth. How she manipulated and moved the fools enchanted by the mysterious phenomenon of the Tower.

She wanted to tell him. How she easily predicted and used the Temple of the All Gods's master, who hated the outside world but wanted connections with the major countries, and how she infiltrated and crumbled the Black Dragon Guild.



But she didn't.

With the burning Tower behind her, the Saintess simply said.

-My grandfather died in the Tower, at your hands.

- "....."

-So, I will kill the Tower, and I will kill you.

Yoo Soo-Ha smirked.

-Then it's his fault. I was killed by him without knowing anything. He acted like he could see the number of murders in my eyes and whatnot. Ugh. In reality, the murderer wasn't me but him.

-Bullshit!

-Bullshit is what you've been spewing. You can't fool blood. A murderer's daughter is a murderer's granddaughter.

-You are the murderer. The Flame Emperor. No, there's no point in talking to you. Die!

The Saintess, her golden hair flying, charged.

-Ha.

Yoo Soo-Ha looked at a white dot that had flown onto his palm. Whether it was dust from a collapsing building or a bone fragment from Kim Gong-Ja being sliced, he didn't know.

But.

-I feel filthy.

He felt filthy.

Yoo Soo-Ha always felt filthy when things he didn't know about happened.

-I don't really need to drag this out here. You should die.

Blue aura exploded, and red aura enveloped it.

A moment later, a scream echoed between the blue and red smoke.

-Aaaaaah!

-Yeah. Now I remember. The eyes are similar, the eyes.

Yoo Soo-Ha opened and closed his eyes.

-The way you look at people immediately as garbage murderers is similar. Ah, is being judgmental hereditary? Did your grandpa teach you to decapitate people first because they're murderers, as some sort of family lesson?

-I, I... ah, ugh...!

-Anyway, this world teaches you to hate people, to talk shit about people, and even how to kill people. What's amazing is, after teaching all that, they expect the kids to love and cherish each other, to have kids and raise them well.

Even in the midst of stinging screams mixed with smoke, Yoo Soo-Ha kept talking.

-I just can't understand. Looking at your eyes makes it even harder to understand.

Yoo Soo-Ha.

He saw a hunter who had become a charred lump, completely burnt.

He bent down, matched his gaze, and looked down.

-How can a person like another person? Right?

The last remaining part also burned up.

A hunter who declared revenge for her grandfather and harbored a grudge for years, died just like that.

Yoo Soo-Ha slowly straightened up.

-Ah, so stiff.

He stretched his neck a few times, then looked around.

-What a mess.

The mansion outside was burning. The ruins that met his eyes seemed enough to build a massive historic site. The world, filled with ash and smoke, was relentless with screams and gunshots.

-What a total mess. You think so too, right, part-timer?

Yoo Soo-Ha looked down at Kim Gong-Ja.

Kim Gong-Ja, having lost an arm and bled too much, couldn't even look up at Yoo Soo-Ha in his dazed state. Yoo Soo-Ha didn't demand his gaze.

-I don't know.

Yoo Soo-Ha muttered.

-You and Jaa Soo-Jeong. I don't understand how you can like people.

Yoo Soo-Ha looked up at the sky for a moment.

-Well, that's why you're working under me.

-President, I...

-Ah, stop. Don't say anymore.

Yoo Soo-Ha stopped Kim Gong-Ja's feeble mumbling with a wave of his hand.

With annoyance.

More than anything, with familiarity.

-Don't worry about anything. I'll take care of it all.

Even in his dazed state, Kim Gong-Ja mumbled blankly.

-How...?

-There's always a way.

The Flame Emperor.

Yoo Soo-Ha shaped a gun with his hand.

And wrapped his hand with red aura, forming a spherical shape like a bullet.

-You wouldn't understand if I told you.

-Yes...?

-My skill is a bit fucked up.

Bang!

A ball of fire pierced Yoo Soo-Ha's brain.

As he saw Yoo Soo-Ha take his own life, Kim Gong-Ja watched in horror.

He probably never understood the meaning of that death until the end.

[You have died.]

But.

'I' knew.

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

The world shattered.

.



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•

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•

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Thus.

'I' opened my eyes.

# Chapter 228:

## Hatred (1)

---

'I' was.

Slowly looking around.

-Home run! Home run!

-It's a home run! Ah, the ball is soaring over the fence!

In the Yoo Soo-Ha Guild.

On the second-floor terrace of a building occupying the prime spot in Babylon, the sound of a Korean baseball game being broadcasted flowed calmly. The voices of the commentators, like the cries of cicadas in summer, seemed more like a distant backdrop than part of a conversation between people.

"Ah."

Yoo Soo-Ha was sitting on a sofa.

Fiddling with his head where he had pierced it himself just moments ago.

"Baseball is damn boring."

"....."

"Guys, I'm going to have a drink. I feel like drinking alone, so don't follow me. I'm staying out tonight, so don't call me. Even if you do, I'll ignore it."

"Don't drink too much, Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha."

Tap, tap.

On the opposite side, Jaa Soo-Jeong was tapping on her laptop keyboard.

The early summer wind from Babylon Square fluttered her hair.

"If you don't want me to roam all over Babylon looking for you again."

"Okay."

Yoo Soo-Ha didn't glance at us.

He simply waved his right hand while turning his back.

Soon, Yoo Soo-Ha's figure disappeared down the stairs.

"....."

I clenched my teeth.

"Manager Jaa Soo-Jeong."

"Yes, Mr. Kim Gong-Ja."

"Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong."

"Yes, Advisor."

"Tower Master."

"Yes, King of Death."

Three titles were exchanged, and three understandings passed.

"Is this the possibility you're showing me?"

"That's right."

Beyond the terrace, the square was bustling with people.

11 years into the future of my world.

Or, 11 years into the past from my current time.

A world established under the assumption of [What if Jaa Soo-Jeong had been there].

".....In a world like this."

I glared at Jaa Soo-Jeong.

"Compared to the world I created, this one is much more peaceful!"

"....."

"What is this! It's a complete mess! The Black Dragon Witch, Anastasia, is still lonely! The Heretic Inquisitor... Bambolina hasn't changed! They're broken, living without even realizing they're broken!"

But...

"[I] put the guild masters back in their place!"

In my world.

The Sword Saint let go of his arrogance and prejudice.

The Black Dragon Witch began to see the Paladin as a friend again.

The Paladin put aside the distrust caused by past purges.

The Heretic Inquisitor acknowledged his shortcomings and bowed his head to me.

They started to communicate and recognize each other.

"In this world, nothing has changed! The guild masters are still holed up in their thrones, the Tower is still a mess. It's just being swayed by the outside world. This is....."

"But..."

Jaa Soo-Jeong raised her head.

Her purple eyes met mine in a straight line.

"Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha was killed by you."

The wind blew.

"You couldn't change him, could you? Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha."

Ding.

The wind chime at the terrace window rang.

"That's because,"

"Is it because Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha was an incorrigible villain?"

The background noise of the baseball game fluttered in the wind.

"Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha was the worst of villains, a psychopath



among psychopaths, so you had no choice but to kill him. Since it was unavoidable, it's not your fault or incompetence."

"....."

"But, look, Mr. Gong-Ja."

The early summer wind swept the chime, and the background faded.

"In this world, Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha is moving for someone else."

The Flame Emperor.

After Jaa Soo-Jeong and I died, he undertook a [Return].

He reversed 24 hours at the cost of his own day.

And just now, he disappeared somewhere under the excuse of [going for a drink].

"The terrorist who caused the bombing. The traitor infiltrating the Temple of the All Gods. The assassin who stabbed the Black Dragon Witch in the back. Above all, the Saintess who attacked him. Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha is moving now to eliminate them."

Jaa Soo-Jeong looked at the square distantly with an expressionless face.

"Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha is worse than you, less active than you, bears less responsibility than you, has less will to change the world than you, and has less impact on the world than you. Even though he's a much worse person than you."

The square.

In the midst of the bustling crowd.

The black hair of a hunter fluttered.

"Yet, he became someone who moves for someone else."

"He could have become that person. Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha."

Ah.

"When you killed Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha. When you 'hunted' Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha according to your own words. That Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha wasn't the same person as the Flame Emperor who killed you. He was just a young E-rank hunter Yoo Soo-Ha, the past of the Flame Emperor, who might have become like the Flame Emperor of this world."

I closed my eyes tightly.

".....I."

A grinding sound came out.

"I also gave him a chance."

In my attempt not to kill him,

"I performed a play. I didn't just kill him abruptly; I gave him a chance. To see if he could feel compassion for a wounded person, to see if he wouldn't harm a vulnerable person despite demanding a price for help."

"As if toying with humans like a god, you put them through such a [difficult] test."

The Tower Master spoke calmly.

I...

"Difficult? If he had just quietly treated me, if he had just not tried to kill me....."

"Is that really such a [special] thing?"

The Tower Master looked at me.

"Is [killing and robbing a wounded person in a situation with no witnesses] really something that only a [specially evil person beyond redemption] could do?"

"If you're human....."

"Can anyone pass that test?"

Silence.

"Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha's death went unnoticed, a mere [disappearance of a low-rank hunter], a [common occurrence]. Don't you see what this implies, Mr. Gong-Ja? Especially since you were a low-rank hunter yourself?"

"....."

"How many people would have passed your test?"

The scent of early summer was intoxicating.

The air was sticky, and the wind was humid. The air itself seemed not yet breathed by people, but exhaled after someone else had already breathed it. The oxygen entering my lungs was the remnants of summer that had been chewed over once.

"Yes."

Among them was a breath tinged with purple.

"Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha didn't help you. He didn't save you when you collapsed in the hunting ground; instead, he tried to harm you. He tried to kill you."

"But what about Preta?"

Jaa Soo-Jeong murmured.

"What about the Demon King of the Autumn Rain? Preta also tried to kill you. She actually did. Dozens, hundreds of times, you were slain by Preta's sword. The continent was once destroyed by the blood shed by the Demon King of Autumn Rain. Yet, Mr. Gong-Ja, you granted the Demon King another life."

I gave life to Preta.

"Lady Goldencup? Constellation Killer? Heretic Inquisitor? What about the Black Dragon Witch? What about the Sword Saint? Among them, was there even one person who wasn't a [murderer], even one who killed fewer people than the young Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha?"

" ....."

"The King of Death changed all those people."

But...

"Except Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha."

He was the only one.

"Because, King of Death. You will forever remain ignorant."

That son of a bitch.

"You could never peek into Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha's trauma."

Was there no need to kill me?

"And you never tried to."

Why.

You could have explained.

You could have told me your situation.

"You didn't want to know."

I admired you so much.

Yet why did you...

"Mr. Gong-Ja."

Treat me like that.....

"You felt betrayed by Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha."

I closed my eyes to the darkness.

Jaa Soo-Jeong's voice quietly crossed over.



"And so you hate Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha."

Silence fell.

The broadcast of the Korean baseball game stopped.

The wind ceased.

The wind chime at the window stood still.

Time passed.

The sunset smeared among the crowd in the square.

The sunset had no nationality, nor did the people receiving it.

"No."

I murmured.

"It wasn't like that."

I shook my head. Several times.

"He would have become a monster. He would have been a monster anyway."

My voice leaked out as if I was feverish.

"No matter where he was born or how he was raised, whatever he experienced, that guy would have become a monster. I had no choice but to kill him. I had to. It was necessary. Not for me. Not because of how I feel. Not because I couldn't accept it. For the Tower. For the world. Because his existence couldn't be allowed. So, I..."

I...

"I thought of him as..."

I admired you.

"Weak."

"That's because you were weak at the time."

My heart pounded.

"If I had been there, it would have been different."

My heart pounded loudly.

"Mr. Kim Gong-Ja, you couldn't forgive Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha. You couldn't accept him. Even though Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha had his own past and circumstances, you didn't have the capacity or the leeway to understand. Simply put, you were too weak at the time."

The Tower Master spoke.

"Were you resentful because you were weak?"

"Feelings of inferiority and betrayal towards Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha. Anger over your own murder. A sense of helplessness that

nothing can be changed. The anxiety that, no matter how much you cherish and admire someone, they never consider you. The sensation of being absolutely worthless."

I don't know when I'll be abandoned.

"So I must become meaningful to someone."

Yes.

"I'm not powerless. I'm different from Yoo Soo-Ha. I have to be different. The people I save, my subordinates and allies, they can't be villains like Yoo Soo-Ha. They mustn't be."

No.

"Saving the children in the burning mansion too."

No.

"The opposite choice you made to Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha's decision to kill the Sword Saint, Mr. Gong-Ja. Choosing to save people

instead of abandoning them. Accepting the Heretic Inquisitor as a subordinate and the Black Dragon Witch as a friend."

I—

"Kim Yul's pain, the Head Librarian's regret, even your devotion to the Heavenly Demon and your love for Count Ivansia. All the things you've done since your return, you did them because you didn't want to be abandoned. You didn't want to be weak again. To prove that you and others are different from Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha—"

"It's not true!!"

It's not true.

That's not how it is.

I glared at Jaa Soo-Jeong.

"....."

How dare.

How dare she describe it like that.

"Why is that?"

The Tower Master spread her arms.

Her robe fluttered like the wings of a butterfly.

I...

"Yoo Soo-Ha, that guy, can't be the meaning of my life."

I was weak.

I had been weak.

Convinced that I shouldn't become a psychopath, no matter how successful, that I mustn't ignore the children burning in

the mansion. I reminded myself over and over, [I mustn't become like Yoo Soo-Ha].

"I have already overcome Yoo Soo-Ha."

But not anymore.

"In my life, the significance that Yoo Soo-Ha holds is now so trivial, I'd rather scoff and laugh at it!"

I met the Guardian Spirit.

Met my master.

Met Raviel.

Met the Head Librarian.

"In my life,"

Such beautiful people.

"Who becomes meaningful to me,"

The ones I chose to be by my side.

"Is for me to decide!"

"I choose who will be the reason for my life."

I become stronger only for them.

Not because of someone like Yoo Soo-Ha.

I no longer live with feelings of inferiority towards Yoo Soo-Ha, betrayal towards someone, or anxiety about others.

I won't let them be the reasons for my life anymore.

I've become stronger than yesterday.



"....."

Jaa Soo-Jeong looked at me.

"Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha is no longer your reason?"

"Yes."

I affirmed confidently.

"I don't even think of that guy every day. Just disappear."

"But you still hate Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha."

"Damn it."

"Mr. Gong-Ja, in your life, he still holds so much significance. So much so that you can't forgive him. No, you shouldn't forgive him. You treat Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha as the most vicious psychopath in this world."

"Fine."

I gritted my teeth.

"Thank you so much for proving that Yoo Soo-Ha could have changed."

"....."

"Now I'll prove that he means nothing to me."

That damn guy.

"Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong."

I glared at her.

"You changed Yoo Soo-Ha, only you could, you showed off in front of me, right?"

"Yes."

"I'll always hate Yoo Soo-Ha, and I can't change that, so I'm weak. So I admit I'm weaker than you, and you're the one who can change all the miseries of the world?"

"Yes."

"Get lost."

I stood up.

"I won't even give hatred and contempt to someone like Yoo Soo-Ha anymore."

I looked down at Jaa Soo-Jeong, sitting against the sunset.

"He is, in my life, now meaningless."

No.

I won't let him be meaningful.

I'm sick of even hating such a guy!

"I've become stronger."

I took out a card.

The first skill I received.

My starting point.

+

[I Want to Become Just Like You]

Rank: S+

Effect: Automatically activated when killed by an enemy. You copy one of the skills of the enemy that killed you and make it

yours. You may not copy from an opponent you've already copied from. The copied skill is selected randomly.

\*However, you will die!

+

"I'll change Yoo Soo-Ha."

I glared at the Master of All Lives.

"I changed the Demon King of Autumn Rain, the Sword Saint, the Black Dragon Witch, the Heretic Inquisitor, all of them. Yoo Soo-Ha... such a lowlife scumbag, do you think I can't change him? Me?"

"Yes."

"I don't need your IF world."

My voice was hot as if I had swallowed fire.

"I changed Preta, Elder Calenbury, Anastasia, Bambolina, Raviel. I will make them the happiest. I don't need your hypothetical existence. The reality they are in with me is their best scenario."

"....."

"You can't make the master as happy as I can."

I don't need your salvation.

"You can't make Raviel as happy as I can."

We don't need to patch our weaknesses with you.

We're not weak anymore.

We don't need gold.

"And you."

I declared.

"You won't be able to change Yoo Soo-Ha the shithead as much as I can."

"....."

"Yoo Soo-Ha, who's pathetically drinking cheap soju around in this world, I wouldn't take him even if you gave him to me. The scumbag you changed, compared to the scumbag I will change, will be far superior and happier. Because I'm more capable. Stronger."

"Ah."

Hearing my declaration of war.

Jaa Soo-Jeong laughed. Laughed again for a long time.

Then asked.

"Can you prove it? Anyone can build a heaven with words."

"I've never been a guy who only talks."

"Right. That's true. Then, is this a challenge to me, Mr. Gong-Ja?"

"It's a duel."

"I always welcome a duel."

The god with an eighteen-year-old face hummed joyfully.

"Only warriors engage in a duel. Only warriors carry the weight of their own lives. I love all humans, praise all blood as beautiful, and find joy in frustrating all challengers. Because I am strong."

"I am strong too."

"I am the strongest of all beings in the universe."

The expressionless girl was rejoicing.



“I melted the heart of the Sun King, who was isolated for sixty years. I comforted the heart of the Duke of Apathetic Leisure, decaying for a thousand years. I thawed the frozen time of the Dragon Emperor, stagnant for seven thousand years. And all these were just the prologue.”

The Tower Master tilted her head.

“I built the Tower. Thus, I became the savior of all the unfortunate, miserable, weak, wicked, mass murderers, assassins, cannibals, and all the weak and evil. My heart is infinite, my life eternal, capable of soothing the wounds of all the torn children of the world. Mr. Kim Gong-Ja, you yourself began breathing only by stepping into my Tower, so how dare you challenge me?”

“Then.”

I spoke.

“Make Raviel happier than I can.”

Just as your life proves your strength.

My life also proves my strength.

“Make my master laugh more brightly than I can.”

The people with me are my proof.

“Go ahead.”

“Ahaha.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong laughed.

“Alright.”

Laughter spread in the sunset.

“Very well, then.”

Her purple eyes half-opened.

A fragrance of purple mingled in the early summer air.

“So? How?”

The scent of a rotten poisonous flower wafted.

“What's your plan?”

The fragrance approached me.

“How exactly will you change Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha more than I can? Hm? Do you have a method? A way?”

The royal courtesan whispered in my ear.

Her voice, which enchanted countless nobles and emperors, dragons, was sweet.

“You've already killed Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha.”

"....."

"Ah, will you return to a time before you killed Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha? You've done it over 4000 times already. A few hundred days might not be impossible. But then, all the relationships you've built with the Black Dragon Witch, Sword Saint, Heavenly Demon, Constellation Killer, and many others in the meantime would all disappear, right?"

"....."

"To change Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha, you'd give up other relationships. Really, how [meaningless Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha must be to you]. Isn't it? How much more significant could those past hundreds of days be?"

That damn.

My head heated up.

Heat surged from my heart.

I didn't suppress the heat but let it out.

“Compensation.”

“Huh?”

Jaa Soo-Jeong tilted her head.

“Compensation?”

“Give me compensation.”

I didn't take out the card for nothing.

“You still owe me.”

I flipped the card over.

The skill description was written there.

Automatically activated when killed by an enemy.

You copy one of the skills of the enemy that killed you and make it yours.

+

“Your rule.”

Your Tower.

“A rightfully earned method.”

The dagger I left in the Tower.

“Based on this, I demand compensation from you.”

“Hehe.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong smirked.

“You’ll steal a skill from me and become stronger than me?”

“Yes.”

“Thinking of stealing [All Lives]? Too bad. That skill only makes sense when several skills are combined. If you had [The Golden Dragon’s Gaze] and [Ice River Dragon’s Breath], maybe you could perform miracles like me... How will you manage?”

Jaa Soo-Jeong hummed.

“Mr. Gong-Ja, you can only take one skill, right?”

Her delight was intensifying.

“Even if you take one of my skills, will you really become stronger than me, let alone change Mr. Yoo Soo-Ha? To become a munchkin like me, you need a lot, quite a lot of preparations. Mr. Gong-Ja.”

“Scared?”

I can't let the god have all the fun alone.

“Ah?”

“If you can't give it, just say so. You're scared, right? Admit defeat if you're scared. I had to endure your life because of the skill's penalty, but you won't give compensation? What a way to run the Tower.”

“Cute provocation. Really.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong laughed deeply.

“And I can't help but fall for it.”

Her fingers played in the air.

“Alright. King of Death. Take whatever you want.”

The Tower's voice echoed.



[The condition for your skill has been fulfilled.]

[Randomly copying a skill from the 'Master of All Lives'!]

Clap!

Jaa Soo-Jeong snapped her fingers.

“Go ahead and take a piece of the life I've walked, and prove your words, King of Death. Advisor. Mr. Kim Gong-Ja.”

Swoosh.

Golden cards lined up in the air.

[Creating skill cards!]

Night had fallen on the terrace as the sunset faded.

The dark night sky.

Jaa Soo-Jeong's golden treasures twinkled like the North Star.

[Madness Syndrome]

[Music of the Capital's Three Delights]

[The One Loved by the Dice]

[Royal Advisor]

[Guardian of the non-humans]

[The Golden Dragon's Gaze]

[Earth Bone Dragon's Skull]

[Ice River Dragon's Breath]

[All Lives]

Each star shining individually.

Together, they form the constellation of the Tower Master.

"....."

I reached out to the stars in the night sky.

And then.

I grasped a beam of golden light in my hand.

# Chapter 229:

## Hatred (2)

---

[Please select a skill card.]

But I had to stop my arm.

The moment I reached out to snatch a card, fingers much smaller than mine entwined with mine and caught them.

"You shouldn't do that, Mr. Gong-Ja."

"Yes?"

"That wouldn't be fun."

Jaa Soo-Jeong exhaled her breath.

“After provoking me to this extent, you wouldn’t show an uncool side in the end, would you?”

I felt a tingling in my back for a moment.

Her fingers, entwined with mine, felt like breath taking form  
- warm, cool, and mist-like, eroding my hand.

“What are you talking about?”

“Hehe.”

Conversely, Jaa Soo-Jeong’s breath sounded like fingers. Every time she whispered in my ear, her breath-like fingers gently nibbled at my ears.

“Mr. Gong-Ja, you brandished the first card you obtained and demanded compensation from me... But look? It’s clearly written on that card.”

Tap. Tap.

Jaa Soo-Jeong tapped the card in my hand with her slender nails. The golden card trembled as if infected by static electricity from the Tower Master's touch.

+

[I Want to Become Just Like You]

Rank: S+

Effect: Automatically activated when killed by an enemy. You copy one of the skills of the enemy that killed you and make it yours. You may not copy from an opponent you've already copied from. The copied skill is selected randomly.

\*However, you will die!

+

“Look, Mr. Gong-Ja.”

Breath turned into fingers touched my eardrum.

“It’s clearly written here... no, not there. Here. The very last part. Clearly, [The copied skill is selected randomly].”

Jaa Soo-Jeong giggled.

She seemed like a girl playing a naughty prank.

“Mr. Gong-Ja, you said to give up a skill according to [the rule set by the Tower].”

Perhaps, that was the highest purity Jaa Soo-Jeong, as a human, could show.

“Will you follow the rules too?”

Thud.

The sound of flicking fingers resonated.

Instantly, the golden cards scattered wildly, like fireflies blending into fireworks startled by the sound.

“Randomly.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong whispered against my arm.

“It’s fine to snatch a piece of my flesh, but please, according to the fair and just rules of the Tower, decide [randomly] which part to choose.”

Looking up, I saw the night sky. Nine golden fireflies whirled ceaselessly. As the constellation broke, each card turned into a shooting star, trailing long comet tails as they sliced through the night sky.

“You’ve had good times so far, haven’t you? Meeting Mr. Sword Emperor. You chose whichever skill you wanted while he informed you from behind. Mr. Gong-Ja, you just casually pointed like picking ice cream.”

"....."

“But every lucky-god game has its end.”

I saw her purple eyes.



The purple eyes saw me too.

Perhaps there is no mirror as clear as her eyes. I could only see the surface of her purple eyes; beyond that, endlessly reflected inner eyes. Mirrors reflecting mirrors, mirrors forming on mirrors, purple mirrors...

“Now, leave it to Mr. Gong-Ja's luck.”

Before I knew it, my gaze was fixed.

Once I properly looked into Jaa Soo-Jeong's eyes, turning my head elsewhere seemed impossible. It felt like I was caught in a cunning trap. My eyes reflected in the purple eyes, and those reflected eyes mirrored in mine...

‘Ah.’

I struggled to regain my senses.

‘Focus.’

If I remained passive, I feared I would become a statue staring at Jaa Soo-Jeong's eyes, forgetting even how to speak, for hours, tens of hours, hundreds of hours.

I took a breath.

"I understand."

And slowly nodded.

"I will choose what I want in that situation, as you said."

"Ahaha."

"But let's set a rule."

"What is it?"

"[I will never look at the back of the card.] You can turn it over and show me, but otherwise, I will not look at the back of the card myself."

“Yes, well. It's a commendable thing to say.”

“But.”

I looked at Jaa Soo-Jeong.

Strengthening my eyes with aura, I focused solely on her.

“Don't treat it as if I've chosen the card the moment I grab it.”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“Allow me time to look, touch, and handle the cards. Ah. I'll never see the back with my own eyes anyway. If I ever turn a card over and see the description, you can just cancel the skill.”

“Hmm...”

Jaa Soo-Jeong smiled coquettishly.

“I'm curious. What are you planning to do? Alright, Mr. Gong-Ja. I can wait as long as it takes for your choice. If you want, I can even use [Ice River Dragon's Breath] to freeze time in this world.”

“That kind of consideration isn't necessary.”

“Alright. Go ahead and try!”

I first collected the nine golden cards. Like the golden ball in a famous fantasy novel, the cards whirled around, but, hey, kids. To me, who has honed aura, you are just fireflies.

“Whew.”

I took a deep breath.

My hand carefully, very carefully, picked one card after another from the stack.

And then.

"....."

I looked at Jaa Soo-Jeong sitting opposite me.

We exchanged glances up close, with only a stack of cards between us.

".....?"

No, this isn't the skill I want.

I immediately decided and put down the first card.

"Huh?"

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong laughed.

"Are you trying to guess the cards by looking at my face?"

There was a mix of mockery and ridicule in her voice.

“Are you playing poker, Mr. Gong-Ja? I'm not someone whose expression can be read. All you can gain from reading my face is admiration for perfect beauty, astonishment at noble dignity, and infinite ecstasy for my existence.”

I looked at Jaa Soo-Jeong.

“Viscount.”

“Yes.”

“Hasn't anyone ever told you to stop spouting bullshit?”

“Mostly my vassals. Really, isn't it too much? No lord takes care of and loves their vassals like I do.”

While Jaa Soo-Jeong blathered on, I continued to carefully, calmly discard one card after another.

"....."

This card isn't it either. Next.

Nor this one. Next.

Next, next, next...

".....?"

Jaa Soo-Jeong sensed something odd when the nine cards were reduced to three.

“Mr. Gong-Ja...”

Perhaps she suspected that I wasn't just reading her expressions to guess the cards, but that I had a clear method to meticulously differentiate them. Such doubts belatedly arose in the Tower Master's mind.

“What are you doing? How are you figuring out the cards?”

“Who knows?”

I looked at Jaa Soo-Jeong.

“Maybe it’s some skill luck again.”

“Mr. Gong-Ja doesn’t have a piercing skill. Even if you did, it’s impossible to see through skill cards. They are created with a really special material. How exactly are you doing this...”

As Jaa Soo-Jeong narrowed her brows, I discarded another card.

Only two cards remained.

I looked at Jaa Soo-Jeong.

"....."

“There’s interesting cards left.”

I was still only looking at the front of the cards. The fronts were colored in gold, with an indiscernible pattern engraved, a topic of heated debates among Hunters. What exactly does it depict?



The pattern is as follows: A dice-like polyhedron floats in the center, with two serpentine snakes winding around it. Finally, leaves and flowers of an unknown plant exquisitely decorate the edges.

Hunters endlessly debated:

「 Why is such a pattern engraved on skill cards? 」

「 The polyhedron represents the Holy Grail. The two snakes symbolize Satan. Thus, the Tower is telling us that demons surround the Holy Grail! 」

「 What about these leaves and flowers? 」

「 Does it mean the demons are interested in environmental activism? 」

「 Nonsense begets nonsense. A fair exchange. 」

Yet, no Hunter had a definitive answer.

It was generally speculated that perhaps there would be a hint on the 100th floor, even after 11 years.

"Huh."

A chuckle escaped me.

Jaa Soo-Jeong tilted her head in confusion.

“What’s funny?”

“Oh, nothing. Just reminded of our Tower folks doing pointless stuff. This pattern here on the card. Hunters made up absurd theories about it.”

But...

“This is just your family crest, Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong blinked.

“Yes. And?”

“Pffft.”

Here’s the thing.

In the kingdom, [magic] and [mages] are symbolized by [snakes], because they believe snakes have inherited dragon blood, and magic was developed by dragons. Since it's a miracle originating from dragons, symbolizing it with [snakes] is logical.

Therefore, if a family's founder was a mage, or if the founder killed a mage, the family crest will definitely include snakes.

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong's distant ancestor famously killed an archmage, whose corpse ended up in the noble family's crest.

The mage lived in a vast forest called Crystal Forest, hence the leaves and flowers around the snake. [The mage died in this forest].

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong's ancestor completely absorbed the territory ruled by the archmage, leading to the family name

being derived from the forest's name, Crystal. The mysterious polyhedron in the center of the crest is the crystal itself.

In essence.

[The family's ancestor killed a mage living in the forest, earning the noble title of Crystal for his valor].

That's the meaning of the pattern engraved on the front of the card.

That's it. The end.

“Viscount, you're really crazy. Why put your family crest on the card front?”

“I don't see why you're calling me crazy. Naturally, I made the Tower, and I'm a noble of the kingdom. Isn't it normal to sign one's own work?”

“The outside world went nuts over this, with hundreds of thousands of priests claiming it was the will of God, a prophecy...”

“Well, I am a god, so isn't my will the will of God?”

Everyone I meet seems to be crazy.

Anyway.

I looked at Jaa Soo-Jeong.

“Hmm, not this card either. Disqualified.”

"....."

I discarded one of the last two cards.

Jaa Soo-Jeong's brows narrowed.

“Do you know what that card was?”

“Yes. An incredibly powerful skill.”

“Tell me.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong demanded proof from me.

I willingly played along with her request.

“[The One Loved by the Dice].”

"....."

“The rank is an impressive SSS. Its effect is simple.”

The description of this skill is a single line. No, just one word.

+

[The One Loved by the Dice]

Rank: SSS

Effect: Heavenly luck.

+

Heavenly Luck.

“In short, a skill that [improves luck]. Golden Dragon's Gaze or whatever is meh, this is the real cheat skill. Improved luck? Game over. No matter how difficult the quest or how complex the stage, with good luck, what's there to worry about?”

That's why it was among the last two cards I kept.

“I pondered a lot.”

“...How?”

“Whether to choose this card or that one, I really struggled. If Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong... Ah, never mind. Let's drop it. If you hadn't provoked me, I would have definitely gone all-in with [The One Loved by the Dice].”

There's an old saying in the Tower:

Skill Luck Triumphs, all other Luck Fails.

The Hunter's status depends on what skill they possess. From that perspective, [The One Loved by the Dice] is the strongest skill.

“But I won’t choose this skill.”

I looked at Jaa Soo-Jeong.

“I’ll pick something else.”

From the beginning to the end.

Throughout the process of sorting and choosing the cards, I only looked at Jaa Soo-Jeong.

"....."



More precisely.

I looked into her purple eyes.

“...Aha.”

Belatedly.

“Indeed, indeed.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong laughed, realizing my trick.

“Mr. Gong-Ja.”

“Yes.”

“You’ve been looking into my eyes.”

That's right.

“Yes.”

It was a simple method.

I looked at Jaa Soo-Jeong.

“I only saw what was reflected in your purple eyes.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong closed her lips.

She smiled joyfully.

Silently smiling, she just looked at me, motionless.

“Can you still see it clearly?”

I nodded.

“Yes.”

Your eyes are too transparent.

Despite purple being the least suitable color for reflection.

Jaa Soo-Jeong's eyes were like endlessly reflecting mirrors.

“Will you read it for me?”

“Take a closer look.”

We were already close enough.

I picked up the last remaining card and looked into her eyes.

My sight, enhanced by Aura, was trapped in her eyes—like a mirror maze.

“Read it out,” Jaa Soo-Jeong whispered.

"....."

Bridging the gap between sight and hearing, steadying my breath against the disjointed sensations, I read out my chosen golden card.

“Earth Bone Dragon's Skull.”

“Yes.”

“Rank. SSS+.”

“Correct. I measured it myself.”

“Effect. Stores the memories of the living. Stored memories are kept in a 'box.' This box can only be destroyed by the owner of this skill....”

“Go on,” Jaa Soo-Jeong's voice came closer.

Perhaps it was just an illusion.

With my sight unnaturally enhanced, all I could see were the purple letters, roundly reflected in the mirror.

“As long as the box remains intact, you can repeatedly produce bodies of individuals inheriting the same memories.”

“In short, as long as the original memory is kept in the box, the body carrying the memory can be recreated endlessly, hundreds, thousands, even tens of thousands of times. However, you cannot do it simultaneously. Only one body per memory. A new body can be created only after the destruction of the previous one.”

"....."

“What are you doing, Mr. Gong-Ja? Please continue.”

“...The bodies can roam the world, accumulating new experiences, which can then be 'updated' into the box. Of course, only if you permit it.”

“Think of that famous game with the Italian airshipmen.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong chuckled.

Her laughter sounded closer than before.

“Even if you die in the game, you come back, right? You don’t truly die. Life is just a [coin]. The box containing the memories, the Earth Bone Dragon’s Box, is like a [save point]. Even if you die and lose a life, you just return to the save point. Of course, the life lost isn’t saved... You need to return alive to save again at the save point.”

"....."

“Because of this.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong spoke.

“Many people died.”

The story contained within that skill.

“How many people wish for a save point in life? Probably as many as those who wish for regression. Earth Bone Dragon. Those who learned of its existence, crossed deserts, swam across oceans, journeyed through monster-infested jungles, risking everything to meet it.”

A story that can’t be just described as a [skill].

“Many died along the way.”

"....."

"178 made it to the Earth Bone Dragon's nest."

And these 178 people acquired their own [save points].

Without fearing death, without worrying about eternal end, they successfully turned their lives into [coins].

“A worst-case military group was formed.”

An army of 178 rampaged through the world.

“They carried flags on their backs to signify where they originally belonged, hence they were called the Banner Soldiers.”

Soldiers fluttering a flag of a bygone era.

“A thousand years ago, the greatest archer hailed as the Rock Banner Shooter. The 17th head of the Spiral Gate, the strongest assassin group of the force. A Great Thief who set the royal road ablaze and escaped leisurely. 600 years ago, a River Pirate who occupied half of the kingdom's rivers, commanding dozens of warships. 1300 years ago, a promising mage expected to become the kingdom's greatest.”

Throughout the long history of the kingdom.

Each significant figure of their era.

Like my master who dominated the last era of the martial world.

“They formed an [Undying Army].”

That was 178 warriors.

“Seeing an army approaching from beyond the desert, fluttering dozens of flags, struck terror into all humans, children cried, and soldiers lost morale and fled,” they say.

"....."



“Thus, the Banner Soldiers were a natural disaster made of humans.”

I spoke, still trapped in the mirror-maze with my lips.

“What eventually happened to them?”

Jaa Soo-Jeong chuckled softly.

“They became my private soldiers.”

“Why the nobles of the kingdom, who see me as nothing but a mutt, don’t declare war on me is quite clear. They’d get crushed.”

And then.

[Selection complete.]

The card in my hand dissolved brightly.

[Copying skill.]

Simultaneously, the maze of mirrors dissolved.

The purple mirror had lost its card to reflect.

The mirror became an eye again, and what I was looking at was Jaa Soo-Jeong's eye. Realizing it, I was face-to-face with Jaa Soo-Jeong.

"King of Death."

Up close.

"What you've acquired is immensely powerful. It has encompassed countless deaths and left numerous scars. Mr. Gong-Ja, what do you plan to do with that card?"

A breath's distance away.

The perfect distance for a viper to strike a human's neck.

“How will you defeat me with it, when even the Dragon Emperor and his army, already defeated and reduced to your spoils, couldn’t?”

I too smiled.

“Better get ready to wail and whine, Tower Master.”

There’s no doubt.

I’ve drawn the mightiest card.

# Chapter 230:

## Hatred (3)

---

The sun had set in the world.

I emerged onto the streets of the sunset with Jaa Soo-Jeong.

Babylon, a city founded by stateless refugees, was a melange of different scents.

The smell of Indian spices wafted through the air. The scent of Chinese incense followed.

Every passerby had a different skin color and a unique body odor.

“Where are you heading?”

Jaa Soo-Jeong inquired.

“I can send you back to your original world anytime now. You’ve collected your reward. Is there still something you need to do in this world?”

“Just follow me.”

“Hmm.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong smiled faintly as she walked beside me.

“Lead the way.”

The street fragrances gradually faded.

Do you know the smell of Harlem?

Poverty always exudes the same scent. The smell of stagnant water, of humidity. Water that couldn't find its way out, pooling in the shadows, not rotting under the sun.

Plastic drink bottles with their heads buried in muddy water.

Measuring the depth of this impoverished pond.

"....."

We walked.

As the muddy water under our feet increased.

As the street fragrances lost their nationalities, subsumed into mere water scent.

As the world's twilight grew darker.

"...Ah."

I turned into a familiar alley.

Jaa Soo-Jeong noticed it too and flicked her lips.

"Mr. Gong-Ja. This place is----."

“Shh.”

I murmured.

“I can hear it.”

Jaa Soo-Jeong closed her mouth.

Then, faint noises started coming from afar.

“Hey, Flame Emperor.”

A familiar voice.

“Why suddenly to me...!”

“There's no use in seeking help.”

A familiar sneer.

“Nobody's around here anyway.”

The top-ranked Hunter, the Flame Emperor.

As if the sunset had been swallowed entirely by his throat, Yoo Soo-Ha's voice was particularly red.

“Never thought the witch had hidden such a beauty. Wow. Would've been a big problem if I hadn't known.”

“Witch? What are you talking about...?”

“Haha. Your acting skills are remarkable too.”

Deep inside the dark alley.

Yoo Soo-Ha had cornered the Saintess, tilting his head cockily.

“I'm different from your old grandpa.”



As he said that, the Saintess's expression hardened.

“Yeah?”

“Your grandpa, the Sword Saint or whatever. He entered the tower seeking revenge, didn't he? For you.”

"....."

“You thought I wouldn't know?”

To be precise, he didn't know.

But Yoo Soo-Ha had [Returner's Winding Clock].

A skill that starts a new day by dying once a day.

Thanks to that, Yoo Soo-Ha knew about [the future where the Saintess attacks him].

“How do you... How could you know that?”

Of course, the Saintess didn't know about Yoo Soo-Ha's skill.

Just like she didn't in my world. Exactly the same.

“Because I'm a damn smart bastard. There's nothing I don't know.”

"Ugh...!"

The Saintess moved her hand.

Probably the brief white flash from her right hand was her Aura.

“Oh, dear. Our granddaughter is quite fierce.”

But the white Aura was cut off before it could fully manifest.

The Flame Emperor had grabbed the Saintess's neck.

“Krggh!?”

“You’ve got the hang of killing a few people. What would your grandpa say seeing his granddaughter’s face like this? Huh? He would’ve probably lamented, unable to forgive a murderer, ready to... Ah, you don’t have idioms like that in your world, do you?”

The Saintess struggled, choking.

Her feet, lifted off the ground, desperately sought support in vain.

“I really fucking love people like you.”

Back then.

“No matter how many times you die, it doesn’t leave a scratch on my heart.”

In the same place, with the same people present.

“Hanging out with goody-two-shoes pisses me off. Wow, fuck, are there really non-trash humans in this world?”

Back then, I couldn't do anything.

“Seems impossible. Just a peel away and everyone's trash. But peeling off is troublesome, right? Even peeling an orange leaves fiber under your nails.”

“Ugh, hrk! Ugh...!”

“All the better when I meet someone like you. Ah, it's not tiring. Just like my brain's been rinsed with cleaner. I live because of you, really. All thanks to you.”

I could only watch.

Panicked, struggling hard just to keep my breathing silent.

“Thanks.”

But now it is different.

“Farewell, Saintess Isabelle.”

Just as the Flame Emperor’s grip was about to ignite,

My Aura surged towards the back of his hand.

“...!?”

Thud!

The Flame Emperor reflexively released the Saintess's neck and staggered back. His nimble steps sliced through the air where my Aura had passed.

“Huk...!”

The Saintess collapsed, gasping for air as her windpipe was freed.

“What...”

The Flame Emperor turned towards us with a shocked face.

That was it.

One breath.

“Salvation Sword.”

Without giving him a chance to breathe, I lunged forward immediately.

Responding to my call, a skill that had become one with me answered.

[The Torn Goddess's Salvation responds.]

It was a technique previously possessed by the Constellation Killer.

Just as nine golden skills made up the Tower Lord, two skills constituted the Constellation Killer.

One was [Puppeteer's Parade].

Thanks to this, the Constellation Killer had returned with a new body even after his original one was destroyed.

The other was [The Torn Goddess's Salvation].

Thanks to this, the Constellation Killer discarded yesterday's memories for today's victory.

When I was killed by the Constellation Killer, I could choose one of these two skills.

And I chose.

“Part-timer!? You, what are you----”

“The coffee from our office’s cafe is terribly tasteless. Please change the delivery service, Guild Master.”

I rushed into the Flame Emperor's embrace.

Compressing my voice with Aura, I shot it as telepathy.

His already shocked face grew even more astonished.

“I don’t want to remember the taste of today's coffee.”

I declared.

“Let's discard it.”

Then I swung my fist.

[The Torn Goddess's Salvation activates.]

A single strike.

Enhancement.



".....!"

My Aura, as red as the Flame Emperor's, struck his abdomen. Kuhk! A grunt escaped Yoo Soo-Ha's lips. Unable to counter the impact, he flew like a stick towards the alley wall.

The wall shattered into pieces.

"Huk, ugh... Ah?"

That was it.

Two breaths.

"You, you're from Yoo Soo-Ha's guild...?"

The Saintess, regaining some strength, looked up at me. She had a red burn on her neck where the Flame Emperor had grabbed her, showing she was not completely unharmed. Confusion was evident in her eyes.

I used to think of the Saintess as a pure victim.

"I'm sorry, but please rest for a while."

Now, I just see her as another person like me.

I pressed my hand against the Saintess's forehead, reversing the flow of Aura.

"Ah....."

She let out a groan and collapsed, unconscious. What once seemed an unimaginable show of force was now so easily done.

That was it.

Three breaths.

"Damn, fuck!"

The Flame Emperor rose from the ruined wall.

Rubble slid off his long ponytail.

“What the hell are you doing! Hey! You! Are you really just a part-timer!?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Fuck, were you also raised by the witch... No, no, that can't be. When the terror attack happened....”

The Flame Emperor couldn't keep up with the situation.

It's understandable. To him, I was still just a frail E-rank Hunter guild member.

“Curious, President?”

The Saintess didn't know that the Flame Emperor had regressed a day.

Similarly.

The Flame Emperor had no idea who I really was.

“If you want to know, try defeating me.”

“Ha....”

“I need to know that I'm stronger than you.”

“I don't know what blessing you've received, but.”

The Flame Emperor's eyes ignited.

“You're about to get a severe beating.”

My hand glowed with blood-red Aura.

“I'll beat you just enough not to kill you.”

Then, I charged.

Summoning all the life I had.

“The top rank of this tower....!”

“My Demonic Heavenly God Art echoes its testament in the snowy plains.”

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The First Form.

Sword of Starving Death.

I lunged a fist at the Flame Emperor. He tried to block it, his face saying, "You got me once, won't happen again." Yes, fundamentally, I was a swordsman, not a boxer. Unlike the Flame Emperor, I wasn't in my best form right now.

But my master once traversed snowy mountains without even a single sword.

So without a sword, I, too, could pierce through a mere

flame.

+

[Demonic Heavenly God Art]

Rank: A+

Effect: The Demonic Cult. They hate and curse the principles of heaven. They not only hate and curse but formed a sect and ultimately established a doctrine. Demonic Heavenly God Art is a martial art containing the essence of this doctrine.

Those who comprehend the Demonic Heavenly God Art can tear apart the heavens and crush mountains! However, one must deeply understand the hatred and curses contained in the techniques of the art.

The more you hate and curse the world, the more colorless the heavens will become. The one who attains the ultimate state of Demonic Heavenly God Art, that person will be the true Heavenly Demon, capable of overturning the heavens.

\*However, using the art makes it difficult to maintain one's

self.

+

One strike.

A fragment of my life penetrated the flame.

“---Eh, what?”

“Today.”

My fist met Yoo Soo-Ha's jaw, and his head turned. Slowly. In the time dilated by Aura, the Flame Emperor couldn't strike back, and I was a step ahead, swinging my arm.

“I discard the memory of stepping into the mud puddle as I entered this alley.”

I unleashed the Aura.

+

## [The Torn Goddess's Salvation]

Rank: A+

Effect: There was a goddess who dedicated herself to a hero. Although torn apart by the hero, the goddess still wanted to stand by his side. She descended from heaven and sealed herself into a skill card.

The goddess converts memories into power. By offering memories to the goddess, you can enhance your abilities and strength. The more important the memory you offer, the more amplified the enhancement effect.

\*However, the enhancement effect does not last long.

+

A storm howled.



My fist, once again, squarely struck Yoo Soo-Ha's abdomen.

"-----"

His breath twisted.

A groan slipped from his open mouth.

Along with the groan, a few drops of gastric acid fell, and then, Yoo Soo-Ha staggered and knelt.

"Ugh, .....fuck...!"

"Guild Master."

I quietly looked down at the Flame Emperor.

"I get you're pissed about us 'dying.' But you did kill her grandfather, right?"

“You, ugh, fuck, what...”

“Then you should start by apologizing for killing her grandfather.”

That was it.

It took five breaths.

“Explain why you had to kill, that the Sword Saint tried to kill you first. Even then, apologize to the Saintess.”

That was it.

It took many days.

“You should do that.”

“Why did you try to kill without a second thought?”

Do you know the smell of an alley?

In poverty, there was always the smell of water.

No matter how strong the sun, where the shadows fall, the light does not shine. The puddles in the shadows, unable to evaporate in time, swell again with the nightfall and rain.

Decaying in stagnation.

“Why.”

It took many suns for my rotten mud to return.

“Why do you kill people you don’t know?”

“You’re strong, Guild Master. The strongest in this tower. Unlike others, you could afford to throw your life away. Yet you kill people without a second thought.”

I looked down at the man who once burned my heart.

So strong that once, to defeat him, I had no choice but to flee to the past, to the days 4,000 days away.

That's right. I fled.

I didn't know how to persuade him, lacked the power to convince him, didn't know how to attract him, and lacked the courage to face him, so I ran and killed Yoo Soo-Ha before he became the Flame Emperor.

I killed Yoo Soo-Ha, not the Flame Emperor.

“Stop living like that.”

"....."

“You fucking bastard.”

Now I'm stronger than him.

Uncomparably stronger.

I could do so much more.

Watching the Saintess die while holding my breath, running to flee, fearing death, fearing being abandoned, worrying about being meaningless to others – none of that was necessary anymore.

I lived diligently.

"....."

The Flame Emperor vomited again.

He wiped his mouth with his hand and muttered, "fuck."

"Stop spouting bullshit, you fucking bastard...."

"...."

"Why can't you be a bit nicer? Why are you ranting at me, fuck. Look around. Where the hell did you grow up to talk such bullshit..."

The Flame Emperor's eyes were bloodshot.

"Jaa Soo-Jeong and you too. Oh, really. You're not humans, you're like stray dogs. Someone picks you up and raises you, and you wag your tails like happy little puppies. Fuck. How can you..."

The words he vomited were also blood.

"How can you like people so much?"

The concentration of his blood intensified.

"How can you---like people so much?"

The Flame Emperor glared at me.

"Fools. Go die. Jaa Soo-Jeong, you too, just go and die. Just, die. Die already. Get lost. Fuck, bastard, really, what....."

Yes.

Then, that is your lament.

I---the Vice-lord of the Demonic Cult, the Moon of the Ivansia Ducal Family, the Lord of the Ghouls, quietly nodded.

"There aren't only bastards like you in this world."

"....."

"And I will make sure you aren't a bastard either. I can do that, and I will."

I pressed my hand on the Flame Emperor's forehead.

"I am stronger than you."

And I reversed the flow of Aura.

The Flame Emperor, leaving his last curse, slipped down smoothly.

"Shit....."

Thud.

The unconscious Flame Emperor collapsed to the ground.

Silence descended in the alley.

Small footsteps approached from behind me. Turning around, I saw Jaa Soo-Jeong looking up at me.

Her purple eyes quietly inquired.

「What will you do now?」

I nodded.

“Ghoul Reincarnation.”

My shadow spread through the alleyway shadowed by the



night sky. The shadow wriggled like slime, and from that writhing, a person's form emerged.

+

[Ghoul Reincarnation]

Rank: SSS

Effect: You summon those you've personally killed. The deceased do not inherit their abilities from life. However, if you wish, they can inherit their memories and appearances from when they were alive. If you do not wish it, they will only be summoned as monsters.

\*However, you can only summon once a week.

+

“Whoa. What the hell?”

The figure that rose from the shadows looked exactly like

the man who had just fallen.

“Where the hell is this? What kind of shitty place did you summon me to?”

Yoo Soo-Ha, dressed in his Planetarium Café part-timer outfit, scowled.

In this world, I was a part-timer, but in my world, he had become one.

Feeling the strange fate, I asked him.

“Yoo Soo-Ha.”

“Huh? Wait, fuck! Who's the guy lying there?”

“Never mind that. Yoo Soo-Ha.”

“What?”

“Do you feel like a dog, being dead and summoned by me?”

Yoo Soo-Ha looked at me as if I were a complete idiot.

“Are you on drugs?”

“Just answer honestly.”

“Alright. I feel like a dog. Wouldn't you feel like a puppy in my place? Some bastard picks me up in a hunting ground, smacks me from behind, even after killing me keeps summoning me whenever bored, orders me to dance, teaches me to swear, fuck. Saying it out loud pisses me off again. Just die. You crazy fuck.”

“Right.....”

I sighed.

“I guess I'm a bastard to someone too.....”

“What?”

“It’s just... the Viscount was absolutely right.....”

Enough.

Time to accept it.

“I’m sorry.”

Yoo Soo-Ha flinched.

“Huh?”

“I’m sorry for killing you, you fucker.”

"....."

Yoo Soo-Ha shut his mouth.

It would be great if he was moved by my apology, even admirable, but of course, Yoo Soo-Ha never does anything to

make others happy, let alone admirable things. He's a bastard, after all. He just looked at me as if I were an idiot.

“You’re sorry for killing me?”

“Yes.”

“Fuck, I thought my ears were busted, turns out it's your fucking head that's busted. Got shot, did you? Ah, but you don't die from that, right? Then get shot more. Wow. I've never heard such a 'sorry for killing you' apology in all my life. Fuck, in the history of mankind, I must be the first to hear this bullshit, you bastard. When are you going to die, you fucker?”

Ah, such a dog-like man...

Does he get pimples on his lips if he doesn't swear when he opens his mouth? Even when someone is apologizing...

"....."

I turned to look at Jaa Soo-Jeong.

Jaa Soo-Jeong was smiling broadly at me.

“...Are you enjoying this?”

“It's fucking fascinating, Mr. Gong-Ja. It's not just my personal opinion, even the entire population would agree it's super fun. Mr. Gong-Ja. It's like bees buzzing ‘Oh my, who stole the honey I stored away? Ah, here it is?’ It's that level of fun, Mr. Gong-Ja. But don't mind me, please continue your conversation with Yoo Soo-Ha, Mr. Gong-Ja. By the way, do they sell popcorn in the Harlem district? My mouth is urgently requesting some right now, Mr. Gong-Ja.”

Ah, such a dog-like woman...

Why are there only crazies around me?

In this crazy world where gods, devils, and humans all hold hands together, I embraced my head for a while, then spoke again after a long pause.

“Hey...”

“What?”

“I can’t make up for the apology now, but... no, I can. I'm sorry to you. And I'll make it up to you. I'll keep making it up. Will that be enough?”

“This fucker, can't talk like a normal person. Speak so humans can understand, you bastard.”

“Be glad I'm such a strong person...”

I...

I took out the most recent piece I had acquired in my life.

“Really, be glad I'm strong.”

The piece I had stolen from the Tower Master.

+

[Earth Bone Dragon's Skull]

Rank: SSS+

Effect: Stores the memories of the living. Stored memories are kept in a 'box.' This box can only be destroyed by the owner of this skill.

As long as the box remains intact, you can repeatedly produce bodies of individuals inheriting the same memories. The bodies can roam the world, accumulating new experiences, which can then be 'updated' into the box. Of course, only if you permit it!

Even if the body of the individual is destroyed, the box remains unharmed. Bestow the privilege of immortality on those around you.

\*However, memories of a destroyed body cannot be updated into the box.

+

“Jaa Soo-Jeong.”

“Yes, Mr. Gong-Ja.”



“I...”

I said.

“I'll resurrect this bastard.”

Earth Bone Dragon's Skull.

A skill that stores [memories] and gives [bodies], I declared holding the strongest card I had drawn.

“I'll return the body to this son of a bitch.”

To resurrect one human being.

# Chapter 231: My Legion (1)

---

Silence descended upon the dark alley.

"Wanting to revive someone."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong slowly looked around.

"How interesting."

A crystal-clear purple mirror reflected the alley within.

"But this place doesn't suit [revival] at all. You know? Mr. Gong-Ja."

Calling my name, Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong stepped into a muddy puddle. Squelch. A plastic bottle got caught under Jaa Soo-Jeong's foot.

Jaa Soo-Jeong lifted the dirty waste with her white, long fingers.

"Think about this beverage bottle. It must've been imported from the outside world. Though it's just a trivial drink, someone wanted it badly enough to pay in platinum. Treasuring it, drinking sparingly... Oh dear. It's completely drained now."

The Tower Master hummed in delight.

"Such a cherished drink. It would've been a waste to simply throw it away. Maybe it was used as a water bottle for a while? Or perhaps as a pencil case. But, such affections have their limits."

Thud.

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong threw the plastic bottle back into the muddy puddle.

"And so, the garbage was discarded where it belongs."

The already dirt-covered plastic bottle slowly slid into a

puddle and then stopped.

"Here."

Suddenly, Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong stood among us.

Naturally, both I and Flame Emperor, feeling an instinctual warning not to provoke her, quietly observed Jaa Soo-Jeong.

"A place where everything discarded is discarded once more."

Once again, silence fell.

In the dark alley.

Those discarded by the vast outside world gathered in the Tower, built Babylon, and those discarded by Babylon crept into secluded alleys to establish Harlem. And now, even in Harlem, there are cursed houses and cursed objects, bringing a foreboding silence around us, the three people present.

"In such a place, you say you want to revive someone, Mr.

Gong-Ja?"

I nodded.

"That's correct."

"Alright."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong smiled faintly.

"Could you explain how you plan to achieve this revival?"

Yes.

I looked at Jaa Soo-Jeong---not only at her but at all the discarded and forsaken things here, proving my qualifications.

"As you know, I have a skill that can summon those who have already died."

Flash.

A golden card radiated light in my hand.

+

[Ghoul Reincarnation]

Rank: SSS

Effect: You summon those you've personally killed. The deceased do not inherit their abilities from life. However, if you wish, they can inherit their memories and appearances from when they were alive. If you do not wish it, they will only be summoned as monsters.

\*However, you can only summon once a week.

+

"And."

I drew another card.

"I also have a skill that can grant a complete body to a person if I have their [memory]."

+

[Earth Bone Dragon's Skull]

Rank: SSS+

Effect: Stores the memories of the living. Stored memories are kept in a 'box.' This box can only be destroyed by the owner of this skill.

As long as the box remains intact, you can repeatedly produce bodies of individuals inheriting the same memories. The bodies can roam the world, accumulating new experiences, which can then be 'updated' into the box. Of course, only if you permit it!

Even if the body of the individual is destroyed, the box remains unharmed. Bestow the privilege of immortality on those around you.

\*However, memories of a destroyed body cannot be updated into the box.

+

I showed the two cards.

"Viscount Amethyst."

"Yes, Mr. Gong-Ja."

"If I activate both skills together, I can revive Yoo Soo-Ha."

Beside me, Yoo Soo-Ha, who had been quietly overwhelmed by the scenery, twitched, tensing his shoulders.

"Please, bring him back."

"Hmm."



Jaa Soo-Jeong's eyes narrowed.

"Really interesting, very clever, and personally, I would naturally want to fulfill such a request, but..."

Jaa Soo-Jeong ran her finger over the cards.

"Look closely at the skill descriptions. Start with Ghoul Reincarnation."

+

You summon those you've personally killed.

The deceased do not inherit their abilities from life.

+

"Look," said Jaa Soo-Jeong.

"Ghoul Reincarnation clearly mentions [the dead]. Summoning through this skill doesn't mean the person is [revived]. For example, Yoo Soo-Ha standing there..."

Yoo Soo-Ha shuddered again.

"is not alive. He's a summoned entity. It's like having a doll identical to the body before death and overlaying it with memories from before death. On the other hand....."

Jaa Soo-Jeong smiled.

"Look at the next card."

+

Stores the memories of the living.

Stored memories are kept in a 'box.'

As long as the box remains intact, you can repeatedly produce bodies of individuals inheriting the same memories.

+

"It's explicitly stated that it stores memories of [the living]," she said, flicking her fingers on the card, tap, tap.

"Not memories of the already dead. Not memories of a summoned entity created through necromancy or summoning spells. Only memories of the already living can be stored in the box."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong tilted her head with a smile.

"What a pity."

"....."

"If Yoo Soo-Ha were still alive, you could have stored his memories in the box without any problem. Skills are very strict, and no matter how regrettable, they don't allow exceptions. Sorry."

"No."

I shook my head.

"There's no need for you to apologize, Tower Master."

"Hm?"

Jaa Soo-Jeong looked puzzled.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't need the process of collecting memories, whether from the living or the dead."

I had already envisioned the entire picture the moment I saw the skill [Earth Bone Dragon's Skull].

"Because [Ghoul Reincarnation] already stores all the necessary memories."

"....."

Jaa Soo-Jeong fell silent.

The silence in the alley deepened.

I continued to speak to those purple eyes.

"[Ghoul Reincarnation] is a box of memories in itself. It contains Yoo Soo-Ha's memories. It contains the Constellation Killer's memories. It contains Goldencup's memories. It contains Preta's memories. It contains the memories of believers who harbored Demonic Heaven in their hearts."

Below my feet.

From that very shadow which had once molded Yoo Soo-Ha, more ghouls were successively summoned.

The shadow grew, covering the plastic bottle garbage at Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong's feet, engulfing the muddy puddle, spreading over the already ruined alley, and finally, everything that was discarded twice in this world.

Preta, the followers of Demonic Cult, Goldencup, Constellation Killer.

One by one, slowly, those gathered in my shadow raised their heads.

Turning my back to them, I faced Jaa Soo-Jeong.

"My [Ghoul Reincarnation] is already a [box] containing numerous memories."

I appealed to the deity of this tower.

"Since I already possess their memory boxes, there's no need for me to seek out a living person to acquire memories. Tower Master, that process is unnecessary for me."

Therefore.

"What I need is only their physical bodies."

"....."

"Bodies bound to my summoning spell, appearing instantly when I call. Not just dolls resembling their pre-death bodies

with memories but---"

Not just puppets tied to me with chains.

"Bodies belonging to these children."

Able to go where they want.

Able to do what they desire.

Bodies indistinguishable from humans.

"I only wish to give these children their bodies."

Jaa Soo-Jeong closed her lips.

The ghouls risen from my shadow looked at Jaa Soo-Jeong. The shadow, indistinguishable from the muddy water, made it seem as though countless stars in the mud were looking up at her.

"So, King of Death. Not just Yoo Soo-Ha but---"

"Yes."

I nodded.

"I wish for all of them, here, to be revived."

---

How long did the silence last?

"Ahaha..."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong laughed.

"Hmm. Yes."

I didn't know what she meant by [that].

But it was clear she was very pleased.



Satisfied with the application of the skill I created, judging by her expression.

"Everyone deserves a second chance at life."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong lightly kicked the muddy puddle with the tip of her foot.

Mud splashed up.

Just before the muddy water could stain Jaa Soo-Jeong's socks and calf, the black droplets froze in mid-air.

"That's exactly why I built the tower."

Time stood still.

Jaa Soo-Jeong playfully kicked the muddy water again. Her skirt fluttered. In that slow-motion as if a circus tent was spinning---Jaa Soo-Jeong, beaming, clapped her hands.

"Mr. Gong-Ja, you are trying to build your own tower within

the one I built."

Clap!

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong just clapped her hands.

But in the frozen world, her clap resounded like a bell in the night sky.

If there were beings that lived regardless of whether time stopped or not, they surely heard Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong's clap.

"Alright, everyone."

Jaa Soo-Jeong smiled brightly.

"To this [junior] who dares challenge me."

I had never seen her smile so radiantly before.

Like a performer on stage, like a conductor facing an orchestra, Jaa Soo-Jeong stood in the midst of the Harlem ruins, arms wide open. "As your [senior], let me show you my experience."

Jaa Soo-Jeong shouted excitedly.

"Everyone! Please come here!"

At that moment, the night tore apart.

There was no other way to describe it.

As if a colossal god had sliced the night sky with a sword, a long wound opened up. Split in two. It was as if there was an invisible zipper in the night sky, and someone had just zipped it open.

The full moon split.

The Milky Way parted.

Moonlight tore, starlight split, and finally, the entire sky opened.

Inside the gaping maw, only pitch-black darkness breathed.

[The Apostle of the Master of All Lives manifests.]

And then.

From the rift of darkness, countless white butterflies poured out.

[The Apostle of the Master of All Lives manifests.]

First, one.

[The Apostle of the Master of All Lives manifests.]

Then, five.

[The Apostle of the Master of All Lives manifests.]

Soon, dozens.

[The Apostle of the Master of All Lives manifests.]

[The Apostle of the Master of All Lives manifests.]

[The Apostle of the Master of All Lives manifests.]

Hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands.

Countless white butterflies cascaded from the night sky.

We dumbly looked up at the stars made of white butterflies.

"....."

Every one of those numerous butterflies was an Apostle, comparable to Lady Goldencup. No, perhaps comparing them

to Goldencup was an insult.

They were not ordinary constellations; they were Apostles serving the unique and only master of this tower, the Tower Master.

"My Lord, who is this person...?"

Perhaps astonished by the sheer number of Apostles in the night sky.

Preta, summoned by me, trembled yet moved closer to protect me.

Not only Preta.

"Vice-lord, what kind of madman have you made an enemy of this time?"

"It seems like we're outnumbered quite a bit. Not that I get scared by numbers, but you know, it's just a bit...yeah."

"The world..."

The followers of Demonic Cult surrounded me, layer upon layer.

Ready to protect me with their bodies if necessary.

"Ahaha."

Watching me and the ghouls, Jaa Soo-Jeong laughed pleasantly.

"King of Death."

"If the King of Death had been born in the same world as me. If you had been born just a little earlier than me, perhaps our positions would be reversed right now."

Jaa Soo-Jeong smirked and raised her index finger.

And gently pressed her finger to her lips.

"But I was a bit quicker."

In the night sky, butterflies formed a Milky Way.

Countless stars appeared.

Every point of light resembling stars was one of Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong's Apostles. From ancient to modern times, in any era, in any place, those lives saved by Jaa Soo-Jeong shone brilliantly in the sky like stars.

"To catch up to me as a latecomer, you'll need to put in quite a bit, a lot of effort."

"...I'm glad. I'm confident in putting in the effort, if nothing else."

"I'll look forward to it."

Jaa Soo-Jeong smiled.

"As a sign of expectation, let me give you one more small



gift."

Viscount Jaa Soo-Jeong raised her hand.

Dozens of butterflies fluttered towards Jaa Soo-Jeong. And the moment the butterflies touched her hand, a small light burst forth. The light quickly grew and soon became the size of a child.

"God!"

A child clung tightly to Jaa Soo-Jeong's waist.

"It's real! It's God!"

"God, please call us more often!"

"It feels like almost 30 years since you last called us!"

The children noisily clamored around Jaa Soo-Jeong, like fans meeting an admired older sister. The children chattered non-stop, and Jaa Soo-Jeong smiled, gently patting each of

their heads.

"Ah?"

Suddenly.

Our eyes met one of the children's.

"Kind sir?"

"....."

My heart fluttered.

"It's the kind sir!"

"What kind sir? Half the people in this world are kind sir to us."

"The kind sir who played with us!"

The faces I had only seen sculpted as dolls.

"Where? How?"

"In the mansion we were trapped in!"

"When was that?"

"The kind sir came and played with us!"

"That wasn't us, right?"

"It was the memories we entrusted to God, right?"

"Right! God said she would use our memories to decorate the tower!"

"Oh, I remember... 600 years ago?"

"That was really fun!"

I slowly opened my mouth.

"You..."

The children of the hellfire mansion.

Addressing the children, chattering with real faces, not dolls.

"You didn't die?"

"No."

The one who answered was Jaa Soo-Jeong.

She gently stroked the forehead of a child.

"They did die."

"....."

"These children are like Yoo Soo-Ha in this world. In one of the worlds where [If I had been there], a world based on such a hypothesis, they barely escaped the mansion with my help, survived, and became my Apostles."

In other words.

"Just as you have decided to revive people with [Ghoul Reincarnation] and [Earth Bone Dragon's Skull], I am sheltering these children with [Master of All Lives]."

"Like what I'm trying to do for Yoo Soo-Ha...."

"Yes. I try to give a second life to everyone who has perished in all creations. Originally, I was going to gather Yoo Soo-Ha through this world as well, but..."

Jaa Soo-Jeong laughed softly.

"I'll leave it to you."

"....."

"Preta too. The warriors of Demonic Heaven. Goldencup. Constellation Killer. These numerous stars might seem insignificant compared to all the stars in the night sky, but, King of Death. I'll entrust that handful to you. Perhaps one day, those droplets will gather and form a river."

Under the countless Milky Ways in the night sky.

The Master of All Lives clasped her hands together.

"To someone who walks a similar yet different path from me."

As if praying somewhere.

"May fortune be with you."

And then.

[Trauma re-enactment complete.]

[The target's ego has remained intact.]

[Penalty Finalized.]

There was light.

# Chapter 232: My Legion (2)

---

What's the most luxurious sight one can see upon opening their eyes?

Some might say the time-worn sky, others might mention an [unfamiliar ceiling], but at least for me, I have a definitive answer to this question.

"Gong-Ja."

It was Raviel.

"Are you conscious?"

Raviel lifted her delicate fingers to my forehead. Her small fingers. The first and middle joints of her fingers rhythmically brushed against my forehead, leaving a tactile sensation.



"Raviel....."

"Hmm."

"I-It was too hard for me....."

I felt like I was about to burst into tears.

The place where I stood up now was a side story in the World of the Tower. Specifically, an external story. This was the place where Kim Yul and Jaa Soo-Jeong went to the same middle and high school. We had decided to stay at Jaa Soo-Jeong's house for a while.

"I just, I tried to dream... about Gods. Tower Masters. This person, just insane, someone whose entire life is a trauma....."

Uburka and Jaa Soo-Jeong (of this world) were looking here, but I couldn't stop clinging to Raviel. At this moment, my heart needed the gentle fragrance of Silver Lily.

"Oh, entire life as a trauma? How is that possible?"

"That person always relives scenes of other people dying in their mind. Even empathizing with them. [If I had been on that battlefield, I too would have been trampled to death by the cavalry]. Like that....."

"Isn't that just a delusion?"

"It would be great if it were a delusion..... This crazy woman, she really made it possible. Not only did she obtain a skill to move through time, she remembers everything that happens to her, understanding all the causality of the world, and then using it....."

"Hmm. Hmm."

Raviel patted my back.

She wore a bitter smile.

"My consort seems to have seen something terrible. It's rare for you to be like this. It's okay. We were all safe, without any incidents. You can lean on me a bit more."

"Raviel.....!"

"No, maybe it's a good idea to take a long vacation. [The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages] said it, didn't she? This city is completely isolated in time from the outside world. A week, a month, rest as long as you want, my Gong-Ja. I too would be happy to spend time comforting you."

Eventually, tears flowed.

How could my wife be so strong?

"I've never seen my father cry like this. Ugor....."

"Is that so?"

"Ugo. I was wondering why it looked unfamiliar, but seeing it twice, it's hard to call him a father. In that sense, he's been holding up well. I'll go to bed first....."

"Ah. I'll lay out the bedding for you, Mr. Uburka."

"Thank you, landlord....."

Uburka went out to the living room with a heavy thud, and Jaa Soo-Jeong (of this world) followed with precise steps, their different masses revealed in their footsteps.

Now, only Raviel and I remained in the main hall.

"Raviel....."

"Speak, Gong-Ja."

As the room became quieter with fewer people, Raviel hugged me more comfortably. Gently. After kissing my forehead, Raviel spread her legs and patted them.

"If our Gong-Ja is crying like this, it must have been terrible indeed. But with just the words I heard, I can't form a clear impression in my mind. Explain a bit more."

"...Yes."

Snugly.

I laid my head on Raviel's lap. Worried that my head might be heavy, I pumped aura into my neck to reduce the weight on Raviel. Of course, I do the same even at the hairdresser's to not burden the designers!

"Pfft."

Raviel giggled above me.

"Gong-Ja."

"Yes."

"Your consideration is cute. But it's not appreciated. How heavy could your skinny head be? I want to take on the full weight you carry. Honey, relax your neck."

"Haah....."

"Hmm. Good job, well done. Relaxing your neck is the key to solving everything."

Summer.

Shadows fell in the sky, and shadows descended on the main hall. The breeze, cooled twice by clouds and roofs, was not bad. Pleasant. I pressed my head firmly against Raviel's lap, as if trying to hide from the world.

"Good."

Raviel smiled silently.

"My lover returned safely from a long journey. That's a very good thing. I just realized this. Ever since the day I met you, good things keep increasing in my life."

"....."

"What made you so sad?"

"Jaa Soo-Jeong... The Tower Master, plans to comfort everyone abandoned in this world."

The cooled summer evening air flowed.

"If there's a child about to burn to death, she shows them a different world. [If the Tower Master had been with the child]. After creating such a world, she lives happily with the child. Tens of millions, hundreds of millions, thousands of millions....."

"That sounds very godlike. What's the problem?"

"...It's that there are people who only seek revenge."

Summer wind blew.

"People for whom the world is nothing but hell. The pain I received is all from hell, unresolvable, with no hope of change. So, the only solution is....."

"[I will inflict greater pain on those who made me this way]."

"...Yes."

I leaned more into Raviel.

"The Tower Master watches them suffer in hell from start to finish, through her skills. And does not help when she can, does not prevent when she can, just keeps watching."

"....."

Raviel's hand paused for a moment.

But it was only for a brief instant.

"Indeed."

Raviel stroked the back of my head slowly, as if she understood everything.

"You're saying that the cause of everyone's unhappiness is none other than the Tower Master, right?"

"Yes."



"Then the victims' resentment will naturally focus on the Tower Master. Even if the Tower Master is a god, or rather, because she is a god, they would want to drag her down, tear her apart, trample on her, and vent their anger. How.....?"

"Yes."

I did not nod.

Instead, I just entrusted the weight of my head to Raviel, staring blankly, expressionlessly, opening my mouth.

"That's what they want."

"....."

"They wish for that. People who think they were sacrificed by the kingdom want everyone to come to them, to return the pain and suffering they received in life, precisely the same, to the Tower Master herself."

"That's....."

"Even more so. The Tower Master comprehends the entire life of the person who returns pain to her. She knows what is a lie and what is not. It's not ordinary sympathy, but really understanding, embracing the other person's pain."

"....."

Crickets chirped in the grass.

"In her mind, there's always someone being stabbed, burning, trampled to death. Always. All day long, such memories play in a corner of her mind. She becomes those people, actually getting stabbed, burned, trampled. It's a scream, Raviel. From the Tower Master's heart, only the sound of screaming....."

"Yes. That is our god."

Raviel sighed deeply.

"[If you desire happiness, then happiness. If you desire pain, then pain.] The simpler the proposition, the heavier the burden it places on humans. And the Tower Master intends to bear all those who perish."

"...Yes."

"Such a dreadful thing."

Raviel brushed the hair beside my face.

Her red eyes looked closely into mine.

"Ultimately, the solution is also simple, my Gong-Ja."

"...Right."

"Those who find happiness not externally but within themselves do not need the Tower Master. Those who overcome pain not from the outside but from within themselves also do not need the Tower Master."

"That's true."

"Everyone must bear their own misfortunes. That obvious fact is so rare in this world. How many live an obvious life in this world? To call what's obvious obvious, to do what

obviously needs to be done, to make things that should obviously happen..."

It's difficult.

Raviel murmured, looking up at the evening sky.

Perhaps, she was recalling a moment in her life that had been [difficult].

"Did you say the Tower Master's catchphrase was [You've done nothing wrong], Gong-Ja?"

"Yes. She said, [No one is born wrong]."

"It's a sad story."

Raviel expertly opened a can of soda and sipped.

After quenching her thirst, she spoke slowly.

"In other words, that means."

I'm the one who's wrong.

I'm sorry.

I apologize.

"Only she was born wrong in this world."

"....."

"Gong-Ja."

"Yes."

"Is the Tower Master strong?"

I recalled the Milky Way I had looked up to in the ruins of Harlem.

Countless white butterflies fluttering. Stars made of butterflies.

"Yes. Very strong."

"Can you defeat her?"

Raviel looked straight into my eyes.

"I demand a more certain answer from my man."

"....."

"I didn't fall in love with someone I might love. Nor did I promise a lifetime with someone I might die with. I loved the one I was to love, and promised because we were to die together. Gong-Ja, if you are the moon of Ivansia, you must speak more."

"Yes, Raviel."

I nodded.

"I will win."

"Win."

Raviel's palm grasped my cheek.

"I chose you as my life partner because you win. Because you do not crumble. Because you do not forget happiness. When the Tower Master wins with the misfortunes of all under heaven as her fertilizer, Gong-Ja, you just win with happiness."

Raviel's face drew closer and closer.

"Make everyone around you happy. Make them feel happy to be with you. Train and tame them to be people who can be happy with you, who know how to be happy. Thus, fill this tower entirely with happy people."

"It will be difficult, but..."

I smiled.

"Let's take it slow. Why not."

"That's the man I fell in love with. But..."

Raviel smiled.

"First and foremost, I must make myself the happiest."

We kissed.

"But the landlord and Uburka might eavesdrop..."

"The landlord doesn't care about such things. I've already checked."

"What about Uburka? He really thinks of me as a father."

"Indeed. If a father moans shamefully or screams, it might indeed scar the pure heart of a child."



Raviel chuckled.

"Honey, you must not make any moaning sounds."

Hmm.

"Raviel.....?"

"What is it? My love."

"What are you going to do with that thin towel.....?"

"I'm trying to help you keep your moans quiet."

"That's actually for Uburka's sake, right? You just want to enjoy it, right?"

"Shh."

Raviel playfully covered my mouth. Her red eyes sparkled

like rubies.

"The child is asleep. Be quiet."

What could I do in this situation?

I obediently accepted my wife's command.

I love you, Raviel.

Forever and always.

---

The next morning.

"Yaaaawn... Huh?"

As I came out to the living room, I ran into Uburka.

I yawned and waved at Uburka.

"Good morning, son."

"But why do you look like a snail who just chewed on a salt rock? Was the bed uncomfortable? Ah, you're too big to sleep anywhere but on the floor, right? Can't help that, huh."

Uburka trembled.

"Dad is....."

"Dad is an unashamed loser!"

[The Constellation 'The Muscle Pig Dreaming of Parricide' despairs!]

With a mighty roar, Uburka ran out to the yard. Bang, crash, bang, bang, his footsteps were so violent I worried the old Korean house might collapse. I checked the safety of the house floor and clicked my tongue.

"What's with him? He's not a kid."

Is it because of puberty?

Raising kids is really tough.

# Chapter 233: My Legion (3)

---

After waking up in the Realm of All Lives, I found myself indebted to Jaa Soo-Jeong – not the noble who received a viscount title in the kingdom, nor the god wielding power in the Realm of All Lives, but simply Jaa Soo-Jeong, the middle school student living in the [Side Story].

"Jaa Soo-Jeong, your cooking is really good."

"Yes. It's all thanks to the precisely made recipes."

Jaa Soo-Jeong, the middle school student, slowly set down the tray. Uburka helped her serve the side dishes for dinner.

Looking down at the table, Jaa Soo-Jeong asked, "Did you accomplish what you wanted, Mr. Gong-Ja?"

For a moment, I felt a stiffness set in.

"Yes?"

"What you wanted, Mr. Gong-Ja."

"....."

Jaa Soo-Jeong's voice was like the sound of a lone dandelion leaf falling to the ground. If not careful, her voice could easily be carried away by the summer breeze.

"I'm a bit worried about how you're feeling, Mr. Gong-Ja."

"...You were concerned about me?"

"Yes, I was worried. As a host. As someone welcoming a guest. But beyond that, I also feel a pure curiosity about you, Mr. Gong-Ja."

"...I'll help with setting the dishes."

We organized the dining table. We carefully arranged the bowls of soup and grilled fish on the tray, across the table.

Stew in the center, bean sprouts and cucumbers to the left.  
Steamed eggs in the back.

As the soon-to-be-consumed foods were neatly placed, my arm brushed against Jaa Soo-Jeong's multiple times.

"What you wanted, Mr. Gong-Ja."

Jaa Soo-Jeong said.

"....."

"You mentioned meeting another me, not of this place, but perhaps a god or the source of me. That's what I heard from you, Mr. Gong-Ja."

"Yes."

"Did you achieve what you wanted?"

That was the first question Jaa Soo-Jeong asked me earlier.

But now, the question laid a second foundation.

"What I sought, even risking death for. The purpose. Did you achieve that?"

I remained silent for a moment.

"Yes."

And then I spoke.

"Well, the purpose was to meet the Tower Master as human to human, not just at the summit. So, in that sense, I really achieved my goal. I learned a lot about the human called the Tower Master."

"I see."

The student who smiled faintly in front of me was not the colorful noble of any kingdom. But I knew that faint smile was when she felt happiest.



"You did really well."

"You've worked hard, Mr. Gong-Ja."

Before I knew it, Jaa Soo-Jeong was holding both my hands.

'So.'

Feeling the warmth of Jaa Soo-Jeong's hands tightly holding mine,

As a conclusion, I couldn't help but feel a heaviness in my heart.

'So this is your true nature.'

A being of concern.

One who praises when well done and grieves when not.

Just a person born from taking that to the extreme.

[May fortune be with you.]

To her, everyone in the world is still a child.

When a child goes outside, she worries about dangers, worries about them wandering into dangerous roads, saying, [Be careful of cars!] [Be careful of motorcycles!] Her heart pounds with anxiety until the child returns. But when they do return, just for coming back safely, she wraps them in her arms, saying, [Well done] [You did really well].

[May fortune be with you.]

Be careful on your way.

[May fortune be with you.]

Be careful of motorcycles on your way back.

[May fortune be with you.]

Be careful not to be swallowed by misfortune while ascending.

[May fortune be with you.]

Please come back safely.

"....."

A god trying to be everyone's protector.

In front of this avatar of the god, I smiled.

"Shall I show you what I gained from meeting the Tower Master?"

Jaa Soo-Jeong nodded.

"As you wish, Mr. Gong-Ja."

Yes.

Translated, that also means [Do what you want to do].

At this point, I guess I'm somewhat skilled as a translator of divine words.

"Then, please follow me for a moment. I have something to show you..."

"Ah. Before that."

Jaa Soo-Jeong pointed at the table.

"Please have your meal first."

"....."

"Eating on time is important for your health, Mr. Gong-Ja."

Indeed.

Translated, that means [Eat before you do anything].

I laughed bitterly and obeyed the command of the god.

---

The place I headed to was the backyard of the old Korean house.

Namely, the [Warehouse Where Ghosts Sleep].

I cautiously opened the door of the warehouse, just a single step inside.

"I never thought I'd enter this ghost den again..."

I hung on the door, checking the inside of the warehouse.

Fortunately, there were no bizarre spectacles or festivals of evil spirits that would drastically reduce the viewer's sanity.

The warehouse was quiet, merely old junk peacefully gathering dust.

".....Not here?"

Just then, something clung to my ankle with a meow!

"Yikes!?"

"It's just Meow. You're too startled, Mr. Gong-Ja."

Jaa Soo-Jeong, as if familiar with it, bent down and grabbed the puppy doll clinging to my ankle. The puppy doll continued to remind us of its existential issues with "Nyaang! Nyaang!" even while being moved.

"Ahem."

I tried not to get too close to the puppy doll.

"Is this one dead? Like, a dead spirit attached to a doll?"

"No, Mr. Gong-Ja. Meow is just a being who eternally ponders [who they are]. That's all there is to it."

Holding the puppy doll, Jaa Soo-Jeong spoke softly.

"Meow believes its contemplation should never end, nor should it ever be resolved."

"Why so?"

The puppy doll then bounced energetically.

-Nyaa! Nyaoong, Meow! Meowwww!

Jaa Soo-Jeong nodded in response.

"Meow says that if it stops pondering, the world will end."

"....."

Indeed.

Well, I'm not exactly sure what part of that qualifies as 'indeed,' but anyway.

"So, you're saying this puppy doll is alive?"

"Of course. Meow is alive, will remain alive, and if it dies, it will be when the world ends."

"....."

I summoned a skill card right in front of what might be the most dangerous puppy... cat... cat-sounding puppy doll... oh, never mind, Meow.

"Skill card."

Woosh!

+



## [Earth Bone Dragon's Skull]

Rank: SSS+

Effect: Stores the memories of the living. Stored memories are kept in a 'box.' This box can only be destroyed by the owner of this skill.

As long as the box remains intact, you can repeatedly produce bodies of individuals inheriting the same memories. The bodies can roam the world, accumulating new experiences, which can then be 'updated' into the box. Of course, only if you permit it!

Even if the body of the individual is destroyed, the box remains unharmed. Bestow the privilege of immortality on those around you.

\*However, memories of a destroyed body cannot be updated into the box.

\*Skill copied from Master of All Lives.

"Jaa Soo-Jeong."

"Yes?"

Jaa Soo-Jeong tilted her head, and at the same time, the puppy doll fluttered around, meowing longingly, probably yawning.

Why are you so cute when you're an apocalyptic-level item?

"I've gained the ability to give a [body] to this puppy doll."

"....."

Jaa Soo-Jeong hesitated.

Her expression remained impassive, but her eyes deepened slightly, attentively and quietly observing the place where my skill card was.

"A body...?"

"I can give these beings a living body."

"....."

"How about it? Jaa Soo-Jeong. Will you trust me and allow me to use the skill on these beings?"

Jaa Soo-Jeong pondered for a while.

Not a noble of the kingdom, not a concubine of the Sun King, and certainly not the Tower Master, but only born with the compassion of a god, Jaa Soo-Jeong, a third-year student in Shinseo Middle School Class A, slowly opened her mouth.

"I'm truly, very grateful for your offer."

She bowed her head.

"But I think it's something these beings should decide for themselves."

Indeed.

"Even though I'd be happy if these beings could live a little more freely with living bodies... they might think differently."

Peeling off the layers of a [Kingdom Noble], [Hero], and [Tower Master], and then confirming what remains in front of me.

Jaa Soo-Jeong's existence was truly minimal.

"If possible, I want these beings to make their own decisions."

I nodded.

"Yes. I think that's right too."

So, I asked each of the bizarre lifeforms, or rather questionable beings, gathered in the [Ghost Warehouse].

For instance, I asked a mirror. Looking into it, you'd feel like some ghost was chillingly gripping your neck.

"Uh..."

Squeeze.

Even from a distance, looking at the mirror, I felt as if long fingers were pressing on both sides of my neck. It wasn't an illusion. Squeeze, squeeze! I genuinely felt each finger.

I tried to dispel it with aura, but even that didn't work.

Before such a mirror, I presented the skill card.

"If you wish... I can give you a body..."

Squeeze?

"Of course, there are conditions. First, your memories will be stored in a box. And that box becomes my property... And when your body dies and needs to be recreated, well, that requires my permission to access the box."

Squeeze, squeeze.

"No! But, I don't have any ulterior motives! Really! I'm not the kind of person who will bring you back to life to create a Ghost Demon Corps and conquer the world or anything..."

Squeeze, squeeze, squeeze!

"Jaa Soo-Jeong! Help! This thing doesn't understand jokes!"

Save me!

Mr. Gong-Ja is dying at the hands of a ghost!

"You're quite adept at communicating, Mr. Gong-Ja."

Jaa Soo-Jeong admired me with an expressionless face.

"You're the first person I've seen who can communicate so well with a mirror other than myself. You're doing well."

"No, don't just praise me from a distance! Help me! I feel like I'm going to die!"

"Hmm."

Jaa Soo-Jeong approached the mirror and gently stroked its surface.

"Mr. Mirror. Mr. Gong-Ja is a very kind person."

As Jaa Soo-Jeong began to speak, the mysterious grip on my neck vanished abruptly.

"Just because he looks like a playboy? No, he's truly upright and strong enough not to be swayed. Upset because he looks young for his age? That can be understandable..."

"..."

What is this inanimate object that doesn't even qualify as a living being saying?

"But Mr. Mirror won't be exploited. The body of Mr. Mirror belongs to Mr. Mirror. Deciding whether to revive or destroy is entirely up to Mr. Mirror. You can trust Mr. Gong-Ja on this matter."

The mirror trembled.

"Yes? Do I have a special fondness for Mr. Gong-Ja? No, I cherish all of you. Unfortunately, I don't possess the special emotion of 'favoritism.'"

The mirror twinkled.

"Yes."

Jaa Soo-Jeong turned to me and spoke politely.

"The mirror agrees to be revived but requests a dedicated Victorian-style, monocle-wearing, black-haired young butler to be kept on standby. And preferably, he should have a strong British accent when speaking English. Also, if possible, it hopes for some interesting backstory, like being the second son of a now extinct marquis family."

Indeed.

Yes, this is truly an 'indeed' moment.



".....There are two cafe workers in our tower who can charm everyone with their looks. One with silver hair and the other with black hair. Though butler cosplay is a bit of a stretch, how about as cafe workers? I'll treat you as a mirror in the cafe."

Wait a minute.

Why am I desperately convincing a mirror that only knows how to choke people? Shouldn't I be the boss here?

There's only one reason.

'To reduce the burden of the Tower Master.'

Yes.

I will reduce the lives the Tower Master has to shoulder, one by one.

First, I'll revive the unknown lifeforms, the 'ghosts,' in Jaa Soo-Jeong's possession.

'Because that's the only way to defeat the Tower Master.'

Renewing my resolve, Jaa Soo-Jeong, the translator between humans and bizarre creatures, nodded her head.

"He says he graciously accepts Mr. Gong-Ja's proposal."

Next.

I began to gather the [Unknown Objects], one by one, into the [Earth Bone Dragon's Skull].

The box that stored the memories was small. A small, pitch-black cubic box.

The moment I saw it, I knew what to do. Following the guidance of the image in my mind, I opened my mouth and swallowed the box.

Gulp.

Then, as if it never had any form to begin with, the box

melted away inside my mouth, esophagus, and stomach.

"....."

My heart darkened a little more.

"The Earth Bone Dragon's Skull."

In front of me, a bright light flickered.

[Activating skill.]

Where the light subsided,

There stood the mirror, seemingly no different from before.

"....."

"....."

Yes.

It stood.

On [legs].

"It has legs."

I noted.

"It has legs."

Jaa Soo-Jeong answered impassively.

"It seems that this was originally Mr. Mirror's body."

The four-legged mirror scurried around the warehouse, excitedly. Even if the most skilled detective in all of the worlds were brought here, they would have only one thing to say about such a sight.

[A cockroach].

A cockroach with the body of a mirror scuttled around energetically.

"No, no matter what, that's just....."

"Thank you, Mr. Gong-Ja."

Jaa Soo-Jeong spoke seriously.

"You're really a good person, Mr. Gong-Ja."

"....."

I gave a body to each of the rest.

As a result, the warehouse ended up with, among others, Meow who looked like an ordinary poodle but cried out "Nyaaa!" every time it opened its mouth, a painter drawing a portrait within a portrait, and a muscular but fortunately only 15cm tall Red Dragon, straight out of myths.

-What the hell, damn it.

Even the Guardian Spirit, who had been silent so far, couldn't help but comment.

-What a complete mess.

"Maybe it's a parade of a hundred ghosts..."

-The curry tastes like crap. Is that still curry? No matter how you name it, it's crap. You dung merchant.

"I think I know when my life started to get twisted, but I'm not sure how it got this way. Sword Emperor, it's since I met you. Ever since then, all the crazies, ghosts, and unidentified freaks started to flock around me. Do you understand?"

-Stop joking around, zombie. Hey. If you hadn't strayed and followed my advice, you'd have already hit the 100th floor of the tower. About 10,000 people would have watched your journey and cheered you on.

What nonsense.

I shook my head in disbelief.

"Ghoul Reincarnation."

I started what I had to do.

[Activating skill.]

Having alleviated the burden of lives the Tower Master's avatar bore, it was time to conclude my task.

"----Have you called for me, my lord?"

Pale blonde hair, wet with water.

Preta, once revered as Ester and feared as the Demon King, my vassal, knelt before me.

"Preta."

"Yes."

"Live."

Preta raised his head and looked up at my face.

Into my eyes.

".....I have killed many."

"I know."

"I am a sinner."

"That's true."

"Does someone like me deserve to live?"

I nodded.



"Live. Carry the weight of your life."

"....."

"If you feel you're going to collapse under that weight, I will carry it for you."

Silence followed.

Preta.

Slowly, very slowly, opened her lips.

"Okay."

His voice was soaked with emotion.

"I will live."

That was the beginning.



# Chapter 234: King of Death (1)

---

I placed my hand on Preta's shoulder.

Swoosh!

A black whirlwind enveloped Preta, gradually lessening from the size of his body to that of his head, and then to the size of an eye. The diminished whirlwind eventually clumped together like a small bead.

This small bead was the [Earth Bone Dragon's Skull].

Preta's memories resided here.

Within this tiny box lay everything... the nameless doppelgänger devouring a village girl to become a saintess, then falling to become a witch, creating a paradise before vanishing without a trace. Everything was inside this tiny box.

"....."

Soul.

Perhaps the closest word to describe it.

I looked down at Preta's soul resting on my palm.

"Preta. Can you hear me?"

The bead on my palm moved ever so slightly.

"From now on, I will consume your memories. I don't understand the principle, but... instead of being stored inside me as a box, it turns into black liquid and sinks into my heart."

The sound of distant rain reached my ears. From the next neighborhood, or maybe the one beyond that. Clouds that had passed through poor alleys would soon reach this old Hanok.

"Preta."

The pitch-black bead glistened.

"Just now, Jaa Soo-Jeong made an important point."

The bead remained motionless.

"If I give someone a physical body with my skill, it should be their decision to accept it."

Inside the black bead, whirlwinds continuously swirled.

"No one in this world can choose to be born. No one can choose their parents. It's not just those considered unfortunate. Even unparalleled geniuses, legendary beauties, and great saints had no will in their birth. Unwished and unable, the 7 billion people are all unfortunate in that regard."

The bead.

"That's why this moment, where [you can decide who gives you life], is very, very special."

The swirling bead just faced up towards me.

"Preta."

"....."

"Would you become my daughter?"

Silence.

The summer rain, having passed the next neighborhood, now reached the Hanok\*. The old streets, unchanged since the Japanese occupation, hoped not to be flooded every time it rained.

\*For those who do not remember, Hanoks are Old Korean style houses.

The rain poured down the old, worn streets.

"....."

Rain also fell in my palm. Plop! Plop, Plop... Droplets bounced off my hand into the wider air, gathering in the crevices of the old wooden floor. Some raindrops escaped, but in my palm, the water slowly pooled, submerging half of the pitch-black bead.

"Preta."

To this small, submerged being,

I pleaded.

"Will you become my daughter?"

The bead bobbed forward as if swimming. It was the only way it could communicate, but I knew it was nodding.

"Yes."

I raised my left hand and slowly grasped the submerged bead in my right hand. Then, equally slowly, I placed Preta's soul into my mouth.

I closed my mouth.

Swallowed firmly.

"....."

The bead turned into a black liquid, flowing down my tongue. As it flowed, it split into dozens, then hundreds of streams, infiltrating my organs.

It was a shadow. The shadow that had been gnawing at my organs suddenly, as if having found its target, surged towards one place in the human body.

The heart.

Dozens, hundreds of shadows squeezed the heart. Then, the heart became tinged with shadow. Though it functioned normally, it was now shaded, each shadow representing someone's memories.

"The Earth Bone Dragon's Skull."



[Activating skill.]

Swoosh!

The shadows that had bound my heart were suddenly released. They rushed up my esophagus, into my mouth, and onto my tongue. Hundreds, thousands of black afterimages surged out of my body.

".....!"

When it emerged, it was nothing more than a bead.

It rolled across the rainy deck, plop, plop, plop. Each bounce made the bead grow exponentially.

Finally, the bead grew so large it occupied the entire deck---

"....."

At that moment, the giant bead shattered.

-Meow!

Meow yelped. Nyaa! Nyaa! Meow! Amidst its cries in the rain, the bead's shell melted into a shadow.

And she stood upon that shadow.

"....."

Ester.

Dressed in simple clothes a country girl might wear. A small basket for picking usable vegetables while surveying the farm.

The girl, who belonged in the middle of a rice field, was born from the egg of a shadow.

"Ah....."

Watching Preta look around bewilderedly, I recalled a scene I had once seen.

Ah.

I see.

Those who enter the tower come with nothing. Money, identification, even clothes, socks – they enter the tower completely bare, as if just born. They pass through a long tunnel and reach a square called Babylon.

And they receive a new name, an alias.

All this was a metaphor and mechanism for [You are reborn].

All this was a message from the Tower Master, [You are all the children of the Tower Master].

"Preta."

Just like.

"What name would you like to have?"

What I am doing now.

"....."

The Demon King of Autumn Rain took a while to answer. Not because she had nothing to say, but because, despite having a ready answer, she hesitated to voice it, unsure if such luxury, such a miracle, was permissible for someone like her.

"Es... Ester..."

She cried.

"My name is... Ester... please, call me Ester..."

I nodded.

I guessed why she chose the name of the first human she killed as her new name. She decided to live a life in place of someone else.

"Alright."

Understanding her heart, I gave her the name.

"Ester."

"Yes. Yes, my lord."

"Now I am not just your lord, but also your father."

In front of the avatar of a god who wished to be everyone's mother, I spoke to the life I had created.

"There will be many challenges ahead. Always cherish the person right in front of you. You now have the power from your [Constellation] days, so there's hardly anything you can't accomplish with a sword. But you still need so much more."

"Yes, yes... Sob. Yes....."

Calling her name as she cried, holding her breath,

"Ester."

I said.

"Learn much."

---

On a rainy day, it opened its eyes.

It had no name, no form. It was more of a shadow. On that rainy day, a shadow opened its eyes and saw the first living creature that shone upon it.

-Ribbit.

It didn't know what this creature was. There was much it didn't know. Only the sound... the sound of the rain. The croaking sound from all around enveloped it. The rainwater carried a sweet fragrance.

Just like now.

When the nameless monster became Ester, it was granted an ordinary human life. When Ester was called a saintess, a noble and holy future seemed to shine upon her. When the saintess fell to become a witch and turned into the Demon King,

destroying a world, she never felt that she was truly born.

She just lived as life was given to her. Becoming a saintess was not because she was holy, but because she could replace a dead child. That's what others saw and called her an angel, a saintess... No. She just lived.

She just wanted to live.

-Ester.

Only now, at this moment,

-Learn much.

Ester was born.

"....."

Ester held a massive black sword. It was the sword that rolled out with her from the bead she was born from. The red sword that had made her undefeated and the strongest during

her time as the Demon King.

Ester picked up the red sword. It was overly massive compared to her small stature. But to Ester, this sword was as good as her soul.

Drawing her soul was too easy, so Ester effortlessly lifted the great sword high.

"Pitiful life."

Ester's face darkened.

As if reciting her own prayer.

"I prove myself here with all my might."

The red sword slowly moved.

"Today, looking up to the sky, I release the croaking sound."



And then,

The swung sword emitted a roaring sound.

The red light emitted by the great sword split the world.

The falling raindrops were split in half, the clouds scattered, and the sunset hidden behind them was shattered to pieces.

"....."

Reflecting the brilliant colors of the sunset, raindrops fell down. Each drop seemed to contain gold, and the old Hanok was suddenly covered in a golden hue.

[The Demon King of Autumn Rain manifests.]

Jaa Soo-Jeong blankly watched the golden shower in the middle of the courtyard.

Raviel, who was sitting on the deck, and Uburka, also quietly looked up at this mysterious rain.

"It's beautiful....."

Jaa Soo-Jeong turned to Kim Gong-Ja and smiled.

"You, Mr. Gong-Ja, possess so many beautiful things."

"....."

Kim Gong-Ja nodded.

"Yes."

Kim Gong-Ja spoke.

"Today is the day Ester is born."

---

And this day was not just the birth of Ester.

In the old courtyard of the Hanok, numerous followers knelt

down. Many had to kneel on the shoulders of their fellow disciples due to lack of space.

499 of them.

Except for one person, the Demonic Cult had not lost their spirit even after losing their old master.

"Blood Demon."

I called out to the strongest man among them.

"Yes, Vice-lord!"

"You followed the Heavenly Demon, handling all sorts of chores. If there were evildoers to deal with, you handled it, and if there were houses to be built for disciples, you built them. You not only eradicated evil but also worked for the people, so you are a secretary among secretaries, and a worker among workers."

"Thank you! Vice-lord!"

I nodded.

"Hell Ghost Demon."

"Yes, sir."

"When the Heavenly Demon set his mind on something, you contributed with strategies and tactics to achieve it. Even if your world under snow buried all strategies and tactics under the snowfield, the last will of the Heavenly Demon could be fulfilled because of your dedication."

"....."

I nodded again.

"Moon Shadow Demon."

"First among the Four Demon Lords, under the Shadow Corpse Troop, Moon Shadow Demon. I answer the call of the Vice-lord."

"You planted spies in the world to know the onset of the eternal snow earlier than anyone. You moved swiftly to guide the last elite of the Martial Alliance and summoned the last warriors of Demonic Heaven. Without you, it would have been impossible to determine the strongest in the last strand of the martial world."

"....."

I nodded once more.

"Sword Demon."

"Speak, Vice-lord!"

"You are strong. In our last battle, we won against the Martial Alliance. If we weren't strong, no matter how beautiful the battle or how worthy of being passed down in tales, what good would it have been? We needed to win first."

"Hahaha! You're right! I want to hug you for that, Vice-lord!"

"You all."

I turned to face the 499 followers.

"We could win because of you. No, our master could win because we were there."

The followers' eyes ignited with a quiet flame.

"Did our master only achieve victory over the Martial Alliance?"

"No!"

The followers responded in unison.

"Did our master only win against the Head of the Martial Alliance, Namgung Woon?"

"No!"

The followers shouted as if spitting blood.

"Then, against what did our supreme master achieve victory?"

Over the evening sky split by Ester, the people of the snow that had once perished shouted.

"The world!"

Indeed.

"Our Heavenly Demon has conquered the world!"

I nodded.

"Even if eternal snow falls and covers the earth, even if all people are buried in the snowfield and freeze to death, the master never gave up on anything, never doubted the sword. Thus, the master sliced through the snowfield."

"Demonic Heaven!"

"Glory to the common people!"

"But still, there are many worlds challenging us."

I pointed to the sky with my finger.

There was only the split sunset, but my hand was pointing to the tower beyond, and everyone present knew that.

"There are still, still so many worlds overflowing to the point of bleeding from the mouth!"

The followers' murderous intent peaked.

"Shall we inherit the teachings of Demonic Heaven?"

"Baraya!"

"If there are many worlds to conquer, is our task clear?"

"Baraya!"



"Then live!"

"Baraya!"

"Our hearts are like candles."

"We will set the world ablaze!"

And so, I melted 499 boxes in my heart.

The resurrected followers were still engulfed in murderous intent.

But it wasn't just murderous intent they exhaled.

"Demonic Heaven."

At my murmur, all 499 followers drew their swords.

"Glory to the common people!"

Their swords carried a dark inner power.

"We will conquer the tower!"

The ghouls tied to [Ghoul Reincarnation] were released.

They were reborn from my heart, returning with their power at its peak.

The strongest legion was born here.

# Chapter 235: King of Death (2)

---

The Ghouls are prisoners.

Sinners who dyed the empire in blood, and sinners who failed to serve the supreme master till the end. They were shackled in chains under the name [Ghoul Reincarnation], and the cost of these chains was horrific.

+

The deceased do not inherit their abilities from life.

+

The dead can't bring back their prime from life but only reminisce. The great demon who once annihilated the empire turned into a small Preta, and the Demonic Cult that once commanded the world became nothing more than quirky ruffians.

But now, it has changed.

"Hahaha! How long has it been since I've felt the power of Demonic Heavenly God Art!"

Martial arts swirled around the swords held by the disciples.

The bodies they once lost have returned, and the martial arts they once abandoned have come back.

Their prime.

As the disciples returned to the era of Demonic Heaven's domination over the martial world, they were filled with excitement.

"Damn, who knew this day would come..."

"Let's have a martial arts contest! Let's open a competition!"

"I was already grateful for having my life saved once, but now the Vice-lord has even returned our martial arts, I am

utterly overwhelmed with gratitude!"

"Long live the Vice-lord! Forever and ever!"

"Shouldn't today be declared an official feast day for the Demonic Cult?"

"I really want to start a contest right now, but this courtyard seems a bit cramped. Vice-lord! Where are we? I've been wanting to ask since I was first summoned, but you looked so stern and serious that I'm only asking now."

I smiled wryly.

It's just like a bunch of runaway peasants, deserters, slaves, and beggars not to keep quiet and turn the place into a marketplace.

"First, clear the space as your successors are waiting. While you were receiving the boxes of Earth Bone Dragon, the remaining five hundred troops were still patiently waiting in the shadows. Either enter the mansion or climb up the wall, make some space."

"Yes, Vice-lord!"

The disciples responded in unison.

Then, skillfully, they climbed up the walls, or onto the shoulders of their companions already on the walls, merged with the wall as one, or slipped under the large deck like burrowing rabbits.

In less than 30 seconds, the courtyard of the Hanok was clean.

"That's some skilled maneuvering."

Jaa Soo-Jeong admired the scene.

"....."

Uburka sat silently on the deck, just looking at the courtyard.

The murderous aura and expectations of the disciples, and

above all, the level of their martial arts. He must be assessing his own skills in comparison.

Excited as a warrior, even though he kept his mouth shut, his arm muscles twitched and writhed.

"Get ready. You'll be fighting them soon."

I tapped Uburka's arm.

"And the strong ones you'll face aren't just them."

I looked around the courtyard and spoke.

"Next."

[The skill is progressing!]

The Ghouls waiting in line were summoned.

The total number of the Demonic Cult is 1000. Having already summoned 499 and given them new bodies, this time I put the memories of another 500 into black beads and placed them into my heart.

Thus, the immortal legion of the Demonic Cult was complete.

"Next."

The next summoned were somewhat less impressive compared to the Demon King of Autumn Rain or the Demonic Cult that once commanded the world.

"Goldencup."

"....."

The maid standing in the courtyard flinched, trembling slightly.

Born into a noble family, her golden hair was always neatly groomed.



Once hailed as the flower of the social world and a heroine who dominated the empire.

Silvia Evanair, the Lady of the Baron.

".....I greet the sun and moon of Ivansia."

She bowed gracefully, her grip on her skirt tight.

"Thinking about it."

I opened my lips.

"We haven't talked much, have we?"

".....You should not lower your speech to me. I am but a lowly servant of the lady. It's burdensome."

"Right. We haven't talked much, you and I."

I spoke casually. Raviel silently, just quietly lifted her right arm and placed her hand on my distant shoulder.

Then something remarkable happened.

Until now, this place was just an old Hanok in some shabby village. A mansion with an unnecessarily large courtyard.

But the moment Raviel touched my shoulder, the deck where we sat became our public seat, proving our titles, and the courtyard where Goldencup knelt turned solemn, as if it was an audience hall.

"I need to have a talk with you."

"....."

Goldencup let out a suppressed breath.

There were no grand family banners or knights in shining armor here. But the [Ivansia Ducal Family] did not exist in silk curtains or marble stairs. Where Raviel is, where Kim Gong-Ja is, that place is Ivansia.

Crickets from another world, from a foreign land, chirped.

Before their cries ended, Goldencup did her best to bow respectfully.

"Please ask your question..."

"You were a returner, right?"

"Yes."

"I understand that you used the power of a Constellation to return. And you coveted the position of Empress, which was to be assigned to Raviel. But why?"

"....."

"Why did you specifically target the position of Empress? Did you want to seize the greatest power in the empire? Why did you bet everything in your new life to steal Raviel's position?"

Silvia Evanair, no longer called the Lady of the Baron, sealed

her lips.

As the lord of the Ghouls, I could command Silvia to speak, but I chose not to.

".....I'm not sure."

Even no longer being called the Lady of the Baron, Silvia Evanair, once a noble of the empire, spoke on her own.

"Not sure?"

"Yeah, well, it's a past I've lost."

Silvia quietly lifted the corners of her lips.

"The lover of the Crown Prince. The future Empress. The rise of the family. Numerous invitations at my feet and the countless riff-raff who flocked to flatter me... All in the past, right? After losing it all, I wonder why I clung to them so desperately... I'm not quite sure."

"You don't want to know?"

"Ahaha. That sounds like a grand rebuttal. As expected from the moon of the Ivansia Ducal Family. You can see through the human psyche, can't you? Eh, there's nothing worth seeing through in me. But if the lady wants to act superior, then I, Silvia Evanair, will dutifully play along."

"It's because your butler is gone."

"....."

"No, to be precise, disappeared."

The butler from [Tales of the Sormewin Academy].

When Raviel was doomed and Silvia fell, unable to endure, he prayed with everything he had. His wish reached some [Holed-Up Head Librarian].

-O God.

-Please help us.

Hamusutra willingly granted the butler's wish. He turned back time to before Goldencup became the Empress, to before Raviel faced her downfall. In the reverted timeline, Raviel was stabbed in the heart and became gilded.

As a price, the butler lost his existence.

He lost everything.

".....I, um."

Silvia clenched her teeth, her head bowed.

"I wanted to be friends with the Lady of Ivansia. Because she was beautiful... and capable, intelligent. I wondered if such a person could really exist among us."

Raviel, resting her head on my shoulder, narrowed her eyes and hummed.

"The very first encounter."

"Yes. The first meeting during my first return. I was incredibly nervous about the debutante ball with the young ones. That's when the Duchess, the Silver Lily Lady at the time, was seen from afar."

Silvia recounted.

Like someone replaying a videotape they've watched several times, Silvia precisely recited the landscape of the past.

"To my young eyes, Lady Silver Lily was like a real angel. Silver hair! And even red eyes... People who have seen the most beautiful rubies would scoff at them as garbage compared to her eyes. So I..."

I understood.

"You admired her."

Like how I once admired a certain hunter.

After a brief silence, Silvia clenched her fist.

"Yes! That's right!"

Silvia grabbed her maid headdress and threw it to the ground.

"I was consumed by admiration! Alright?! Happy now!?"

Silvia snorted and glared at the silent Raviel. The initial politeness was gone, standing like a gangster, forgetting all manners.

Jaa Soo-Jeong, our expressionless landlord, approached with a tray.

"Here's some chilled barley tea. Would you like some?"

"Yes! I don't know who you are, but thank you! Hup, gulp, gulp, gulp..., what is this!? It's freaking delicious!? Damn!"

Silvia stared at the barley tea and suddenly slumped her



shoulders.

Her expression was one of life's futility.

"Well, there were others obsessed with admiration like me. We formed a social club called [Silver Bells]. It was exclusive, and only ladies recommended by members could join. The screening was strict, not just any social club anyone could enter."

"Silver Bells...?"

"[Bells for Lady Silver Lily]. Little bells, you know. You don't get it? Idiot?"

Silence lingered for a while.

Guardian Spirit and Shiny broke the silence.

-Zombie, at least when you were holed up, you didn't create anything like a bell club, right?

[Shiny gently speculates that even the hero of that era would not have had the social capacity to create such a thing.]

-Ah... Sorry, Zombie. I accidentally touched a sore spot...

I quietly listened to Goldencup's story.

"So, as the founder, I was very active."

Raviel, with her chin resting on her hand, leaned forward.

".....I'm the person in question and this is the first I'm hearing of this."

"It was an absolute secret society. Just looking, no touching. We just watched from afar, went back to our secret hideout, and gossiped about Lady Silver Lily, wrote poems, and published stories. That was the incredible purpose of the secret society [Silver Bells]."

"I seem to be in a strange position like a platypus..."

Raviel pouted her lips. Indeed, she looked like a newly born platypus.

"Well, as usual, we were going 'Kyaa, Kyaa' and then, you see, I just casually wrote down Lady Silver Lily's real name... Raviel Ivansia, and below it, my name. Ah. I should show you for it to make sense."

Silvia looked around.

Then, spotting a broom for sweeping the courtyard, she trudged over to fetch it.

"Look here."

Silvia held the broom upside down and began writing on the ground.

+

Raviel Ivansia

Silvia Evanair

+

"Just like this, I scribbled the names on paper when I was young."

-Zombie, even when you were holed up....

[Shiny again gently suggests that even the hero of that era wouldn't have been in such a turbulent period.]

-Right.

I continued to focus solely on Silvia.

Silvia twirled the broom and said.

"At first, it was just a doodle out of boredom. But suddenly, an idea struck me. What if a child was born between Lady Silver Lily and me..."

Raviel almost dropped her cup.

Silvia pointed her broom at Raviel, her expression fierce like an angry hedgehog.

"Ah, understand, will you? It was puberty, okay? Anyway, if a child was born between us, it'd be a bastard since we couldn't officially marry. We couldn't pass on the family name, but we couldn't give a completely unrelated name either. Combining [Raviel Ivansia] and [Silvia Evanair] seemed almost inevitable. Do you understand this outstand idea?"

"Miss Silvia."

Jaa Soo-Jeong politely raised a hand.

"It's not 'outstand,' it's 'outstanding' in this context."

"Thanks, but now shut up! Damn it! So, focus and watch!"

As Jaa Soo-Jeong dejectedly lowered her head, Silvia's broom briskly moved.

+

R A V I E L I V A N S I A

S I L V I A E V A N A I R

+

“Look here, everyone! This is the tricky part. When I was young I thought of combining our names to make a new one, but then I found something amazing!”

Silvia moved her broom to continue making letters on the ground.

“If we move around the letters...”

+

A A A E I I I L N R S V V

A A A E I I I L N R S V V

+

Ah.

"....."

Indeed, written like that, it was unmistakable.

I looked at the letters arrayed on the ground.

"The letters forming the name... are all the same?"

"Yes!!"

Thud!

Silvia tossed the broom and spread her arms wide.

"Lady Silver Lily and I! We had the same name!"

Her face shone with the purity of a girl, long rusted and reduced to remnants.



# Chapter 236: King of Death (3)

---

The next moment.

"Hehehe."

Silvia laughed eerily.

The sparkling purity of a girl coexisted seamlessly with the moisture in her laugh, blending perfectly.

"As soon as I discovered this fact, I was shocked and hid the note. The terrifying truth that I and Lady Silver Lily had been entwined by the same destiny since birth, maybe even before. I concealed that revealing note tightly."

As if she didn't want anyone to discover it.

"Of course, right? It's a very seductive secret. While the other ladies in the social club were giggling, sharing secrets like [this is what I heard from a friend] or [oh, I eavesdropped this from my parents] just to spice up our tea time... This [Secret Note] was completely different. Yes, it had to be!"

There were still many young ladies in the Silver Bells club.

How to take this secret note without them noticing, and how to present this astonishing and mysterious coincidence to Lady Silver Lily. Young Silvia was extremely nervous.

"I was different from the other members of Silver Bells. Yes, very different. Even when those girls were utterly charmed by how beautiful Lady Silver Lily was that day, or who she danced with first... I was secretly searching for some mystical connection between Lady Silver Lily and myself. Horoscopes, fortunes, birthstones... But now they're all useless. Our names. Our names prove the inseparable bond between Lady Silver Lily and me!"

"....."

A spirited performance unfolded in the old courtyard.

The sunset, like an old man weary from a long walk, slowly

crested the hilltops. As the sun aged through the day, it seemed already old.

As the aged sunset spread across the sky, the performance of a maid on the ground, no matter how fervently she voiced, only echoed as a faded sound of the past.

"Things like imperial laws don't matter. Ethics? Morality? They can shove it. I was certain. Lady Silver Lily just didn't know it yet, but if I managed to present her with this secret note, leaping over the strawberry vines in the courtyard, passing through the maze-like yard, and finally reaching the hall where Lady Silver Lily was dancing with the gentlemen... Climbing up to the hall, waiting among the fools hoping to hold hands with Lady Silver Lily until their line dwindled."

I easily imagined the scene.

"Finally, I would reveal this secret I discovered to her."

At that time, Silvia, or Goldencup, must have been disheveled.

Running from the courtyard to the hall, she wouldn't have looked anything like a noble lady, no matter how generously one viewed it. Even if they subtly tried to dismiss her with an

eviction order, she would have brushed them off, insisting, 'I have something I must show Lady Silver Lily!'

And then.

"My turn finally came."

The two faced each other.

One, a flower of the social world destined to be the Crown Prince's consort.

The other, a girl trembling with admiration for the flower.

-What's going on?

-I, I, I am the daughter of the Evanair Baron family. May glory be upon the Moon of Ivansia!

-So. Why did you want to see me? Baroness.

Lady Silver Lily was exhausted.

She had been trapped in social obligations since dawn. Her mother had long disappeared. It was the Lady herself who had to play the hostess role in the Ivansia Ducal family.

Therefore, she not only planned, designed, managed, and supervised every ball but also, as the flower of the social world honored by the Emperor, had to extend her hand to the influential heirs who requested a dance.

While dancing in the hall, she had to carefully avoid stepping on her partner's feet and simultaneously keep track of whether the ball was going well, if there were any issues with the orchestra's song selection, and if enough food and drinks were being served to the guests.

In short, Raviel Ivansia, despite her young age, was already handling one of the empire's pillars, quite skillfully.

Spies spread around the ball by the Duke family reported rumors and secrets from the venue to the young mistress. It was also Lady Silver Lily's job to classify and interpret this information.

Thus, Raviel Ivansia lived in the [Empire]. The empire was

her world.

"I approached Lady Silver Lily with immense nervousness!"

On the other hand.

Here was a young Baroness who didn't yet understand what the empire was and didn't need to. She had just discovered a sparkling treasure named coincidence.

The secret note was crumpled tightly, hidden from others, looking tattered. She was embarrassed to present such a crumpled piece of trash to Lady Silver Lily's delicate palm.

-But she'll understand!

Young Silvia might have believed so.

-Because it's truly amazing! She'll want to be friends!

And then.

"Lady Silver Lily unfolded the secret note and looked at it for a while. Now that I think about it, she might have imagined it as [a secret directive sent by a spy from an enemy nation]. But since it made no sense, Lady Silver Lily turned to me expressionlessly."

-What is this?

"At that moment, I locked eyes with Lady Silver Lily for the first time. Do you understand? For the first time! Well, her expression was a bit expressionless and cold, but I was sure her icy demeanor would melt away once she heard my explanation. I calmed my thumping heart and explained."

-This, this is my name...

-Your name?

-Yes! My name is Silvia Evanair, and, um, your name, Lady Raviel Ivansia... If we break down both names and arrange them... they, they're the same.

-.....

-The coincidence is amazing, isn't it? Such an incredible... coincidence...

"As I spoke more and more, the atmosphere felt wrong, like this wasn't it. I awkwardly smiled and looked up at her."

-.....

"Ah."

Silvia Evanair, dressed as a maid, sighed.

"That look made me realize. Yeah, well. It wasn't just disappointment... it wasn't just a look of boredom. It was like, in the 2 seconds Lady Silver Lily's red eyes looked down on me, I felt everything about me become worthless."

A sensation of her existence being sliced away, starting from her fingertips.

"To her, I was just trash."



Lady Silver Lily said nothing to the young lady.

Without insult or scorn, without a farewell, she simply turned her back and left for the ball.

After she left, a crumpled note lay abandoned in the place she vacated.

"....."

Silvia Evanair smiled.

"Such things often happen in childhood, right? Yes."

She bent down and grabbed the broom again.

And started to sweep away the letters she had written in the courtyard.

"I never really had any greed. My peers were all excited about how handsome the Crown Prince was, but I never had any interest in love or marriage. Then I accidentally saw Lady

Silver Lily, who was just, too beautiful."

Swoosh.

The consonants and vowels on the ground were swept away into the dust.

"I just wanted to be a bit closer to her."

"But, to dare insult someone like that?"

Silvia raised her head.

A laugh completely different from the one on her lips just moments ago blossomed on her face. A Corpse Poison Flower. Emitting a fierce toxicity, Silvia laughed radiantly.

"Is the empire so important to you? Is sorting and classifying information that sacred? Organizing the family affairs, comforting the people, being engaged to the Crown Prince, are those so, so important that compared to them, I'm nothing?"

That was.

"I'll prove it to you."

A curse.

"That Crown Prince you hold in such high regard. I'll charm him. It was easy."

"A pretty face with sweet whispers, delicate gestures, and he fell for it. Those spies from your family? I asked the Crown Prince to use the imperial knights to kill some. His love for his mistress was so deep... I was moved!"

Goldencup laughed brightly.

"You despised me every time I did such things, didn't you, Moon of Ivansia? Called me [a lowly creature who never thought of the future of the empire]. Yes, that's right. I never thought about the empire. But I was curious. How such a lowly creature."

Swoosh.

The letters on the ground were completely erased.

Standing on the broom, Silvia Evanair bowed gracefully.

"Could ruin your despised face."

"For the empire, right? For the people of the empire. Loyal to the royal family, loving the family. Me, I just wanted to shatter the empire, plunge its people into despair, wreak havoc on the royal family, and bring your family to ruin. Still, I wondered if you'd still love the empire and your family."

Or,

"Would you hate me to the point of madness."

"That's what I was curious about."

Silvia smiled lightly.

"Waiting for the day when your hatred for me would become far more potent and deeper than your love for the empire and

family. It's a pity. Some frail-looking farmhand came in and ruined everything."

Silvia glanced at me.

Beneath her smiling eyes, her pupils shimmered with resentment.

"....."

Raviel remained silent.

The events Silvia just spoke of happened in her first life.

As Raviel, she couldn't remember or know them. My wise wife, with her chin propped on her hand, was deep in thought.

"I know."

That's why I answered on her behalf.

"What do you know?"

"I know how you must have felt, how much pain you were in."

Silvia paused.

Resentment that had been pooled in her eyes spilled over towards me.

"How dare..."

Goldencup said.

"How dare you say that."

Goldencup grasped her sleeve. The crumpled sleeve created ripple-like wrinkles across her dress.

She exclaimed passionately.

"How would you know? Do you know my pain? My suffering? How much it hurt that day, how much agony I felt, the pain of being ignored by someone I looked up to! How would you, what do you know to spout such nonsense,"

"I do know."

I repeated.

"I really do."

I didn't say it was a mere trifle to invest an entire life in vengeance.

I didn't say it was a mere trifle to plunge your world into disaster.

Being ignored.

Being treated as if you don't exist.

Not being treated as a person is a poison strong enough to

kill someone more than 4000 times.

"..."

Goldencup clenched her teeth.

Her teeth ground together in her closed mouth.

Then she opened her lips again.

"Why do you interfere then?"

"Your butler."

Silence lingered.

"I don't know much about your butler. He might have secretly loved you, maybe even my wife. But what's clear is that your life, sharpening your blade for revenge, was never happy."



"....."

"The butler wished for someone to help you. Hamusutra took that wish. I was just dispatched as Hamusutra's agent. In the end, you created this situation yourself."

"Why is that my own doing?"

"You didn't make the butler happy."

"....."

"You had someone who cared for and loved you, but you ignored them. You were just obsessed with your own revenge. At least you should have been happy yourself, but even that didn't happen."

As a result.

"The butler became an 'invisible person'."

I said.

"If Raviel was a bastard to you, you were just as much of a bastard to the butler who was helping you the closest."

".....Ah."

Silvia Evanair dropped her head.

"What is this... a story about the butler."

Amidst the silence, her words trickled out.

"Bringing up that guy... it's cowardly..."

Silence settled again.

The sunset over the western mountains had now dimmed. Streetlamps in the alley buzzed to life, but in the poor village, the lights stretched their arms as far as they could. The old hanok of the Amethyst, untouched by the crimson streetlamp light, was simply dark.

"I'm sorry."

It was Raviel's voice.

"I was sorry, Silvia Evanair."

"And I'm sorry."

Slowly, Silvia lifted her head. In the dark night, people were merely silhouettes, shadows merging together. A shadowy voice flowed from the shadowy body.

"What are you talking about...?"

"Even if it wasn't in my memory, if the same thing had happened, it would have played out the same way. I would have ignored you. I wouldn't even have remembered you. Because, at that time, the only things that mattered to me were the well-being of the empire and the glory of the family."

"....."

"I'm sorry. I was a person who didn't yet understand pain."

Raviel stood up.

As she rose, the ancient floorboards of the deck creaked.

Like a broken cassette tape turning.

"You took away my promised future. You stole the position of Crown Princess, monopolized the Crown Prince's heart. Moon of Ivansia. Flower of the social world. The future leader of the empire. All those promises were broken because of you."

"So what about it...?"

"Because of you, my heart bled for the first time."

Thud.

Raviel walked towards Silvia.

"It hurt. It was painful. I had to stab my own heart in the mirror. Only then did I realize how much I had hurt others."

"And then, I met my love."

Raviel turned to look at me.

Even in the dark veil, I clearly recognized the warmth of her breath, the rhythm of her breathing, the fragrance in her eyes. She didn't speak. Silently, she commanded me to come closer.

I approached her.

"My love was also wounded. A returner. The endless wounds of life repeated. Never did I expect to find someone to share such a burden."

"I am grateful for the curse of eternal repetition."

Indeed.

"Because of it, I could meet Gong-Ja."

I too am grateful for my returning life.

I became grateful.

"Although it was very painful."

As the master said, those days were painfully painful.

"If it weren't for that pain, I would never have recognized my lovely kindred spirit."

It allowed me to fall for Raviel at first sight.

"Because of my pain, I met someone bleeding like me. Gong-Ja. I knew it when I saw you. And Silvia. I realized it because of you."

"I thank you, Silvia Evanair."

Slowly.

Raviel knelt on the dust-covered ground, bowing her head to her maid.

"Thank you."

Ah, of course.

Of course, Raviel is... my lover.

The emotions she holds for Silvia must be as intense as the feelings I have for Yoo Soo-Ha. She must want to retaliate, to take revenge. Yet, despite all, Raviel kneeled to Silvia.

Because the present moment with me is overwhelmingly happy.

Thankful for everything in the past that led to this moment.

".....Eugh."

Silvia clenched her teeth.

"Damn it... Damn! That's why. That's why I hate you people. Why do you get to be happy? Keep being miserable! Keep hurting! Keep crying pathetically, lamenting your misfortune!

Yeah, damn it! Be miserable!"

That's why, Silvia said. That's why.

"That makes me... seem like a fool for being swayed by emotions, wasting my life...!"

Silvia covered her face with her hands.

"It's not true. It's not. My pain is deeper, more special, incomprehensible to anyone, unforgivable, and so, so—"

Her voice trickled off like a faucet running out of water.

Silence flowed.

After enough silence, when Silvia stifled her breath, trembling, Raviel slowly stood up.

"Right."



She returned to her chair and sat down.

Resting her elbows on the table, she propped her beautiful chin on her folded hands.

"Let's start thinking about how to deal with this now."

She spoke.

# Chapter 237: King of Death's Family (1)

---

Silvia clenched her fist tightly.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Let's summarize the issues at hand," my lover continued calmly.

"I hurt you. I apologized, trying to soothe that wound, but it's difficult to heal such wounds with just words. In reality, you haven't completely healed either."

"Well, saying it like that makes me sound petty but... then what...?"

"There are three options available."

Raviel extended three fingers and then folded one.

"First, I endure ruin until you feel satisfied."

Hearing this, I clenched my fist.

Raviel glanced at me and then turned back to Goldencup.

"However, this is not feasible. Just like in the past, my ruin would bring too many things with it. It used to be the empire's safety, and now it includes the happiness of my lover, so I simply cannot grant such a request."

"Moreover, the fact that your butler proved by sacrificing everything that such an act won't bring you happiness."

Silvia slumped her head.

The story of the butler remains an indelible debt in her heart.

Raviel folded another finger.

"Second is to physically exclude and annihilate you."

"...!"

Silvia jerked her head up.

The Silver Tyrant gazed down at Silvia with eyes burning through the darkness.

"Under normal circumstances, it would be my immediate choice."

"...."

"Murder is the ultimate incompetence, as my partner once relayed a god's words. I fully agree. Murder is not a proof of competence, but rather a last resort when no other options are available."

But, Raviel added.

"However, I'm not an omnipotent god or a transcendent

being. I'm just a person with limitations, reliant on bread and water, nothing more than a 'slightly smarter beast'. I must protect what I carry within these constraints, physically removing anything that threatens or could threaten my well-being."

There was a certain pride in her voice, acknowledging her own limitations.

"So..."

Silvia bit her lip.

"You're going to eliminate me...? Or keep me bound in this ghoul's curse forever because I'm unworthy to have a body like you...?"

"Both are possibilities, but right now, I won't choose either," Raviel stated and folded her last finger.

"Third is to accept your heart."

"...?"

"Meaning, to welcome you as my concubine."

Silence descended.

"....."

"....."

Jaa Soo-Jeong sipped barley tea with a gulp, the sound clearly audible.

Besides that, no other sound was heard, and even the believers of the Demonic Cult hiding in the shadows held their breath.

-Wow.

The first voice I heard was the Guardian Spirit's admiration.

The legend among legends who conquered up to the 99th floor of the tower looked at the courtyard with a profound expression.

-Zombie, some popcorn, please. Ah, not just any popcorn, make sure it's caramel. To me, popcorn coated in a moderate brown is the tastiest. You know, it's like biting into a cavity, making it more special. Anyway, that's how it is.

His expression was profound, but the dialogue, not so much.

Honestly, I wanted to tell him to shut up for a moment.

Eventually, after a long time, a human voice echoed in the courtyard, belonging to Silvia Evanair, Goldencup.

Silvia's lips trembled violently.

"What nonsense are you spouting!?"

Hidden in the darkness, her eyes trembled as much as her lips.

"A concubine? A, a concubine, you say? To me, Silvia Evanair, who was promised by the Crown Prince himself to be his Crown Princess, to suggest that I... become your concubine!?"

"Yes."

"Nonsense! Absolute nonononononsense! How can you even think of such absurdity...?"

"Hm. It indeed is nonsense," Raviel affirmed.

"There are two reasons why."

Raviel spread her fingers again and spoke.

"One. This is not something I can decide on my own. Status, looks, or anything can be sorted later, but first, Gong-Ja, my love, and I need to come to an agreement. The fact that this proposal came before the agreement is why it's nonsense."

Relieved, my heart, which had climbed back up my spine, sat comfortably in its place. Silvia screamed out loud.

"No, that's not it! What about considering my opinion! That should be the precondition—"



"Two."

Raviel folded her fingers.

"Did you truly love me?"

Silvia, who was shouting, fell silent.

"Was it not mere admiration for an idol?"

"A desire for something unattainable, assumed unattainable, was it not?"

A long silence followed.

"I..."

Thud.

Raviel placed her teacup down.

Jaa Soo-Jeong collected the cup on a tray and briskly disappeared towards the house.

"I love Kim Gong-Ja."

"I love everything about Kim Gong-Ja. I never thought such love was possible, and it must have been impossible for the countless people who lived and died before me, but a miracle was granted to me, and I met him."

Raviel.

She recited it calmly, as if stating a fact.

"Everything is perfect. His breath, the empty spot on the bed when he leaves at dawn... the warmth... I find happiness in every trace my love leaves behind. I understand him, and he understands me. We live in the same timeline. Therefore..."

Raviel turned to Silvia.

"I cannot recognize anything as love other than [this kind of love]."

"....."

"Did you love me that way?"

Silvia slumped her head.

It was a gesture of evasion, unable to answer, not wanting to answer, just wanting to escape from this situation.

"By now, you must know. You did not love me. That's why I can't love you."

Indeed.

That's how it is.

How much coincidence and bloodshed were necessary for me to love Raviel and for Raviel to love me? The reason we love each other so fiercely is precisely because we didn't fall in love easily.

Our love is difficult.

It's a love that only Raviel and I can have.

"...Then,"

Then, Silvia spoke.

Shadows gathered behind her drooping head and fallen bangs.

"So, what now... what are you proposing?"

Her teeth chattered as she spoke, blood from her gums tinging them red.

"You won't grant me ruin, won't erase me, won't love me... So what should I do? Just tossing an incomplete apology at me, ah, what should I do... what can I do..."

"I leave that to you," Raviel said.

Then she turned to me.

"Gong-Ja."

Hmm.

"Yes, Raviel."

"By using the skill 'Earth Bone Dragon's Skull' to give Silvia a body, will she be more free than when she was a ghoul?"

I understood the intent behind her question and nodded in affirmation.

"Yes, she will be freer."

"Is that freedom equivalent to what she enjoyed in life?"

"Yes, it is."

"Enough to pursue what she desires?"

"Enough to pursue what she desires."

Raviel nodded and then turned to Silvia.

"Pursue what you desire, Silvia Evanair."

"Do you want to ruin me? You almost succeeded once. Try again. But to do that, you must be stronger than me and my lover, and be able to completely ignore the sacrifices made by your butler for your sake."

Goldencup's breathing halted.

Raviel continued speaking.

"Do you want to die and disappear? Or do you want to kill me? Try it. But I won't just stand by and let it happen. I will resist with everything I have against any threat to me and I will win. Just as when you wanted to ruin me earlier, you will have to do better."

"Or do you want to be loved by me? Or like before, do you want to become a being that I admire and adore? That too depends on your effort. You can strive for it."

Maybe you can achieve it, Raviel muttered.

Throughout her speech, she looked straight at Goldencup.

"Whichever it may be, Silvia Evanair."

The eyes of one person met the eyes of another.

"I recognize you as my equal, an entity capable of standing opposite me, a worthy adversary."

From the very beginning.

From the very start, all that was needed in every world was just that.

"So I ask you, Silvia Evanair."

Raviel Ivansia asked quietly.

"Do you recognize me as a person?"

And then, silence ensued.

---

Silvia gazed up at Raviel, stupefied.

Beyond the darkened sky, the white moon was floating.

Raviel's face, backlit by the moonlight, was resolute.

How much time passed?

"....."

Goldencup opened her mouth.

As if there was so much steam in her heart, when she opened her mouth, no words came out.



Just hot breath, malice, rage, self-loathing, guilt, resentment, vengeance, blood clots, breath, endlessly leaking out.

"I...."

I, she said.

Silvia was truly pouring out her soul.

"It's difficult for me. You, you all..."

Biting her lip till it bled.

Gazing with pain.

"To look up to, to look down upon, to accept as a person... to do unto others what I myself desperately desire, I..."

Above all, with a dragging voice.

"...Even now. You apologized to me, but in the end, I... I can't apologize to you. I can't forgive you... I am." Silvia covered her face with her hands.

"I know... Saying this is shameless. I know I did much worse to you, really, incomparably worse. I know, but still, that... that thing."

Regardless of the presence or strength of power, the one who forgives is always stronger than the one being forgiven.

Silvia wasn't strong enough, and therefore couldn't forgive Raviel.

"So for now..."

Silvia shivered and then barely spat out her words.

"For now, I want to... I want to try that...."

Silvia vowed.

"To forgive you... you all, to accept you all as people, no matter how long it takes, how it's possible with my petty mind, I will make it happen."

"Because that's..."

Silvia swallowed her words.

She could have just swallowed them, but instead, with her head down, she said,

"That's what he would have wanted... the butler..."

Her eyes brimmed with tears as she murmured.

A sob followed, then a cry.

"For now, I want to become someone... someone not ashamed in his eyes... hard as it may be, difficult as it is, I..."

I call that the will to live.

"Good."

As one bestowed with the power to share life, I willingly answered.

"Then let's see you live. Goldencup, Silvia Evanair."

"Live to obtain what you seek. To prove what you want to prove. Live."

My hand, clutching the golden card, shone brightly.

"I will be with you in this."

I enclosed her will within the Earth Bone Dragon's Box.

[Activating skill!]

# Chapter 238: King of Death's Family (2)

---

Swoosh-

Black water swirled around Goldencup. Or perhaps it was not water, but shadows.

Whether it was the first water one touches at birth, or the shadow one drags until death, it was too fitting for announcing a birth.

[The Earth Bone Dragon's Box activates.]

The water... the shadow... the water-shadow soon completely enveloped Goldencup. Swish, swish, the sound of the water-shadow swirling like a cocoon continued from within.

And then, it began to shrink.

The cocoon surrounding Goldencup shrank smaller and smaller, until it finally condensed into the size of a child's toy bell. In my palm, a bead lay, squishy like water, yet dark as pitch-black shadow.

"....."

This tiny thing represented the existence of Silvia Evanair.

I slowly, carefully, opened my mouth and— dropped the bead in, just like placing a cherry on top of a cake.

"....."

Everyone in the room watched me, tense.

To them, I was neither Ivansia's consort nor the Vice-lord of the Demonic Cult. I was a demi-god with power.

As they silently observed the miracle of the demi-god, I simply chewed.

Squish.

I chewed and mulled over the bead. Naturally, the taste was different from cherries. Cherries are sweet, with a tart aftertaste. But this bead, this existence of Silvia Evanair, the more I chewed, the more I bit into it... the more it tasted of sorrowful rainwater.

-Miss Silvia.

-Remember, you're a bastard to someone too.

-Butler! What are you doing, where are you going!?

Memories fragmented.

Each time I chewed the bead, memories popped like popcorn kernels.

"Hmm."

I swallowed the finely crushed memories of Goldencup, then

swallowed again. A human life was too vast or too sticky to swallow in one go.

Goldencup's existence was on the stickier side. Like overly dense red bean jelly.

I steadily, really steadily, swallowed Goldencup's existence.

[The Earth Bone Dragon's Box is complete.]

And then.

"Huuu..."

I slowly exhaled. The breath I just released had mass, weight, even color, like a poisonous smoke, it was a pitch-black breath.

In the dark mist, two eyes shone like a beast's.

[The Apostle of 'Ruin-Harvesting Cow' manifests!]



The tower called her eyes by an ancient name.

But it was too loose a sound to encompass who she was now.

“Silvia Evanair.”

"....."

The one who regained form from breath.

To call it reincarnation would be too grand, and transformation too magnificent, so let's say it was a change of life. The one who had once died now kneeled before me.

“Do you have a new name you wish for?”

“...No. I wish to live as I have been called, as I have been known. More importantly... What should I call you?”

Goldencup's face was filled with awe.

Naturally.

From her perspective, I had resurrected her.

Using memories stored in [Ghoul Reincarnation], I compressed them like a box with [Earth Dragon Bone's Skull], then transplanted it into my body. Now, I could revive Goldencup whenever I wanted.

Even for someone who has dealt with magic and gods, this was undoubtedly a miracle.

“Re-resurrection is truly a sign of divinity. It feels inappropriate to call you as I did before, just like Ivansia's lady.....”

“Family head.”

“Pardon?”

“You can call me family head in public. In private, Kim Gong-Ja, Mr. Gong-Ja, or whatever is fine. But in war or battle, call me family head.”

"....."

I slowly stood up.

Merely straightening a bent back, yet to me, it felt like a beast awaking from a long winter's sleep. If I felt this way, so must have the many watching me.

"Listen."

I spoke, letting aura flow into my voice.

"There are two meanings to 'family'. One is the family we're born into, and the other is the lineage we create. Raviel and I are a unique family. Everyone who approaches me in this world becomes part of my family... that is my ideal."

If I could love someone else as I do Raviel.

If there was even a chance to achieve that impossible feat.

"Ester."

“Yes, master... Father.”

At my call, Ester hurried over and kneeled on one knee. Seeing this, I chuckled softly and stroked her head.

“That’s it.”

“...Yes?”

“That’s not how family is formed, Ester. See, where would you find a daughter kneeling on one knee to her dad?”

“Oh...”

Ester was flustered.

“This is, well, even in parent-child relationships, if the parent is a king, the child must fulfill both the duties of a child and a subject, so it’s unavoidable...!”

“It’s alright.”

I smiled.

“We haven’t become close enough to each other yet.”

“...Father?”

“I am an inexperienced father. Ester, you’ve never been a daughter, so you wouldn’t know. So, we haven’t reached the stage of being a family yet. We don’t know what kind of father I’ll be, or what kind of daughter you’ll be.”

The night wind blew.

Years ago, such a wind had also blown at an orphanage outside the tower.

It had blown.

“There’s still so much we don’t know.”

What we will be to each other, is not yet determined.

“We’re not a family yet.”

We're only at the starting line.

“If we ignore this and think, ‘We’re family’, ‘We’re closely bonded’, one day, these thoughts themselves will shackle us. ‘Even though we’re family, I didn’t know anything about you.’ ‘Why can’t you do this much even though we’re family?’ Such despair will follow.”

The heart racing ahead is beautiful.

But the heart is more beautiful when it supports actions.

In front of all of us orphans, the director had said so.

“We're...”

I recited what the tired-faced director once told me.

“We're to understand each other, to be understood in areas we want to be understood, not to understand where we

shouldn't as requested. What we want. What our habits are. What message you want to leave in this world. Why you love sunsets..."

I slowly recited the signs of love.

"Until we learn and understand these things about each other, we're not yet a 'family'."

I looked at each one - the Demon King who tried to destroy the world, the believers from the eternal winter, the noble lady who cursed people.

"We're people striving to become a family."

Director.

"Family isn't completed or ended with the word 'family'. Family is a relationship, the extreme of relationships. It's a promise to strive for each other. It's hard enough to care for each other, and striving is even harder. How can a family be easily formed?"

Right.

“It’s going to take a lot of effort.”

Though there will be many fights.

We can do it.

“Until then—instead of wearing the skin of a 'family', let’s become a 'lineage'.”

At my declaration, Ester, who was being stroked on the head, reacted.

Her ears perked up.

“Father... Lineage, did you say?”

“A lineage has its roles and duties. The housekeeper is responsible for the hygiene and welfare of the lineage, cooking when the lineage members are hungry.”

Just as the director assigned each of us a role at the orphanage.



Ultimately, people act as they have learned and strive to be better.

I looked at Ester seriously.

"The eldest daughter usually becomes the successor. While receiving education as an heir, she steps in to host balls and social gatherings when the family head is unable. Ester, as the eldest daughter of our lineage, you will take on many responsibilities in the future."

"....."

"On the other hand, warriors protect the safety of the lineage. They guard against any villain attempting to kidnap a lineage member, and when a force tries to bring down our lineage, they fight."

The night sky.

My precious believers, merged with the darkness of the night. The warriors sat on the walls, under the walls, in the courtyards, and on the main floor, looking up at me.

“I will strive to become a family to you.”

Though not a single one of us is related by blood.

“Until that day comes, first, let's become a lineage.”

We will cherish each other more than anyone else.

Because we've experienced pain, hated humans, been betrayed by the world, witnessed annihilation, and yet somehow, we've arrived here, met like this.

I spoke.

“Four Demon Lords.”

“Yes!”

From the dark corners of the mansion, facing in each cardinal direction, the elite assassins of the Demonic Cult gathered at my feet.

Among them, the eldest, Blood Demon, spoke.

“Please command, Vice-lor...”

A wrinkle formed on Blood Demon’s handsome forehead. Principled on the good side, but stubbornly old-fashioned on the other, he was a guardian warrior who maintained discipline among the believers. Tall and good-looking, but a stickler for rules.

After a short contemplation, he adjusted his address with a sigh.

“...Family Head.”

“Hmm.”

“We are merely tools to be used. You, Vice-lord... no, Family Head, have a righteous heart. Even if we are used as tools, we will never feel self-loathing or regret. Just being admired as well-honed blades is enough for us.”

“The master was like a mother to me.”

"....."

"To you, the master was more than a mother."

"....."

"Blood Demon."

I bent down and covered Blood Demon's fist salute with my hands.

"We lost someone, and that person was like a mother to all of us. Isn't that right?"

"...Yes, it is so."

"So, we are brothers."

I declared.

“People don't unite over what they have, but over what they have lost. That is the doctrine of Demonic Heaven. Hence, losing our master, we are undoubtedly a sorrowful one.”

"....."

“We will share more stories, try to understand more, learn about each other's boundaries, sometimes become bastards to each other, and through that...”

More than now.

Much more than now.

“We will become more beautiful and happier.”

"....."

“Until that day, I will take the responsibility of the head of this lineage.”

Blood Demon moistened his dry lips.

“Yes, Family Head.”

“I entrust the military affairs of the lineage to Blood Demon. Your position will be Warrior Deputy. I will soon appoint someone as Warrior Chief, so as a deputy, assist them.”

“Yes! Family Head!”

I turned my head.

“Uburka!”

“Hmm.”

Boom.

Uburka stood up from the main floor, and the courtyard vibrated lightly under his step. Until now, Uburka had controlled his aura, managing the weight of his body. Now, being called by me, Uburka unleashed his restrained aura.

“Did you call? Daddy.”

Whispers of fear flowed from here and there.

The believers of the Demonic Cult, now warriors of my lineage, realized the heights Uburka had reached.

Uburka was a monster.

A warrior who underwent metamorphosis as a child and achieved semi-immortality in his old age. The strongest warrior in Earth Spirit Tribe's history. Given time and opportunity, he might glimpse the realm once tread by our master. My lineage's warriors tensed at this realization.

Amidst the warriors' tension, I smiled.

“You are my son.”

“Ugor. Indeed.”

“Lately, it seems your brain has gone crazy, falling in love and confessing to everyone you meet...”

“Have you forgotten my constellation name, father? Do you want to be beaten by a madman?”

[The Constellation 'The Muscle Pig Dreaming of Parricide' threatens you.]

Hahaha.

I laughed a bit more.

“It’s alright. Even if you’re going through adolescence, our son is still cool. Your father only experienced love once, but that one time was with the greatest person in all existence, wasn’t it? From a cost-benefit perspective, I am already the king of romance. Feel free to consult with father anytime.”

“Your case is very special and extremely unique, unlikely to be of any reference... Ugor. But, I’ll talk if there’s something.”

“That’s right. You are my eldest son.”

I nodded.



“And the strongest warrior I know.”

"....."

Uburka looked down at me.

“Even though I’ve challenged and lost to daddy several times?”

“I lost hundreds of times to Ester for a single victory. The number of defeats only serves to embellish the victory.”

“Will I ever be able to defeat daddy?”

“I believe in your talent, your effort, and your will. You are the most perfect warrior in this world.”

"....."

“Our lineage's Warrior Chief, please become that.”

I placed my palm on Uburka's large hand.

“Lead us in the front lines when we fight. Fight alongside me and lead us. You have learned Demonic Heavenly God Art. Not only learned but mastered it. You’ve reached the pinnacle of the art after me, so the warriors of the lineage will willingly obey your command.”

The warriors’ breathing quietened a bit more.

Fear lessened, replaced by anticipation.

"I have modified the Demonic Heavenly God Art, transforming it from a single person's sword to a dance and song for hundreds. Learn it. Learn it well. Teach it to the warriors. You will teach well."

"....."

“My dear son, Uburka.”

Uburka lifted his other hand and covered my palm.

Despite being a giant, my son, who still seemed young, nodded.

“I will become the chief warrior of my daddy.”

And he vowed.

“I won’t forgive those who dare to harm this place, our lineage. I will protect those dear to daddy and strive to make them dear to me too. As long as father loves me, I will also love the world.”

I smiled.

Thank you.

I was born an orphan, and you were born with albinism, but now I have loved ones around me, and just as you don’t know why you hate the sun...

In the far future, we will become something more different.

Proving something to this world.

"....."

I then thought of a Ghoul I hadn't summoned yet.

Their scent, hair, eyes. The hint of a being lost in that person's scent, the traces of wounds hidden between strands of hair, a buried past in those blue, expressionless eyes. I recalled them.

"Come forth."

I called what I had envisioned.

[Activating skill.]

The shadow surged.

From it, bubbling and boiling, a hand reached out, followed by hair, a face, a body. The pale Ghoul breathed softly.

“Hoo.”

As I imagined, the being had the scent, hair, and eyes.

Raviel's distant ancestor resembled Raviel, and it was very easy to think of someone who looked like Raviel.

“You called.”

I nodded.

And called the person's name.

"Kim Yul."

You too will become something more meaningful to me.

# Chapter 239: King of Death's Family (3)

---

Kim Yul.

I faced the man resonating with that name.

‘Handsome.’

The man had long hair. As the night wind stirred, his silver hair danced weightlessly in the air. It seemed that if its tiny roots attached to the scalp were cut, the hair would immediately drift away... possibly to some nameless desert.

Yes. The silver hair seemed to yearn for a desert. The place it left, the place it could leave anytime, the place it would eventually leave. Each strand of hair subtly carried a longing for the desert.

“Kim Yul.”

“I came when called. But is this place a Demonic Realm? The power gathered here is so formidable that even I, in my prime, wouldn’t have been able to determine the outcome if I had charged in.”

His piercing blue eyes scrutinized the courtyard of the mansion. The elite of the Demonic Cult, now our lineage's warriors, the Blood Ghost Troop, met Kim Yul's gaze with a menacing aura.

“---A considerable force.”

The once-absolute powerhouse of the Tower's 50th floor, now a café part-timer, evaluated sincerely. Kim Yul was always earnest, after all.

“How considerable?”

“If they were to ascend to the 50th floor as they are, the riff-raff wouldn’t dare approach. Even the witches who spin webs in the Magic Tower would have to engage them in battle to determine the true owner of the 50th floor.”

“And.”

I tapped Uburka's arm.

“What if this kid is added to the mix?”

"....."

Kim Yul examined Uburka thoroughly, from his rugged chest muscles to his thighs that seemed like they were muscles themselves. Tapping Uburka's muscle lines, Kim Yul's eyebrows slightly raised.

“Impressive. A monster?”

Kim Yul was expressionless.

However, I could tell he was genuinely admiring. When it came to reading Kim Yul's expressionlessness, I was as authoritative as the Head Librarian.

“The epitome of a Heavenly Martial Body. There are warriors who, at best, can only slice through a person with a single sword strike, known as Human Martial Artists. There are great warriors who can expand a country's land with one swing, known as Earth Martial Artists. But Heavenly Martial



Artists are different. One swing can cleave the heavens, and under that blade, how many die or how many nations fall becomes irrelevant. Astonishing. Just the power gathered in this mansion could annihilate any average constellation's floor..."

"My son."

"....."

For the first time since his summoning, Kim Yul clammed up.

A hint of confusion and turmoil mingled in his blue eyes.

To think I can disconcert someone like Kim Yul. Impressive, isn't it?

"A son?"

Kim Yul turned his head to look at Uburka's stature, mine, and finally at Raviel. The most complex equations unfolded in his mind. Surprisingly, beads of sweat seemed to form on Kim Yul's forehead.

“How? ...It’s impossible. Both physically and racially, it seems impossible. A curse of the Tower? A skill's influence? No, but the rate of growth...”

“He’s my adopted son.”

“You wish to die, King of Death.”

Before I knew it, Kim Yul’s hand was gripping my neck. It didn’t hurt since he was a Ghoul who had lost his prime strength, but the icy glare was somewhat frightening.

“Wow, you’ve become quite expressive. Your face is still expressionless, but you admired Uburka, and showed dumbfoundment towards me...”

“I am human too. Can’t help it.”

Kim Yul released my neck with a sigh.

“I’ve lost the skill that traded memories for power. All I have is this notebook, documenting half of my life that I abandoned.”

Kim Yul took out a notebook from his pocket and looked down at it. His gaze, filled with many emotions, swept over the worn leather.

“I’ve already abandoned everything I could, and it’s impossible to abandon more. From now on, it’s only about gaining. As you promised me, King of Death. I am living a life.”

“Things that I wouldn’t have noticed before, or would have been quickly discarded, are now slowly settling and accumulating in my heart. As they pile up, the surface of my heart will eventually overflow. When that time comes, maybe I too will laugh, cry, get angry, and love like others.”

Kim Yul looked at me.

“If you hadn’t brought the teacher and reunited me, I would still be nothing more than a machine devoid of anything in my heart. King of Death. It’s all thanks to you.”

I smiled.

“That’s great, Mr. Kim Yul. But don’t you regret it?”

Kim Yul tilted his head.

“Regret? What do you mean, King of Death?”

“You have someone precious now. The Director. Hamustra, who might not be very reliable but likes you. Even if the memory-losing skill returns, you can’t discard it without hesitation now, can you?”

"....."

Kim Yul pondered expressionlessly.

“That’s right.”

He nodded after a moment.

“I can’t abandon them.”

"....."

“There is someone who lived a life for my death. Someone who is fascinated by my life and loves me. To enjoy the luxury of being born and dying in this human life is to enjoy everything. I can’t let go of this fortune.”

Kim Yul looked up at the night sky.

“I see.”

Then, he slowly turned to face me.

“I am happy now. King of Death.”

"....."

“You made me happy.”

Various emotions were swirling in Kim Yul's eyes – not just bafflement, surprise, and gratitude. His eyes, as blue as the sea, were stirring with a myriad of feelings.

“Is that your wish?”

Mixed in, there was an indiscernible concern.

“Do you intend to make everyone you meet happy? In my opinion, it’s not easy to change me this way.”

“Ah, it was really hard.”

“I lost my memories. You created [Trauma World] to retrieve fragments of lost memories. I was miserable. To prove I wasn’t just miserable, you brought the director. ...The cost-effectiveness is off. It’s hard enough to apply salve to one person’s wound, King of Death. What exactly are you dreaming of?”

I chuckled and scratched my head.

“It looks good, you know.”

“What?”

“Seeing everyone smile makes me feel really good.”

"....."

There's a god who takes on our miseries in our stead.

A tricky situation.

If you're born, it's best to achieve your desires and laugh as much as you want.

It's hard, but I think it's worthwhile.

"Mr. Kim Yul."

"Speak."

"You now have things to protect."

The teacher, Hamustra, and the quite likable Planetarium Café.

“But you don’t have the power to protect them.”

"....."

“You can peacefully enjoy the smell of books and coffee in the café built in the Great Library now. Hunters can’t rampage there. I guaranteed its safety, and the Black Dragon, Temple of the All Gods, Celestial Martial Clan, Sang-Ryun, and Vigilante Corps jointly invested in it. But conversely, your happiness is completely reliant on others.”

I grabbed Kim Yul’s shoulder.

There was a time when touching him meant risking my life.

But now it was so easy that Kim Yul couldn’t escape or shake off my hand.

"....."

Kim Yul knew this too.



Thus, waves stirred in his beautiful eyes.

I looked into those waves with a smile.

“Aren’t you afraid?”

"....."

“The director is weak. She’s old. If some crazy hunter deliberately attacks, they will be brutally avenged later, but the director will still be defenseless.”

Ripples trembled on Kim Yul’s shoulder under my hand.

“Hamustra is no longer a constellation. Just a fragile kid. A child who likes reading books. He lost his power. If some madman attacks, he’ll die.”

“What...”

Kim Yul opened his lips.

“What do you want from me?”

“I can protect them if you ask.”

I said.

“I can order my warriors, who are sharp and quick, to infiltrate the library and guard it 24/7. Not just that, if a situation arises and you die, I have the ability to turn back a day.”

"....."

“You can trust me with everything.”

Even then, it's okay.

I won't blame you.

For the sins you've committed so far, I can take care of them while I'm with you.

But.

“If you don’t want that.”

If you choose something else over safety and comfort.

"I will return life to you, Mr. Kim Yul."

Slowly, Kim Yul looked into my eyes.

“Life?”

“I’ve become a bit stronger than before. The abilities, the skills you had to give up when you became a Ghoul. I can restore them all to you.”

Kim Yul hesitated.

He looked around at the warriors emanating fierce aura around the courtyard. Until recently, like Kim Yul, they were powerless. They had knowledge of combat and immense tenacity, but they couldn’t utilize internal energy or execute

martial arts.

“Indeed.”

Finally, Kim Yul's gaze landed on Ester.

Silently observing Ester, what radiated from her was the prestige of a constellation that once single-handedly brought down the Aegim Empire. Seeing the Demon King who toppled the empire he founded, Kim Yul understood the true intent behind my words.

“You grow stronger with each passing day.”

“Well, the world won't let me stay weak.”

“...The definition of [strength] varies from person to person. However, if a family provider saves every minute to swing a pickaxe, tirelessly swinging their arms because every second and minute is precious, that person is undoubtedly strong. Not wasting time. Buying time. That's the measure of strength.”

Kim Yul looked at me.

“You always buy time. Despite being able to turn it back, a day or a year, making the value of time seem trivial to you, yet you live each day as if it can never be turned back.”

Kim Yul muttered expressionlessly.

“That’s why I think you’re strong.”

And then, Kim Yul said.

“I also want to be strong like you.”

"....."

“I’ll try, King of Death.”

I fell silent for a moment.

‘Everyone is trying.’

I wanted to savor that fact for a while.

Ester. The once doppelganger who wanted to be human. That's Ester's wish. So, she'll strive to become human, and strive to become family with me.

Silvia. Once a frivolous noble lady, she wanted Raviel. That's Silvia's desire. So, she'll work to have Raviel and fulfill the conditions Raviel set.

Kim Yul. The man who once became strong by discarding memories, now has things he can't discard. He doesn't want to discard them ever again. That's Kim Yul's newfound wish. So, he will work to not discard himself.

‘Nice.’

Others too.

‘Yeah. That’s good.’

Because everyone has something to hold onto.

They will surely be able to try.

‘Just a small push is all it takes.’

And.

I can be that push for them.

“I will give you a physical body, Mr. Kim Yul.”

To be a catalyst for someone, I've become strong.

[The Earth Bone Dragon's Box is activated.]

[The Earth Bone Dragon's Box is completed.]

Just like Ester and the Four Demon Lords, the believers, Silvia Evanair, Kim Yul's existence also transformed into a black bead and dyed my heart.

Feeling the presence that was sad for not being pure white, I exhaled.

My breath was as black as my heart, and when it left my lips, it settled on the ground like a dense fog.

From there, slowly, a human form took shape.

"....."

Constellation Killer.

The man who emerged from being a ghost back to a human, slowly opened and closed his right hand. Repeatedly.

And he muttered.

"The passage I read in a book today was truly good. Beautiful."

Kim Yul looked up at the night sky.



“But, there will be many more beautiful things waiting for me.”

In an instant.

Constellation Killer swung his hand, and the aura emanating from it sliced through the night air. Cutting and dividing, it even cleaved the moonlit clouds. The dark clouds silently scattered on either side of the full moon.

The white moon seeped through the parted clouds.

Kim Yul stood still, bathed in the moonlight pouring down on him.

“I can’t remember that passage anymore.”

"....."

“King of Death. What should I call you?”

I approached Kim Yul.

“Please call me Family Head.”

“Family Head.”

“Yes. Someday we will become family to each other. But I am wary of rushing to call each other family from the start. We still don’t know much about each other and are not very familiar.”

"....."

“We can certainly become closer.”

I took something out of my pocket.

A week after parting from the God.

During that time, I wandered around the city, preparing various things. Passing an old road, I found a stationery store. Passing an elementary school student playing arcade games in front of it, I entered the store and found this.

“It's not a very expensive item, but...”

Swoosh.

I untied the yellow rubber band holding Constellation Killer's hair.

The rubber band was very resilient, tightly binding Kim Yul's silver hair.

“This is a gift from me, while dreaming of the day that will eventually come.”

A moment later.

“Hmm. This is my first time tying it, so it's not going well... Ah, I think it's done now. Anyway, I guess this is okay.”

A plain hair tie was now tied in Constellation Killer's ponytail.

I took the yellow rubber band and said,

“You won’t need this anymore.”

And simply burned it with aura.

"....."

Probably a very long time ago.

Hundreds of years ago.

Leafanta Aegim must have thought as he discarded 'Kim Yul's memory'.

[Even if I erase my memory, I should not forget the fact that I was abandoned by the world].

Students of Shinseo High School used the yellow rubber band to bully Kim Yul. Tying hair with a rubber band hurts. A simple yet effective bullying tactic.

Everyone could see Kim Yul wearing the rubber band, so everyone knew he was poor and a victim of violence.

It was a stigma.

Leafanta Aegim did not hesitate to discard Kim Yul's memories. After all, there were no good memories to hold onto. He wanted to discard them gratefully if possible.

But the evidence.

He wanted to leave the evidence that the world had abandoned him. He wanted to prove what kind of person he was, how he was born, and the life he led with such a stigma.

So he could curse the world to his heart's content.

"....."

The evidence of the past that had bound Constellation Killer for a long time was now burnt here.

With an expressionless face, or rather a dazed one, Kim Yul touched his hair tied with a hundred-won hair tie from any stationery store.

“I will take charge as the representative of our family.”

"....."

“Mr. Kim Yul, please become the Shadow of our family. Become the shadow of our family, scout the enemies, and gather their information.”

“A spy?”

“Yes.”

I pointed to the warriors hiding beneath the wall.

“There’s Hell Ghost Demon among the Four Demon Lords. She was a believer responsible for intelligence in the Demonic Cult, and the Soul Repentance Troop he leads is a spy unit that dominated the martial world. Mr. Kim Yul. Please lead them.”

“...Is this a suitable position for me?”

“You’re skilled at recording and analyzing information.”

I tapped the notebook in Kim Yul's left hand.

The old notebook trembled.

“From now on, don’t write in that notebook about people you must kill, people who killed you, or things you must discard.”

"....."

“Only write for us, for the family. Let that notebook become the Old Records of our family. Mr. Kim Yul. Please prove us with your pen and your words.”

Then.

“I will be very happy.”

Kim Yul fell silent.

Enough time for the split clouds to scatter and vanish passed.

Bathed in the faint moonlight, Kim Yul, in the courtyard of a hanok where he merely endured time having missed the chance to die, in a remote corner of his birth and death hometown, on the parched ground--- knelt on one knee.

“I understand.”

Bowing his head to me.

“I will place my life in your dream.”

And Kim Yul swore.

“My Family Head.”



# Chapter 240: We were sitting on an Old City's Wooden Floor (1)

---

Dawn broke.

The color of dawn seeped slowly into Kim Yul's silver hair. As Kim Yul was kneeling before me, I had the luxury of looking down at the dawn rather than up. Yes, the dawn was beneath my feet.

[Your existence becomes better defined.]

It was around that time when the voice of the Tower reached me.

[Hunter Kim Gong-Ja is leveling up.]

As dawn gloriously painted the sky, the Tower once again affirmed my qualifications.

It was expected, in a way.

I had returned Ester's physical body, restored the bodies of the Demonic Cult elites, granted life to Silvia Evanair, and finally embraced Kim Yul's life. I became as distinct as their greed, desires, hopes, and wishes.

Heavier.

I had expanded.

[Your skill slots have expanded.]

[You are now an A-Rank hunter.]

[May fortune be with you.]

Yes, God.

To the God who wishes to be a mother to all who are born into this world.

Jaa Soo-Jeong. Even if those whom you consider your sons and daughters turn their nails against you, you would merely be sad, slowly accepting it as your own fault.

I think.

That's sad.

“I don’t need to do that!”

Gripping the hilt of my sword, I looked up at the sky.

I used to worry if the Tower would listen to someone like me. But not anymore. Every word I speak, every word I utter, will reach the Tower – and reach Jaa Soo-Jeong’s ears.

Because that's the existence I've become.

“I’ll go there and smash everything! Be it the Golden Rule,

kingdoms, whatever, I'll go and obliterate them! I'll show you that you're wrong, much happier, with happy people!"

My declaration undoubtedly reached the Tower.

And thus, a response came.

[May fortune be with you.]

On this day.

I declared war on the Tower.

---

"From now on, we are one family."

I sat on the wooden-floor.

Only Raviel and I were seated on the floor, making it clear who deserved the throne.

“Our family name shall be the King of Death Family.”

Hundreds of humans knelt on one knee in the courtyard. All of them were my retainers. If there wasn't enough space in the courtyard, they would climb the walls, and if the walls were too narrow, they would even climb the old trees to submit to me.

At least a thousand.

A sufficient force to form a family.

“I am the Family Head of this family, and my spouse, Raviel Ivansia is...”

“I too am the Family Head of a great family.”

Raviel lightly tapped the wooden-floor with the side of her fan.

“The Family Head of the King of Death Family is the consort of the Ivansia family. Thus, the matriarch of the Ivansia family becoming the matriarch of the King of Death Family is logical. These retainers gathered here are all collected by the noble. It

would be unseemly for me to interfere just because I'm the noble's spouse."

Raviel smiled.

"In this world's language, Ivansia translates to Silver Heart. It would be fitting to call my family Silver Heart Family. Someday, when the King of Death Family and Silver Heart Family fully merge, then— as the Death Heart Family, we will conquer the Tower."

That's right.

When that time comes, Raviel and I will lead our family as co-Family Heads.

"Silvia Evanair."

At the call of her name, one of the lacking retainers in the courtyard twitched. She was a blonde noble lady, also a powerful apostle of a constellation.

"Yes, yes! Family Head!"

“From now on, you are the steward of the King of Death Family. Take care of what our family eats, sleeps, and wears. Use the warriors from the Four Demon Lords who have free time each day as servants. I entrust the family's livelihood to you.”

Silvia Evanair broke into a sweat.

“...It all seems like chores and menial tasks?”

“You haven't forgotten what you said yourself, have you?”

Silvia's expression hardened.

“The steward is the one who serves the Family Head most closely. If you want to be like me, if you want to learn to accept others, then watch over me from my side. That's the opportunity I'm giving you.”

“I am...”

“If it's too hard, you can quit.”

I spoke sincerely.

“But proving your heart and life can only be done through your actions. Think. Decide. If you've decided, then fight. If you've fought, win. That's what your butler would want.”

“Damn it...”

Thus, our family gained a steward who always muttered, "Damn it", "Shit", "Fuck". Despite the bright blonde hair, her face was always gloomy. Curses leaked every time she opened her mouth, which would now become the daily life of "Steward Silvia Evanair."

“Ester.”

“Yes, Family Head.”

Ester stood up straight when I called.

Unlike Silvia's disgraceful behavior, Ester's expression was serene and her presence dignified. The lingering shadow of a Demon King who once commanded hundreds of thousands of monsters and devastated continents was still present in her



breath.

“Please give me your orders.”

“As my eldest daughter, in times of need, you will be the successor to lead the family in my stead.”

"....."

A faint crack appeared on Ester's tranquil face.

“Times of need... That’s disrespectful. You will never die...”

“I have my ways, of course. The family won’t be in crisis just because I lose a life or two. But I can’t ignore the possibility of times of need. What if I am cursed, unable to move not just my limbs but even my teeth, sealed tightly in a vast, sturdy safe?”

"....."

“Of course, even in that state, I can use [Ghoul Reincarnation]. But what if someone turns me into a

vegetative state?"

"Father..."

"I'm not invincible, Ester. As we climb the Tower, our enemies will get stronger. We must always consider the worst-case scenario, and if it really happens, I want you to lead the family."

"....."

Ester closed her eyes.

She breathed quietly, her exhaled breath carrying a slightly stronger scent of desolate ruins than before.

"Yes."

Ester reopened her eyes, now solemn.

She held the sword with both hands, touching her forehead to the crossguard.

“I, Ester, will become the successor of the King of Death Family.”

I nodded.

“Good.”

We may still be immature as parent and child.

But as [Family Head] and [Successor], we can certainly do well.

‘There’s no need to rush.’

We can start from here.

Ordinary people first become parents and children, then the head and successor of the family, but that's only for those who have enjoyed ordinary fortunes.

Scattered across this and other worlds, having met each other by chance, we have no choice but to become a family in

reverse, backwards.

That's enough.

"As a successor, you will be treated as such, but ordinarily, you will serve as an advisor, aiding me."

"Advisor, you say..."

"As the name suggests, it's a position where you'll provide me counsel. Ester, you once led armies, toppling kingdoms, sanctuaries, and empires across continents. Your military acumen and strategic sense are incomparable to mine."

I'm gradually realizing this as we ascend the Tower.

'The stages where a hunter can wreak havoc alone are diminishing.'

The size of the forces appearing as enemies in each stage is growing.

I managed to clear [The Hellfire Mansion] somehow on my own.

But starting from the tragedy of [Aegim Continent], it became significantly more challenging.

Originally, that stage required top hunters to take roles such as generals, knight commanders, and prime ministers, working together to uplift a crumbling empire, didn't it?

'I just exploited a loophole in the stage.'

A solo play that shouldn't have been allowed.

I made it happen through actions akin to cheats.

'Even in the Revelations of the Great Library, [team play] was already enforced. Entering the [Race War], it even reached the point where I was leading an entire race.'

This.

What does this series of events signify?

'The Tower is ordering us to form a [force].'

I narrowed my eyes.

'The Tower never arranges stages without meaning. No, Jaa Soo-Jeong never acts without purpose. This is advice. A warning.'

If we don't build a force in advance.

The stages beyond the 50th floor will be brutally difficult.

'Currently, in our Tower, only I am aware of this warning.'

Because I alone have faced Jaa Soo-Jeong directly.

Only I know what kind of person the owner of the Tower is, what she thinks, and what she desires.

And this will definitely serve as a massive advantage in conquering the Tower in the future.

'We need to grow our force.'

Fortunately, I have people around me.

A lot of them.

Not just a large gathering, but people who can mean a little more to each other.

'My fortune.'

I am deeply grateful for this fact.

'We are strong.'

I looked around the courtyard.

[The Warriors of the Demonic Cult] bowing to me.

[The Lieutenants Four Demon Lords] leading the warriors.

[The Chief Warrior Uburka] commanding the Four Demon Lords.

[The Steward Silvia Evanair] to support and back them up.

[Kim Yul, the Shadow of the family] organizing an intelligence unit.

[Ester, the Advisor] who will give me strategic advice.

I observed each of them, exchanged glances and wills. Those who shared death with me, those who declared to live together, were here.

'We are strong, and we will become stronger.'

I spoke to Ester.



“This father is skilled at gathering and uniting people. I can proudly claim competence in that regard. Whether someone is living with a wound, I can see it, and if I can't, I will know it in death.”

"....."

“In doing so, I share people and their wounds. We become a family through sharing. If we try harder, we might become a family. However, I'm still inexperienced and lacking in how to manage this gathered [force]. Very much so.”

I smiled.

“I need your help and advice, Ester.”

"....."

“The history where you, as a Demon King, annihilated the continent has disappeared because of me. But that's not a meaningless trauma.”

Precisely.

“It can be made not to be.”

I gestured to Ester.

She approached me with cautious steps.

I took her hand, sat her next to me on the wooden-floor, and made her face the same direction as me.

“Look.”

I shared the same view with her.

“The wounds you received while living a traumatic life, those aren't just wounds; now they'll protect our family. My family. Your family. And our family.”

"....."

“No one can burn down our family.”

I spoke to the child who became my daughter today.

And then, I conveyed the words I had always wanted to tell her.

“With what you gained while destroying the world, now protect your world.”

Dawn broke.

As the crystalline blue began to color the world, the blue paint momentarily lingered on Ester's face.

"....."

Ester nodded slightly.

“Yes.”

She nodded once more.

“I will protect it.”

Ester raised her left hand.

Then, grabbing the skull mask that had always covered half her face, she ripped it off and casually threw it towards the ground of the courtyard.

The ancient bone crumbled into dust the moment it touched the ground.

“I will protect our world.”

Ester turned to look at me.

Her complete face, seen for the first time since becoming Preta.

“Family Head.”

Tears of dew that had accumulated over the long night were on her face.

Now that it was dawn, it wasn't strange for dew to form on things born like leaves in this world.

"It's my honor to be your advisor."

So it wasn't unusual for Ester to smile brightly either.

"....."

Without a word, I nodded and finally stood up from the wooden-floor.

I looked up at the sky, turning from glassy to blue, and shouted.

"It's time."

The sky was quiet.

"The holiday is over. Thanks to your unkind kindness, I've seen and experienced a lot. But once again, what I saw made me stronger instead of weaker, what I experienced forged me

instead of burning me.”

The sky distorted.

“Now,”

A ray of light descended from the sky.

“Please send us to the next floor.”

Then, a voice echoed from the sky.

[The Constellation 'The Princess Who Strolls Through  
Mirages' manifests.]

# Chapter 241: We were sitting on an Old City's Wooden Floor (2)

---

[The Constellation 'The Princess Who Strolls Through  
Mirages' manifests.]

The light descending from the sky suddenly fragmented into  
countless petals.

Countless petals, petals, petals...

The gleaming white petals cascaded down into the  
courtyard. They seemed like transparent butterflies fluttering  
beautifully, for these petals had only color, lacking any outline  
or scent.

"Eeeum! Hello!"

Amidst the dance of petals, one of the Tower's pillars energetically stretched.

"It's been a while! Everyone!"

The pillar, 'The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages', was a blonde lady.

The Princess stepped down from the sky to the ground, stepping on the petals, as if descending a staircase. We watched from the courtyard as a goddess descended to this land in a dance-like manner.

"Did everyone have a good time? Were you satisfied with the vacation I sent you on?"

Thud.

Finally, the Princess's foot crushed the last petal, firmly planting her foot on the ground. The crushed petal turned into white dust and gently disappeared somewhere.

"Ah, King of Death. Seeing you with your beloved lover and adored son, it's truly heartwarming."



The Princess looked around. Those who once bore the burden of being ghouls stood upright, alive and in flesh, surrounding us.

"Mmm."

It seemed like she realized something.

Then, she immediately turned and looked straight at me.

"Indeed. It looks like you had quite an extraordinary holiday, King of Death."

"Your vacation was highly appreciated, Princess."

"Yep. I sent you all here for a rest. But what's this? Far from a holiday, it seems you've been up to unimaginable things, King of Death. Why have these people regained their physical bodies? Why have they resurrected in their prime?"

"I did what I always do."

I opened my palm.

"Got a good skill, and put it to good use."

As the skill opened, a golden card appeared. Recognizing the identity of the golden card, the Princess furrowed her brows.

"[The Earth Bone Dragon's Skull]...? Wait, this is..."

"Yes. It's a skill possessed by your mother."

"....."

"I know you are the first daughter of the Tower Master. And I also know that the Tower Master is named Jaa Soo-Jeong."

The Princess's face hardened.

As I continued, the atmosphere around grew darker.

"Hmmm," the Princess tilted her head and looked up at me.

"That's quite a lot you've come to know, King of Death."

"Yes."

"Amazing. Incredible. Yep, I mean it sincerely. I'm genuinely praising you. Because, copying mom's skill means you died once at her hands--- then, you must have seen it?"

The Princess gently grabbed my forearm.

And leaning against my upper body like a snake, she whispered softly in my ear.

"Mom's trauma."

"....."

"How far did you see?"

Only then did I realize how much the Tower Master and the Princess resembled each other. Both had platinum blonde hair that could make actual platinum jealous. They even shared the habit of whispering secrets into one's ear.

"I fell right in the middle of a noble council attended by the Tower Master."

"Ah-ha. Hmm, ah-ha. And?"

"I came to understand how corrupt the world where the Tower Master lived was. And how Jaa Soo-Jeong, as a Viscount, saved it. That she rose above a Duke as well."

"Is that all?"

"I also learned about the Golden Rule."

The Princess clamped her mouth shut.

[‘The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages’ is shocked.]

Perhaps she didn't expect me to break through that far.

"I saw the Tower Master's will there. The Tower master intends to bear all the wounds occurring in this world."

"It's not a vain statement. Mom truly aims to create such a world."

The Princess's voice was weak.

"A world where everyone only blames a single person, where there are no 'people born wrong'. A world where only mom is the 'one born wrong'."

Her eyes seemed to look somewhere beyond this place.

"In the old days when the light of reason was extinguished, people were engulfed in all sorts of fears. To alleviate these fears, they created a scapegoat, shifting all sins and pain onto it, like the snail empire created by the Heretic Inquisitor."

It's all because of you.

"The world of primitive religions created to appease people's feelings overlaps with mom's world, which seeks to encapsulate logical conclusions about cause and effect."

It's all because of me.

"Interesting, isn't it?"

But the Princess saying this didn't seem to find it enjoyable at all.

However, she soon changed the atmosphere, altering the tone of her voice.

"Anyway, to have gone that far and still return to the present. King of Death, you're tougher than I thought. I don't usually give compliments, but this deserves one. You're incredible."

The Princess clapped her hands with an 'Oh!' sound.

[‘The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages’ praises you.]

Hmm.

"I'm always open to your compliments. But first, you should send us to the next stage. The vacation turned out to be longer than expected. Think of the comrades waiting above."

"Yeah, I've already taken care of that, so don't worry. Got it."

The Princess looked around.

"Then let's tear it up. Raviel should be sent to the world where Sormewin Academy is. Constellation Killer should be dropped off at Café Planetarium, right? Hmm, the 999 believers are a problem. You guys should train in the martial realm for a while..."

"Princess."

"There's no need for that."

I grabbed the Princess's hand.

"Everyone gathered here, excluding Raviel, will be deployed for the stage conquest."

"Hoong...?"

The Princess crossed her arms.

"What do you mean? From the 30th floor to the 40th, only top-tier warriors can enter. Your warriors are strong, but their rankings haven't been determined yet."

"No."

I still held onto the Princess's wrist.

"All of them will ascend this stage with me."

"What?"

"This stage, and the next one, and even the one after that. Until the end of the Tower is in sight, they will move with me."



Words against the rules.

Actions the Tower would not allow.

I casually stated that it was [okay].

"Hmmm."

The Princess grinned.

"How so? No, how can you? What authority do you have?"

"I have no authority. But as I said when we first met, all I have is a skill."

I showed the [Earth Bone Dragon's Skull] card.

"All of them are tied to my skill [Earth Bone Dragon's Skull]."

"Yes. And?"

"I have used [Ghoul Reincarnation] in the Apocalypse where the number of entrants was already limited."

I said emphatically.

"Meaning, adding personnel through a skill does not violate the Tower's rules."

"Ha. So?"

"It's the same this time. I possess [Earth Bone Dragon's Skull], and about a thousand of my family members are bound to it. Therefore, it's only proper to interpret that my family's force of a thousand is an extension of me."

"Still playing with the rules, our King of Death."

The Princess smiled thinly.

"But ghouls were summons, right? These are living humans. So, King of Death, do you want to treat them as your summons? Or are you suggesting there's an issue with interpretation and you want to request another pillar meeting?"

The Princess was definitely the daughter of the Tower Master. The smile that appeared around her spinning mouth reminded me of snake scales.

"Just saying, the chances of getting support in a pillar meeting again aren't high. Especially if it's revealed that you've got mom's skill."

"....."

"You saw it at the kingdom's noble council, right? There are as many who worship mom as those who oppose her. And naturally, such people are among the pillars too. King of Death, just the fact that you have mom's skill will make a tremendous number of them---"

"Princess."

I interrupted her.

I tilted my head at the Princess.

"Princess. What does [skill] mean to you?"

"Hmmm," the Princess uttered and immediately responded without hesitation.

"Preserved techniques. Tools to compete and win against others. Means to seize advantageous positions."

"No."

I shook my head.

"At first, I thought so too, but it's not the case."

"Hmm, then?"

"Skills, without exception, all embody someone's [life] who once lived in another world."

Jaa Soo-Jeong had told me this.

Skills were a reflection of someone's abilities or someone's life.

In a way, skills were self-portraits, and when we use a skill, we're not just attacking someone, but at the same time, we're proving the existence of someone who once lived in this world long ago.

"Just think about the [Puppeteer's Parade] card."

A skill once possessed by the Constellation Killer.

Though not in my possession, I vividly remember the card's description.

I manipulated Aura to create an exact replica of the card with the same words in the air.

+

[Puppeteer's Parade]

Rank: S

Effect: There once lived an old puppeteer in a world. The

puppeteer feared being loved by someone. But he was not strong enough to endure eternal solitude.

"Let's create another me." The puppeteer thought. "Let the other me be loved. Let it live. With people, among people. And if it gets hurt--- let's throw it away." The puppeteer whispered. "Erase it forever."

Countless puppets lived.

Countless puppets were discarded.

This skill is a sorcery for the weak. The right to choose memories to keep and discard. You can create 13 puppets with the same appearance and abilities as you. When a puppet dies, another wakes up. Broken puppets can be repaired.

Granting you a replicated immortality. An assembled eternity.

\*However, memories are not shared between puppets.

"Even [Goblin High Society] contains the same principle."

+

[Goblin High Society]

Rank: F

Effect: The Great Goblin pondered deeply. 'Our goblin culture is too lowly. Every language ending in Kerk or Keruk. How can I, the boss, shine with such a language!' Then, a stroke of genius hit him. 'That's it! From now on, I will not say Keruk, but Gorr. Gorr! A pronunciation befitting my refined sensibilities.'

\*However, this causes internal conflict within the tribe.

\*Skill copied from the monster Great Goblin King.

+

"If skills were merely tools and only about functionality, why

would they have such detailed descriptions?"

"That's because, King of Death, in card games, flavor texts add depth to the setting. In reality, they're just for overpowering others."

"No."

I interrupted the Princess, lifting the card.

"Skills aren't just for overpowering others."

The card in my hand was [Sword Constellation].

A card I obtained in my naive early days.

"Rather, it's a system for connecting people with each other."

And it was a skill that left a profound impact on me.



"Opening Skill Card."

Words emerged from the card I held.

+

[Sword Constellation]

Rank: A+

Effect: From another world, he cleared his world's tower up to floor 99 but failed on the 100th. Unsatisfied, he was unable to give up on his earthly desires, and has become a spirit.

He cannot physically affect anything in this world, but is able to communicate with the holder of this skill.

Be awestruck by his skill and experience, and ask him for guidance!

\*Only the holder of this skill is able to feel his presence.

\*Skill copied from Marcus Calenbury.

+

The Guardian Spirit, with the same demeanor from his days dominating the martial realm, stood right behind me, arms crossed.

"This is the true intent of skills."

I said.

"Connecting people with people. Connecting worlds with worlds. The fact that the skill I used today was once a life-long technique mastered by an old master long ago. Through skills, we feel humanity and connect with each other."

That's...

"Isn't that what your mother, the owner of this tower, desires?"

"....."

The Princess fell silent.

Deeply silent.

Her lips quivered momentarily, but then closed again, and quivered once more.

"Really,"

Her words came sporadically, spaced out over a long time.

"I can't argue with words."

Silence fell.

"So, King of Death. Do you want to go up together?"

"Yes. Please."

"Hoo."

The Princess sighed deeply.

[‘The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages’ shakes her head in disbelief.]

Flapping her sleeves, the Princess shouted to those around.

"All of you will be transported to the 36th floor! If you have anything to pack, do it now! I won't give you much time, gather within 2 minutes! Hurry! Quickly! I'm a busy person!"

Clatter, clatter, clatter.

The warriors, who had been strictly aligned, started to move. They tried to move as carefully as possible, but the old hanok trembled as if struck by an earthquake.

"Huh."

I was astounded.

"Hey! Be careful! If it gets damaged..."

"It's okay."

The homeowner, Jaa Soo-Jeong, spoke plainly.

"They're just things I never use. If they get damaged, it means they carry the memory of your visit. That's not bad."

"....."

I took a deep breath.

Then, to the avatar of the god, to the offering doomed to live the most unfortunate life, to the incarnation existing only as a mother, to Jaa Soo-Jeong of class 3-A of Shinseo Middle School, I asked.

"Won't you come with us?"

"No."

The question was long, but the answer was short.

Jaa Soo-Jeong bowed her head.

"I'm sorry. If I leave, there will be no one to care for the rabbits at school."

"....."

"There are people who will be sad if I disappear. Not many, but they are definitely there. Now on a summer vacation, Mr. Baek, Ms. Nyeong Hyang, my senior, and Mr. Do Yeon. I think they will be very lonely if I disappear. So I'm sorry, but I can't accept your offer, Mr. Gong-Ja."

Probably.

If I asked for help here, saying [please help me].

Jaa Soo-Jeong would follow me without a moment's hesitation.

She was a god, a fragment of a god.

Intending to exist to bear everyone's wounds.

But.

"...Yes."

I am not climbing the tower to prove the omnipotence of god.

"To create a world where we don't need gods, I climb the tower."

To show that we can live happily without seeking help from gods.

"Yes."

To prove she wasn't born wrong.

"Go safely, Mr. Gong-Ja."

Jaa Soo-Jeong prayed for me.

And at that moment, a pure white light enveloped the old hanok.

[The 36th floor is opening.]

[To those ascending the tower.]

Just before being completely enveloped in light.

Worried about Jaa Soo-Jeong, who was near me, I turned around and saw an unexpected sight.

Jaa Soo-Jeong was smiling brightly. Her hands gently clasped in prayer, surrounded by a white light, making her appear not as a human praying to a god, but as a god praying for humans.

She whispered softly, her lips barely moving.



[May fortune be with you.]

And the light embraced our family.

# Chapter 242: We were sitting on an Old City's Wooden Floor (3)

---

When I opened my eyes again, I realized the transfer was complete.

A white space.

No horizon, mountains, rivers, or vegetation. Just a 3D space that seemed like a blank canvas, where we stood.

A stopover between stages.

We had arrived at a [Temporary Base] to prepare for the next raid.

‘It’s been quite a while since I’ve been here.’

It was too barren to feel nostalgic.

“What is this place exactly...”

“Curious?”

Tap.

[The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages], who had been transported with us, lightly stepped on the ground. The Princess smiled broadly and turned to face me.

“No, just a bit concerned.”

“This is one of the worlds created by mother in the cycle of life. Wow! I just said that sentence and no noise was made!”

Mid-sentence, the Princess suddenly bounced up and down excitedly, as if something incredibly joyful had happened.

“Listen! Terms like Mula-Gagamia or Gesh-ve-Nail, which are normally translated into the language of the main world due to security levels, are not translated here. It's amazing!”

[The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages praises your security level.]

The Princess continued to exclaim how amazing it was.

The fact that security levels do not apply to me was that exceptional.

“If it's the language of the main world, then it's the world where Jaa Soo-Jeong lived.”

“Yes!”

The Princess happily confirmed.

“The tower translates all languages except the main world's. Mr. Gong-Ja, you've been to the main world through trauma, right? Could you understand the kingdom's language?”

“Yes, I understood it from the beginning. However...”

A possibility crossed my mind.

“When I was there, I was possessed by Baron Gu Won-Ha. Since the Baron was learning the kingdom's language, it would make sense that I could hear and speak it without issues while possessing his body.”

“Hmm, I see.”

The Princess hummed thoughtfully after hearing my explanation.

Then she stepped a bit closer, looking up at my face.

It was a bit overwhelming.

“What is it?”

“To think that Baron Gu Won-Ha and King of Death...  
Hmm...”

“Is there something we have in common?”

“No, not at all!”

The Princess quickly straightened up and waved her hands.

“Looking at life, there’s not even a speck of commonality. If you two were to meet, you’d become enemies in less than three seconds.”

“That bad, huh...”

“Yes, yes. It’s that incompatible in temperament and style. But...”

The Princess waved her hand in the air.

Ssshhh.

White petals flowed from nowhere, swirling around her hand.

“Let's say there's an innocent child and a separate world.”

It was mystical. In a world of blank canvas with only white petals fluttering, the space suddenly transformed into a sacred temple where life sang divinely.

“But to save this child, you have to destroy the entire world. Conversely, to keep the world intact, the child must inevitably die.”

“...An extreme version of the world of The Immortal Missionary of Happiness?”

“Yes, yes. You’ve already passed through such a world. But you made that choice because you had the ‘power’ to overturn that world.”

That's right.

If I didn't have my skills, choosing such an option would have been impossible.

“If you didn't have such power and could only choose one of the two options, what would you pick, Mr. Gong-Ja? Would

you save the child or maintain the world?”

Hmm.

I crossed my arms.

“I would save the child.”

“That was quick. Why?”

“Well, if a world can only be maintained by such means, it's not a proper world to begin with. So the child should be saved.”

“Ahaha.”

The Princess chuckled softly. A laugh mixed with amusement and understanding.

“Right. Right. Such a world has little value. The person you were possessed by thought the same.”



“...Baron Gu Won-Ha?”

"Yes."

The Princess nodded.

“She loves mom very much. No, it's more like worship than love? Well, let's say it's the heart of a priest who wants to monopolize a god.”

"....."

“You better be careful, King of Death.”

The Princess grabbed my shoulder.

Turning around, I saw nearly a thousand family members looking at me.

“Right now, you've just formed a family. It must be good. Overflowing with belief. Feeling like you can do anything, always rallying together.”

[The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages whispers softly.]

“But they are a group united by looking at you.”

A group united by looking at me.

“Without you, without your presence, they have no reason to be one.”

“Do you understand?”

The Princess sneakily approached from behind, resting her hand on my shoulder and whispering.

“The followers of the Demonic Cult cannot accept Ester, who mercilessly slaughtered their people. The Constellation Killer, who killed constellations, cannot accept your son, Uburka. These people have lived different lives in different worlds. They are inherently not meant to mix.”

Her whisper was like the hissing of a snake.

“And that’s not the end, right?”

"....."

“There are others you have put off meeting, waiting for the right moment. In the future, there are those you intend to embrace, right?”

That's right.

“As your family grows, King of Death. Such disharmony will only increase. And the moment—”

You disappear or become even slightly endangered—.

The Princess clasped and then spread her hands.

Fwoosh.

A playful explosion sound came from her mouth, and she chuckled amusingly.

“Climbing the tower? Helping the weak? Allowing everyone to carry their own wounds, creating a world where no one is forced to sacrifice? Nice story, but, King of Death. If you die here, or, really get seriously hurt.... For those children, it becomes [a story that doesn't matter at all].”

“They will all scramble for you, disregarding the world. The scale will break, and the world will never outweigh you.”

[The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages issues a serious warning.]

“Don't die, King of Death.”

"....."

“Don't get hurt. Don't get kidnapped. Don't get tortured. Don't sacrifice yourself for anything. The more blood you shed, the more their hearts will be dyed red for you.”

The daughter of the god, either with a frivolous smile or a solemn voice, prophesied to me in the false temple of the white world.

“Be happy.”

"....."

“You must be happy so that other family members can be happy. As much as possible, earnestly. Not just emotionally happy, but clearly understanding why we're doing this, what incredible things will happen if we succeed. Be happy like that.”

I...

Nodded.

“Yes.”

“Hmm. Another quick answer. Are you sure about your response?”

“When others are happy, I am happy.”

I spoke with emphasis.

“As long as I fight for someone, as long as the fight continues, my happiness will not end.”

“Hmm.”

The Princess smiled.

Then she turned around and clasped my hands.

“Take good care of mom.”

As our hands met, bright light shone through the gap.

At the same time, I flinched.

A tremor came from the Princess's hand. It was a tension that did not match the Princess who had been smiling leisurely throughout. I inadvertently raised my head to look at her face.

“...Princess?”

“Please. I beg of you.”

The daughter of the god, with tears streaming down, pleaded.

“Save mom...”

.....

“There are too many unhappy lives. Lives that blame mother, lives she must be responsible for, too much suffering...”

“Princess.”

“Despite there being so many already, every second more are added than before.”

That would be the case.

I thought of the worlds I had passed through during my mission.

I wondered how many among the casualties of the Demon King's attack in the world of the Aegim Empire were the tower master. In the martial world where my master lived, I wondered how many among the nameless, starved zombies were the tower master. How many were there in the world of The Immortal Missionary of Happiness?

In the snail empire created by the Heretic Inquisitor, how many among those who were discriminated against and abused to death were the tower master?

How many in the world where I lived?

“Please.”

The daughter of the god who suffered, wept because she had such a god for a mother.

“Please, that’s the only thing I’m asking from you.”

And then.

At that moment, the voice announcing stage entry echoed in the space.



[The 36th floor has been opened.]

[To those climbing the tower.]

[May fortune be with you.]

I gently stroked the little princess's shoulder.

“Okay.”

I braced myself and nodded.

“I’ll save her.”

The distant 100th floor of the tower.

But once there, surely, something can be done.

“It’ll be tough, but wait for me.”

If the god saves the worlds of all things.

We will save that god.

Simple, clear, and utterly noble.

“We are strong.”

[You are being forcibly transferred to the 36th floor!]

As I continued to comfort the still crying princess, I looked ahead. A tide of light was sweeping from the infinite canvas.

It was already a silent explosion of light.

The wave made of light easily swallowed me, Kim Yul, and Silvia Evanair, and swept away all 1000 family members at once.

In the last moment, I smiled for the princess who would be left alone.

---

And then we were floating above a plain.

It wasn't the first time floating like ghosts, but it certainly felt novel with so many people – a thousand family members.

‘If someone saw us, they might think it's the end of the world.’

I looked around.

Soon, groups as large as ours came into view.

On both sides of the vast plain.

Two armies under different banners were fighting.

-Wooahhh! Kill them!

-Don't back down! Kill! Kill them!

One side was the army of the Ghost Tribe.

Led by the 6th Rank Hunter, Viper.

The Ghost Tribe members were larger than other tribes, with two horns growing on their heads. Wearing loose armor, they wielded swords as large as their own bodies.

The other side was the army of the Earth Spirit Tribe.

The tribe I lead.

Having not grown horns like the Ghost Tribe, they didn't look much different.

-Kwaahhh!

-Horn-heads! Let's settle this!

-Archers! Fire the arrows!

-Don't let your guard down! Use the enemy's corpses as shields against their arrows!

A brutal battlefield.

About 20,000 from both armies were engaged in a deadly battle.

'Hmm.'

I felt a momentary surge of emotion.

'Among them, how many lives are unfairly lost, how many...'

The scene was overwhelming, but I steadied my heart.

Not getting swept up by emotions, not turning away, but facing everything head-on, I stood firm.

As a result.

I saw [it].

“Nyahaha-!!”

On the frontline of the Ghost Tribe army. A red-haired Ghost Tribe swordswoman was there.

Wielding dual swords and wearing a robe-like garment, her lively appearance attracted everyone's attention.

In fact, she was indeed attracting attention.

-Wow! It's the Sword Beauty!

-I always believed in you, damn it...!

The Ghost Tribe cheered.

Comparing their rugged faces to hers, well... she seemed out of place.

Hmm.

But the problem is....

“Daddy.”

Uburka poked my shoulder.

“Yeah.”

“About that... is that by any chance...”

"Hmm..."

I averted my gaze. I had just decided to face everything head-on, but in this situation, I wanted to look away.

However, Kim Yul mercilessly muttered beside me.

“That's a [Possessed Body].”

“Don’t say it...”

“I’m currently a ‘player’, akin to a ghost. Is it because of that? I can see the image of a middle-aged man possessed in the body of that woman rampaging on the battlefield—”

“Ugh! Don’t talk about it!”

That's right!

Behind the Ghost Tribe swordswoman, the figure of Viper was visible!

In other words, it was Viper!

“Sir.”

Silvia tugged at my sleeve.

“Why....”



“That’s... not the only one...”

“Not the only one?”

“There, over there. No, don’t look away. Look there. Yes, right there.”

Silvia forcibly turned my head to look in that direction.

It was also one of the frontlines of the Ghost Tribe army.

“Well, can't be helped. I'll have to step in.”

A slim Ghost Tribe boy, unlike other bulky Ghost Tribe members, also holding dual swords, stepped forward.

"....."

And behind him, of course, was the afterimage of Viper.

In other words, it was also Viper.

“Ahaha! It seems we must step in after all!”

Another Ghost Tribe member, a small girl with twin tails and a strange speech pattern, also holding dual swords, stepped forward.

Of course, she too was Viper.

“Well, it’s our duty, isn’t it?”

A sharp-faced Ghost Tribe youth, who could cut a cake cleanly with just his facial outline, muttered dully while holding a scythe.

Naturally, he was Viper.

"Hmm."

Seven Ghost Tribe members appeared from all directions, each with their own appearance.

“This battlefield is for us, the 'Seven Ghost Heroes'.”

In other words, seven Vipers spoke simultaneously.

I...

+

[Multiple Possession Reincarnation]

Rank: SSS

Effect: You possess the individuals you choose. If the possessed individual dies, you return to your original spirit.

Cost: Priceless (obtained through special means)

\*However, you can only possess them within 1 minute of their death.

+

I couldn't help but shout.

“What are you doing over there—!?”

# Chapter 243: Era of the Heroes (1)

---

The battlefield was in chaos, swarmed with soldiers.

Whether they were the seven heroes of the Ghost Tribe or Viper's seven avatars, the addition of Viper's reinforcements quickly began to overwhelm the Earth Spirit Tribe's forces.

If left unchecked, the Earth Spirit Tribe would face annihilation. Viper, funny old man or not, is powerful! And there were seven of him leading the army.

"Damn it!"

I used aerial stepping techniques to quickly cross the battlefield. I heard Ester and Uburka calling me from behind.

“Family Head!”

“Daddy, Family Head!”

“You two wait here. No, Warrior Uburka! Keep communicating via telepathy with me and head to that mountaintop!”

In an instant, the distance between me and the battlefield closed. Uburka sent his voice infused with aura to me, precise and refined enough for only me to hear.

『The mountaintop? Why suddenly?』

『There's something you need to do there. I'll tell you when and what to do later, for now, just go to the mountaintop and wait!』

『Ugh. Daddy, no, Family Head, is having one of his strange ideas again...!』

Tat, tat!

I stepped through the air and surged into the heart of the battlefield.

If others could see me, there would be astonishment and admiration everywhere. But right now, I am no different from a ghost. Only [players] can recognize me.

And on this battlefield, apart from our family members, Viper was the only player.

“Nyahaha-!”

At the frontline, a warrior laughed cheerfully while swinging dual swords.

“So the Earth Spirit Tribe is the strongest in the world? All talk! Can't even catch one of me! Bring it on! I am one of the Ghost Tribe's seven heroes, the Sword Beauty! Come and die more!”

With red hair fluttering, the warrior crossed swords. Swish! The Earth Spirit Tribe warrior's head was easily sliced off by the crossing blades. The life I nurtured and cared for, my children, was taken.

“This...!”

I burst with rage and blocked the path of the red-haired warrior.

“What in the world are you doing!”

“Huh?”

The warrior, who had been smirking and strutting around the battlefield, widened their eyes.

Behind them, like the guardian spirit attached to me, was Viper’s fluid form, arms crossed.

“Oh. What's this? The King of Death? You’re finally here?”

Viper recognized me immediately.

Not particularly happy to see me. Of course, it had been a long time for me, but for Viper, it had been just a few days since our last encounter.

“Finally here? Now’s not the time for such relaxed talk! Why



are you in the middle of the battlefield, swinging your sword!?"

"Hey, hey. Calm down. War can happen between tribes. I'm a god of the Ghost Tribe, so I can fight on their side. What's so serious about that?"

"That's..."

I was about to explode with indignation. However, the battle didn't pause for our conversation.

-Woahhhhh!

Seizing the opportunity of my sudden stop, a warrior from the Earth Spirit Tribe roared and lunged with a spear towards the Sword Beauty (Viper).

"Huh."

Of course, Viper wasn't someone to fall for such a trick. Lifting one of the dual swords, Viper threw it at the Earth Spirit Tribe member. Thwack! The blade precisely lodged in the warrior's forehead. The Earth Spirit Tribe member

collapsed to the ground, bleeding.

And my eyes turned.

"Celestial Martial Guild Leader!!"

"Ah, really. It's annoying. Hey! It's not like I want to be in this war!? If you're late, stay quiet like a latecomer!"

"Shut up and pull back your troops!"

"Ah why! This war was bound to happen! One side has to win overwhelmingly for less damage! And hey, the Ghost Tribe, Earth Spirit Tribe, whatever, are all mixed up now, how do you expect to retreat! Retreating now will only cause more deaths, idiot!"

Tch.

The Sword Beauty spat and strode away. Pulling the sword from the corpse's forehead, the Sword Beauty once again took a dual sword stance.

“Let's see how it ends!”

Damn it.

Though infuriating, Viper's words had a point. To pull back the armies now, I had to create a situation to allow it.

So, I decided to do just that.

『Chief Warrior!』

I turned back and shot a telepathic message.

Across the battlefield, a mountain ridge loomed over the plains, and from its highest peak, Uburka caught my telepathy.

『Do you hear me!』

『Ugor. Your words always reach me, like they could even in hell.』

『Chief Warrior, you're the only one among us with a [physical body] in this world!』

Uburka laughed heartily, being originally from this world.

『That's true, Ugor.』

『We need to stop the battle. You have to do it.』

『Starting or stopping a war, both are my specialties. But how?』

『Pull out the mountaintop!』

There was a brief silence.

Enhancing my vision with aura, I looked up and saw Uburka on the distant mountaintop, wearing a look of disbelief.

『Pull out the mountaintop? Are you sane?』

『Why. You can do it, can't you!』

『Well, I could, but...』

『Pull out the mountaintop and slam it down in the middle of the battlefield! Aim for a part without soldiers! If such an absurd sight unfolds, the soldiers will be shocked and stop moving for a while!』

『Ugor.』

Uburka laughed.

『Is this the first order you give as Family Head to your son evolving to a Chief Warrior?』

『That's right!』

『Great.』

Uburka stood up.

『I was worried becoming a Family Head might make things dull, but that was needless. Daddy was always psycho, and whether Daddy is called Family Head or a god, a psycho remains a psycho!』

Rumble...

A thunderous sound echoed from afar. Uburka's figure grew immensely, the aura contracting and amplifying, releasing a ferocious sound. However, ordinary soldiers didn't understand the source of this noise.

“Looks like it's going to rain on this damn day!”

“Stop that Sword Beauty or whatever! Woah! If we don't, we'll lose!”

The Earth Spirit Tribe soldiers rallied their ranks, shouting their battle cry.

Despite the seven Vipers disrupting the frontlines, the Earth Spirit Tribe didn't retreat easily. They were warriors. The children I, Kim Gong-Ja, raised with sweat and tears.

‘I’m proud of you, guys.’

I looked up at the mountaintop.

『 Chief Warrior! 』

『 Ugor. I’m ready, Family Head. 』

『 Do it! 』

At that moment, a tremendous noise, incomparable to before, shook the world.

The battlefield trembled slightly. The tall Ghost Tribe members and the large Earth Spirit Tribe warriors momentarily lost balance, looking confused.

A high-ranking Ghost Tribe commander shouted.

“Is, is it an earthquake!?”

“Stay in formation with your comrades! Don’t run! It’s just a small quake---.”

Sorry, but it wasn't an earthquake.

This was not a natural disaster, but a man-made one.

Boom...!!

The sound of something breaking echoed. Then, a few keen-eared soldiers momentarily turned their heads away from the battlefield, looking up at the mountain range bordering the plains.

『Ugor.』

There stood a giant straight out of legend.

A few soldiers pointed at the mountaintop, mouths agape in shock. What was happening? Why such a reaction? Questions spread among the soldiers, and as they followed their gaze, heads turned upwards.



『It's been a while since I've used aura like this.』

Giant Transformation.

A technique where a giant form is created with aura and controlled directly. Before meeting me and receiving my teachings, Uburka had dominated the Earth Spirit Tribe using such techniques.

Now, a spectacle once only known in legends unfolded in the midst of this battlefield.

“What the hell is that? What is that!?”

“Is that a fairy tribe's illusion? Did the fairy tribe send reinforcements to the Earth Spirit Tribe...”

“Crazy. Hey, are we all seeing this right now? Huh?”

The soldiers trembled, unable to grasp the reality before them. Just moments ago, they were proud warriors fighting the enemy.

But now, faced with a sight beyond their comprehension, they quickly forgot their duties. They stepped back, uncharacteristically for soldiers, trembling in fear like warriors faced with a myth.

For in the presence of myth, every human is but a mortal.

No longer needing telepathy, Uburka opened his mouth wide and shouted gloriously.

“Behold, my Family Head.”

The mythical giant, Uburka, grinned.

“I am your Chief Warrior! The sharpest sword of all you possess, the greatest flag among those you raise! My name is Uburka! The Chief Warrior of the King of Death Family! The first among your vassals to execute your command!”

Uburka, having [pulled out] the mountaintop and carried it on his back,

[The Constellation 'The Muscle Pig Dreaming of Parricide' roars!]

He jumped from the peak and, just like that---- right there---- in the middle of the battlefield, slammed the mountaintop upside down into the ground.

Kabooooom!!

A thunderous roar erupted. To call it merely a roar would be a gross understatement. The world shook.

Uburka, with the mountaintop on his back, slammed it into the ground. He jumped from an impossible height, crossing the absurd distance, planting the impossible into the earth. Indeed, Uburka was an unbelievable warrior.

Thump! Boom... Rumble! Boom!

The mountaintop, born to split the sky, now tore the earth asunder. The battlefield split open. The mountaintop cracked upon impact, creating another loud burst.

Crack!

Dust and dirt enveloped the battlefield. Screams erupted from every direction. Ghost Tribe, Earth Spirit Tribe,

regardless of tribe, soldiers were floored by the feat before them, dropping their shields and spears, trembling on the ground like caterpillars.

“Ugor.”

In the midst of the dust, Uburka sat cross-legged atop the inverted mountaintop, laughing heartily.

His level of Giant Transformation had decreased compared to before. But in this moment, when all humans were shrouded in dust clouds, only Uburka rose above the sea of dust, a clear answer to the question, 'Who is the madman in this area?'

“I am.”

Uburka spoke. The dust-covered mountaintop looked like an ancient, ruined temple pillar. Sitting atop this temple pillar, Uburka surveyed the ground below—soldiers trembling in fear.

“The 212th Chairman of the Fire River Council.”

Gasps of astonishment trickled in from here and there. Relishing in their shock, Uburka sniffed a couple of times and finally laughed, revealing his molars.

“And the Chief Warrior of the King of Death Family. I am Uburka.”

No one dared to question what this meant.

The privilege of questioning was reserved only for the strong, and there, no one existed who could dare to question Uburka.

“My Family Head desires a halt to the battle, and commanded me to stop it.”

Uburka surveyed the battlefield.

“If anyone has objections, come forward. I’ll deal with you.”

Silence then fell over the battlefield.

Occasionally, the unsplit ground would crack further, the mountaintop would split more, making creaking noises.

No living being dared to utter a sound.

".....Uh."

Only Viper, letting dual swords dangle, made a sound. The Sword Beauty, Viper's face, looked stunned, mouth agape.

But not at Uburka, at me.

"King of Death, what kind of crazy bastard have you picked up...?"

---

The legendary great warrior, brought to life in several Blood Fire Dramas, a hero of myths popular among all ages and genders.

Young Earth Spirit Tribe members looked up at him, shouting.

“Woah, it’s Uburka!”

“Uburka! The greatest lunatic among our ancestors has appeared!”

Uburka snorted. Seemingly pleased by his distant descendants' ecstatic reactions.

He opened his mouth wide, inhaling the winter air in one breath, then exhaled.

Wooooooooah!

The Lion's Roar.

From the torn jaw of the mountaintop, Uburka bared his chest, literally roaring out loud. The roar split the mountainside, sliced the sky, and finally swept over the battlefield.

“Hic, what’s this...!”

“My, my ears...”

Amplified by aura, the Lion's Roar relentlessly swept across the battlefield, beyond it, engulfing the entire plains. Deers hiding in the brush, startled, dashed away. Birds sleeping in the forest flapped their wings, flying towards the distant sky.

"....."

"....."

Eventually, the vast prairie was submerged in silence.

No sound of insects, no birds, not even the footfalls of wild animals. Everything that could flee had fled.

Only the soldiers, who missed their chance to escape, remained trembling.

“Ah well... I guess I'll have to step in.”

The slim Ghost Tribe boy (Viper), adjusting his gloves,



stepped forward.

“Wow! One of the 7 Heroes, the [Dark Swordsman]!”

“Believed in you, damn it...!”

The Ghost Tribe soldiers cheered.

Uburka sent a bewildered telepathy.

『Family Head, some lunatic is charging at me.』

『Take care of it. But don't kill.』

『Ugor. Even without your word, I was already feeling uneasy about getting involved in kids' fights.』

The Dark Swordsman (Viper) was swift and agile. Unfortunately, he couldn't charge at Uburka.

He was at the foot of the mountain, and Uburka on the mountaintop. Distance was the issue. Nonetheless, the Dark Swordsman (Viper) started climbing, yelling, “Hey, hey, wait!”

The problem was, the moment he set foot on the mountain path, Uburka flicked a pebble, breaking his leg.

Thud.

The Dark Swordsman (Viper) collapsed, unconscious.

“The Dark Swordsman...”

“How can this be...! The undefeated among the 7 Heroes...”

It was a living lesson for all.

First, whether he’s the real Uburka from history or not, he’s ridiculously strong.

Second, waging war against such a monster would be a bad idea unless someone's completely lost their mind.

The other 7 Heroes, or rather the other 7 Vipers, seemed to understand this.

Sword Beauty (Viper) frowned.

“Retreat, retreat! Let’s retreat and regroup, think of a way out. This is the will of all 7 Heroes.”

“Yes, yes...”

The Ghost Tribe soldiers’ morale plummeted. They obediently nodded as the Sword Beauty (Viper) instructed.

As the other 7 Heroes (Viper) carried the Dark Swordsman (Viper) away, the Ghost Tribe efficiently retreated from the plains.

“One rock throw from your son halted the war.”

Silvia spoke in a tone that was either astonished or sarcastic.

Before I could respond, Kim Yul corrected the Golden Cup's

words.

“It was a rock throw from our family's Chief Warrior.”

# Chapter 244: Era of the Heroes (2)

---

As both armies retreated, the plains opened up, and moonlight generously poured onto the open field. Only the peak planted in the center of the plains blocked the moonlight.

In the deep of the night, where even the stars seemed to hold their breath, we walked under the shadow cast by the mountain peak.

"Is Viper over there?"

At my question, Kim Yul nodded.

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Without a doubt."

Kim Yul affirmed, glancing down at his notebook. Dark starlight flowed over his silver hair. If one were to say that such a veteran-like demeanor shrouded his eyelids, would that be too partial to my own family member?

"I've pinpointed the location of every camp. The Ghost Tribes thought they were clever, hiding the seven heroes' quarters deep within, but they couldn't fool entities like us. Family Head, trust in me and the soul comfort troops you've assigned under my command."

"Alright."

I nodded in response.

Kim Yul serves as the family shadow, or intelligence chief, in our clan. Under him, the soul comfort troops have been deployed, who have controlled the information of the martial realm since the demonic cult days.

I'd wager that no intelligence agency in the world could outdo our clan.

"Let's go."

We entered the Ghost Tribes' camp, avoiding the moonlight.

The camp's paths were as complex as a maze, winding here and there. Tents lined the roadsides, and between them, the Ghost Tribes, exhausted from battle, emitted sleepy snores.

Finally, we discovered a somewhat luxurious camp.

-Nyahahaha!

-Cheers! Pour more drinks here too!

Those voices were unmistakably from today's battlefield.

Red curtains fluttered as voices and the sound of alcohol filled the inside of the tent.

'This is it.'

It was certain. This was the camp of the seven Ghost Tribe heroes, the enemy's stronghold.

As I inquired with my eyes, Kim Yul slowly nodded in confirmation.

'Okay.'

Then there's no need to hesitate.

"I'll be back."

I stepped into Viper's camp.

---

The camp of the seven Ghost Tribe heroes was luxurious.

Red silk embroidered the tents, and the floor was covered with red-dyed wool, resembling a red carpet. Plush pillows were plentiful, and each of the seven Ghost Tribe heroes picked their favorite, either hugging them tightly or laying their heads on them.



They were having a drinking party.

"Pour it!"

"Drink up!"

"Ah... you guys really love drinking too much. Excessive drinking is harmful to health---a well-known fact, right?"

"Haha. Since you can't drink because of your injury, you're making such pitiful comments. How unsightly, Dark Swordsman."

"Ah, I already showed an unsightly side once. What does it matter? I won't complain."

As they passed the cups back and forth, the seven Ghost Tribe heroes chattered away.

"....."

But.

They were all Viper.

"What the heck are you doing now.....?"

I couldn't help but mutter to myself, and the seven Ghost Tribe heroes, or rather, seven Vipers, burst into laughter like the seven dwarfs fired by Snow White.

"What, what's this!?"

"An enemy!"

"Everyone---form the Seven Star Formation!"

"Hey, wait a minute... as always, you guys are too hot-headed."

Amid the confused, vigilant, immediately responsive, and coolly mediating Vipers starting their 'mass possession service', I felt like I was losing my mind....

"Ah, would you all quiet down!"

"Hm."

Finally, after my rebuke, all the Vipers coughed in unison.

Then, the Sword Beauty with red hair spoke as their representative.

"What's this, King of Death... What brings you here in the middle of the night?"

"What else? I came to ask why this war started."

"The reason for the war?"

"Yes. Didn't you say you'd answer after the battle? I've ended the fight. Now, please tell me."

The seven Vipers looked at each other.

One of them, scratching the back of his head, answered.

"Sigh. It's a hegemony war."

"A hegemony war?"

"Yes. Your Earth Spirit Tribe and my Ghost Tribe. At a glance, their characteristics overlap, right?"

I thought about it.

Both are races with abundant muscles and love fighting.

"Until now, it was all about the renaissance of art, discovery of new continents, and such, but how long can two lions share the same plains? That's why the king of the Ghost Tribes sent a letter to the chairman of the Earth Spirit Tribe, challenging them to a duel to decide the superior!"

I was incredulous.

"Two lions? Didn't you get completely thrashed during the holy land war?"

"Ha! Don't you know about the best-of-three series?"

"I don't get it... I don't want to. Anyway, this is why the war started?"

"Indeed, it's true we're killing each other for no good reason, but what can we do? It was a mutually agreed fight."

As she spoke, the Sword Beauty sharpened her sword against a whetstone. Each stroke fluttered her clothes, emitting a deep rose scent.

But, she was Viper.

"That's right. What can we do about a mutually agreed upon 'duel war'? It's like a collective version of a life-and-death duel, isn't it?"

A slender woman picked up on the Sword Beauty's words, shrugging her shoulders. Her sharp gaze sent tremors through the night air.

But, she was Viper.

"In essence, what we have here is a war over the pride of two races! We have no right to intervene and criticize what they see as honorable!"

A girl with twin braids spoke while crunching on an apple. Despite her small stature, her hearty eating made for a huge gap, making her extremely cute.

But, she was Viper... Let's stop here.

"...Alright. I get the situation. But why possess seven people at once? It's driving me crazy."

"Hmm. Simple reason."

This time, a sharp-looking young man answered.

Since entering the tent, the young man had just leaned against a pillar, looking perfect even in the shadow.

"Possessing multiple people is much more powerful than just one. It's easier to seize power too. We, the seven heroes, are essentially the leaders of the Ghost Tribe. This way, we can steer the entire tribe as we desire."

His calm words were followed by nods from the other heroes.

"In short, it's a measure to lead this war advantageously."

"A rightful decision for a god leading a tribe, perhaps?"

"Ah, that's why we're the seven heroes."

Though the scene was remarkable, I didn't pry further.

I sighed and spoke.

"So, do you plan to keep participating in the war? All seven of you?"

"Yes. Is there a problem with that?"

I bit my lower lip in contemplation and then spoke.

"Problem aside, I have a proposal."

"A proposal? What kind?"

"Surrender in this war."

At my words, the playful smirks on the faces of the Vipers vanished, replaced by an intense murderous aura.

---

When the seven Vipers acted out their characters separately, it was unavoidably comical. The more strictly they adhered to their characters, the more ridiculous it became.

However, now, abandoning all character and expressionless, the seven diverse individuals acting with a single will was no longer comical, but rather eerie.

"Surrender? Why?"

I addressed the group of Vipers.



"I understand why the two races are fighting. I also understand that we have no right to stop it."

"Uh-huh. And then?"

"And following that logic, what you meant by 'one side overwhelmingly winning to minimize damage' is now clear to me."

If a fight is inevitable and unstoppable, as Viper said, one side achieving a decisive victory would indeed reduce casualties.

"And continuing with the same logic, one side completely surrendering would be the path with the least casualties. That's why I'm suggesting this."

"Oho. You know how to talk nonsense, don't you?"

All seven Vipers simultaneously spat in disdain.

"How about this, King of Death? Your tribe surrenders instead. Oh, what's this? The conclusion is opposite but the result is the same? Wouldn't that be acceptable?"

"Celestial Martial Guild Master. I'm being serious."

"I'm also being serious, you brat. Do I look like I'm joking?"

The piercing gaze of seven pairs of eyes was like a sharp sword thrust at me.

I firmly stated,

"I only wish to minimize the damage."

"Uh-huh. Then you surrender, King of Death. Understand?"

"That's not possible."

I sighed and candidly revealed my thoughts.

"The Earth Spirit Tribe that I lead... they have a peculiar political system. It's easy yet difficult to unite them under one cause. And in this case, it's extremely difficult."

The fervor in the Vipers' attitude receded slightly.

I continued.

"To make my children surrender, I first need to possess the strongest among them. That individual must consent to my possession. Then, I have to propose the idea of surrender to the entire tribe, and knock down anyone who opposes it."

In such a scenario of 'absolute surrender,' almost all the Earth Spirit warriors participating in the war would express opposition.

The probability of someone strong enough to take down all those opposing me consenting to my possession is next to zero.

"But Celestial Martial Guild Master. It's easier for you to unite the Ghost Tribe under one decision, isn't it?"

I looked at each of the seven Vipers in turn.

"You just said this: 'The entire Ghost Tribe moves at their will.' It's faster for you to persuade the Ghost Tribe than for me to persuade the Earth Spirit Tribe. That's why I'm asking

you."

"....."

"I'm begging you, Celestial Martial Guild Master. Please, just this once. I will ensure the price paid is satisfactory. You wouldn't want your tribe to suffer more casualties either. So..."

"Our children,"

Viper interrupted me abruptly.

"have lost too much."

The murderous intent in their seven pairs of eyes had subsided.

But their will burned just as intensely.

"The Heretic Inquisitor, those damn snails, defeated us. Our kids, not even ten years old, had their horns broken and were whipped into slavery."

Before my return, there was such a tale in the tower.

"What next? The holy land coalition army, gathered to wash away their humiliation, with the Ghost Tribes at the forefront. But then, suddenly, your tribe appeared and, as you said, completely thrashed us."

The one who saved the most people in the tower is the Master Alchemist.

The one who killed the most is the Head of the Temple of the All Gods.

"The Ghost Tribes were resolute. Even as other tribes celebrated the renaissance of art, we quietly gathered strength in secret."

The most feared in the tower is the Black Dragon Witch, and the most Ghost Tribe is the Paladin.

"But that backfired. In the end, we were left behind in the discovery of the new continent."

However, the most respected by their peers in the guild is

the Celestial Martial Guild Master.

Such tales existed.

"Our children have lost too much. They have only known defeat."

And that was still the case.

"Now, you're asking those children to surrender again?"

"....."

"I can't do it. That's truly impossible."

I understood Viper's words. My proposal was indeed harsh.

But I clenched my fist.

"In the end, you will lose again."

"Because of that big guy, Uburka, you brought in?"

"Because the situation demands an overwhelming victory to reduce casualties. It's better for both your and our children if Uburka is tossing mountains around rather than your seven heroes rampaging through our lines."

I looked directly at Viper as I spoke.

But the seven Vipers scoffed in unison.

"King of Death, you underestimate me too much."

"Even the Ghost Tribe heroes you possessed couldn't get near. Seven of you charging at once won't change that."

"That's true. But what makes you think I haven't prepared anything?"

The seven Vipers looked at me with a crooked smile.

I frowned.

"And what is this 'preparation' you speak of?"

"Ah. Trying to get spoilers... Just know that I have an ace up my sleeve that can turn that white muscle pig into first-grade pork."

"...Bluffing won't change reality, Celestial Martial Guild Master."

"Scared? Then face your end."

Indeed.

Being on the receiving end of these words made me empathize with those who heard them from me.

It's infuriating.

"So, you can't surrender."

"Ah. Just like you can't surrender, we 'can't' surrender either."



"We'll meet on the battlefield then."

"It seems so."

Both I and the seven Vipers simultaneously declared.

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow."

Negotiations had broken down.

# Chapter 245: Era of the Heroes (3)

---

That night, I was lost in thought.

"What should I do?"

Questions I would normally murmur to myself or monologue in my mind, now slipped out through my lips.

As a hunter, I had many things to ponder alone. Only the Guardian Spirit was my conversation partner and Advisor. That was the hunter's karma, and I never thought of it as loneliness.

"Complete intervention might be necessary, my family head."

But now, things were different.

Ester, looking over the plains, answered my question.

I was no longer a lone hunter, but the head of a family. Talking to myself and soliloquies were no longer necessary. Under the cold moonlight, we sat in a circle on the barren ground, discussing.

"Complete intervention?"

The Hell Ghost Demon inquired.

Ester responded to the question.

"The Celestial Martial Guild Master is using [Multiple Possession] to control several heroes at once. From the perspective of the people of this world, this is akin to arbitrarily using the power of a [God] to favor the Ghost Tribe warriors. It's unfair. And against unfairness, we must respond with unfairness."

"Hmm."

Sitting in the center, I, the Family Head, pondered, with Ester, my advisor and successor, to my right.

Uburka, the Chief Warrior, huddled his massive form to my left. Silvia Evanair stood erect, and Kim Yul, the family's strategist, sat opposite me, quietly scrutinizing his notebook.

The core leadership, surrounded by the Four Demon Lords, and beyond them, a thousand followers of the Demonic Cult encircled us. A thousand family members held their breath, eavesdropping on our 'family meeting.'

Under the midnight moon, breathing its light, our House of Death lay submerged in contemplation.

"Well, what. Just having Uburka, the Chief Warrior, intervene alone would utterly demolish the Ghost Tribe army."

Silvia Evanair remarked nonchalantly.

"Family Head, couldn't you purchase a few [Character Possession] items? Just two, and entrust them to Ester, the advisor, and Kim Yul, the family strategist. The Advisor can shoot out beams, and if the strategist slightly forgets the taste of the coffee he drank last night, the Ghost Tribe warriors will be wiped out in one hit."

"...Do you have a problem with me? Why the attitude?"

“A problem? That’s absurd. I, Silvia Evanair, am filled only with loyalty towards you, as vast as the cockroaches scuttling in a summer storage. My loyalty is as boundless.”

That’s some disturbingly loyal sentiment.

“Regardless of the tone, the steward’s point is invalid.”

Kim Yul spoke softly.

Silvia's eyebrows twitched.

"Why is it invalid?"

"Because our victory is not the issue. A crushing victory is simple, and even our family head knows this. That's why he asked [what to do] instead of [how to win]."

Kim Yul flipped through his notebook under the moon, resembling a newly born star.

His gaze, like that of a twinkling star, turned towards me.

"But even that question from our family head is somewhat misplaced. Before discussing means, our family head should define his goals more clearly."

I stroked my chin.

"The goal, you mean."

"Exactly. As our family head declared to the Celestial Martial Guild Master, does he 'wish to minimize the casualties of this war'? If so, then apart from complete intervention, no other answer suffices. Yet if he hesitates, it indicates another goal is weighing on our family head's mind, balancing between the two."

Kim Yul's voice echoed, light and unburdened, like a star.

"Our family head views the Earth Spirit Tribe as his children. Not as his own blood, but as a parent considers what's best for their child's education, our family head too looks after the Earth Spirit Tribe with a parental heart."

"....."

"And from that perspective, our family head has so far refrained from intervening in the Earth Spirit Tribe's affairs. Only when absolutely necessary, when non-intervention meant the tribe's annihilation, did he actively step in. But this war, even if started by the Ghost Tribe warriors, seems to be something the Earth Spirit Tribe [desired]."

Kim Yul raised his head to look at Silvia, then turned to me.

"This war is not about resources, but a collective duel of warriors. Our family head is pondering whether it's right to intervene here or not."

I sighed deeply.

Raviel's ancestor had precisely pinpointed a corner of my heart.

"Indeed."

The Sword Demon shrugged his shoulders.

"He's right. If we interfere in a serious fight, it would be absolutely infuriating. Wouldn't it be the same for them?"

“...Disregarding the impertinent words of the Chief Warrior for a moment.”

Ester leaned on her chin.

"Apart from a warrior's pride, the question of whether our heavy intervention is the right education also arises. 'Whenever there's trouble, a god intervenes'. Is it good to instill such an impression in the Earth Spirit Tribe?"

Hmm.

I turned to look at Uburka.

"What do you think, Chief Warrior?"

“Ugor.”

Uburka answered without changing his expression.

"My thoughts are as our family head decides."



Is that so.

I nodded.

"We are strong. Both the Ghost Tribe warriors and the Earth Spirit Tribe. We could end this war without killing a single person."

I removed my hand from my chin.

"But when I think about it, I'm not the Tower Master."

If this war was based on mutual agreement.

And if that agreement had reached its conclusion.

"It's only right to ask the children living in this era for their opinion."

The discussion halted as my retainers awaited my command in silence.

"Chief Warrior."

"Ugor."

"You are the only one among us granted a physical body in this world. Being a legendary figure, you can approach the Earth Spirit Tribe and strike up a conversation. Go. Ask them. Ask the current chairman of the Fire River Council—whether they want our help or not, and report back."

"Ugor."

Uburka grinned, clenching his fist.

"I've been waiting for those words. Wait for me, my family head. I'll ask the kids of this era and return."

Kwoong.

As Uburka rose, the ground around him shook. Naturally, not just Kim Yul, but Ester and Silvia too, were not the kind to falter at such tremors.

"Hahaha!"

Uburka, seemingly pleased, laughed heartily and thudded across the plains.

His destination was the Earth Spirit Tribe's densely packed camp.

Boooom! Boooom!

It seemed an alarm was raised at the distant camp, signaled by the sound of horns. Understandable, given a fortress-sized warrior had suddenly invaded; the Earth Spirit Tribe would naturally be terrified.

Soon enough, sounds of chaos emanated from inside the Earth Spirit Tribe's camp.

"Is this alright?"

Ester looked worriedly towards the distant camp.

"Why?"

"Uburka, the Chief Warrior... While I haven't known him for long, he seems rather hot-tempered. I wonder if he's suitable for diplomatic envoy work in a situation like this."

"He may seem like a brute who only knows fighting, but your brother is deeper than he appears."

Startled.

Upon hearing [Your brother], Ester hesitated momentarily.

Struggling with the unfamiliar, or rather, difficult-to-get-used-to phrase, Ester stuttered.

"My brother...?"

"You are my eldest daughter and Uburka is my second son. Naturally, you're a sister and he's a brother. Officially, we address each other as Chief Warrior, Advisor, but in private, you should get used to it quickly."

"That's absurd, Father!"

Finally, breaking the formal address, Ester called me father.

Of course, it was whispered into my ear, ensuring no one else could hear.

"How could I treat such a gigantic child as my brother! Siblings, at that. I've never experienced such a relationship! It's unimaginable!"

"It's alright."

I gently patted Ester's shoulder.

"After this stage, more people will join our family."

Among them would be my two starting points.

The starting point inside the tower, Yoo Soo-Ha.

The starting point outside the tower, the Director.

Thinking of the one outside the tower, I spoke.

"Director is an extraordinary person. A lifetime spent turning [children who aren't family into family]. Whenever you face a difficult problem, or are unsure about something, consulting with the Director will help solve it."

"Are you anxious?"

"Yes... I am."

Ester lowered her head.

"Destroying a continent and burning humanity to hell was hard, but not anxiety-inducing. I've never felt such... I'm anxious about truly being a family to others. What even is a family...."

Again, I reassured her.

“It's okay.”

I comforted Ester by holding her shoulder.

“We will certainly become precious to each other.”

“But, Father. What if I, as the eldest sister, make some mistake...”

“When that time comes, we'll discuss it together, just like now. We'll call all the retainers, sit together, and think thoroughly about the problem and its solution.”

"....."

“Can you trust this inexperienced father?”

Ester lowered her head even more.

Then, in a voice as soft as a whispering worm, she murmured.

“...Yes. I trust you, Father.”

Under the cool moonlight.

We, who had just become father and daughter, sat leaning against each other.

---

Ester's worry was half right and half wrong.

Uburka returned and shared his story with us, roughly like this:

When Uburka appeared at the Earth Spirit Tribe's camp, chaos naturally ensued. From their perspective, a general from the legends, thought dead, had suddenly appeared [Alive? Really?].

The Earth Spirit Tribe's army was in an uproar.

Amidst the pandemonium, only one person, the current chairman of the Fire River Council, met Uburka with dignity and proper attire.



-Who are you?

“I am Uburka, the 212th chairman of the Fire River Council.”

-I am Kerhsombok, the 627th chairman of the Fire River Council.

“You don't look very strong...”

-Who among this land could stand against you, if not a mere infant?

Uburka chuckled.

“I'll help if asked. I am neither a god nor a spirit. Just someone who became a bit stronger than others in pursuit of the ultimate martial path. I am still of the Earth Spirit Tribe, a former chairman of the River Council. If you seek reinforcements, I should naturally extend my hand.”

The Earth Spirit Tribe murmured among themselves.

-Uburka! That damned ancestor is going to help us?

-Tearing mountains to thrust them into the battlefield, such strength aiding us!

-Ugh! Let's accept it! Teach those horned bastards a lesson!

-With that damned ancestor's help, conquering the continent, seizing every port and waterway, creating a unified Earth Spirit nation will be easy!

Gradually heated up, the Earth Spirit Tribe discussed, and then, the current chairman, Kerhsombok, spoke.

-Stop.

The Earth Spirit Tribe flinched. The chatter quieted, and the excitement faded.

Chairman Kerhsombok, with his icy glare, surveyed the surroundings.

-So what if we defeat the Ghost Tribe warriors. They would not be crushed before the Earth Spirit Tribe, but merely under the foot of the great spirit, Uburka.

-.....

-Let's conquer the continent with Uburka at our lead. Looking at it, would that be the Earth Spirit Tribe's nation? Or Uburka's nation?

-.....

-The White Lion always worried and helped us. Yet, he always asked to be called a [friend], thinking the most beautiful feeling between him and us was [friendship].

Chairman Kerhsombok was a middle-aged man with admirable muscles.

The muscles built in his youth supported his body, and his aging head upheld his wisdom. Standing between youth and old age, he spoke like a nameless priest of a forgotten temple.

-The White Lion wanted us all to feel friendship. If difficult,

we help; if too difficult, many help. When someone wins, we praise them. We openly express envy and jealousy, delighting the victor. The loser devotes their life to one day reaching the champion's spot. We find such a loser's life beautiful and feel endless friendship towards them.

-.....

The crowd grew silent.

Thousands of Earth Spirit Tribe warriors listened to the priest's speech in hushed breaths. The speech resonated in their hearts.

Their millennia-old [White Lion Faith] pulsed in their hearts, never severed.

-Earth Spirit Tribe warriors.

Chairman Kerhsombok gazed at the warriors arrayed far below.

-Are we weak?

Thump! Thump! Thump!

The warriors stomped their left foot on the ground, a stark answer of [No].

-Do we need the help of ancestor Uburka to defeat those horned weaklings?

Thump! Thump! Thump!

-Are we so feeble that now, right now, is the moment to summon the White Lion again, begging him to lead and comfort us?

Thump! Thump! Thump!

-Yes! No!

Chairman Kerhsombok spread his arms.

-We don't need our ancestor's help! Nor the help of a god! Uburka! White Lion! We trust your friendship, so we, as your

friends, will respond. Wait and see! Observe how magnificently the Earth Spirit Tribe warriors will defeat the Ghost Tribe warriors, without any danger or worry!

Wooooooah!

The Earth Spirit Tribe warriors went wild, waving their weapons.

-We are warriors raised by the White Lion!

-If the White Lion feels friendship towards us, what is there to fear!

-We are one! One people! Children of one being!

-We can't worry him! Let not a wrinkle form on our White Lion's Ghost Tribe brow!

The morale soared.

Facing the unstoppable warriors, Uburka couldn't help but

smile bitterly.

“Is this it? Education too good to be a problem...”

After inciting the warriors' spirit, Chairman Kerhsombok returned and said.

-We don't need our ancestor's help. With respect, we don't need the White Lion either. We are strong. We want to show our ancestor and the White Lion our strength.

That was the message of the Earth Spirit Tribe living in this era.

---

"As expected of our family head. You've raised the tribe well."

Ester smiled happily. The others reacted similarly. Uburka, feeling good, fetched a barrel of liquor to drink, and Kim Yul nodded expressionlessly.

Only Silvia seemed displeased, snorting.

"What's wrong with you, Steward?"

"Everyone's so proud, must be nice. Weak ones like me, I wonder if I can find a place to lie down. No, no, this is just a weak person's complaint. You, the mighty King of Death and powerful retainers, please enjoy to your heart's content."

"....."

I decided to overlook her grumbling, something she'd always done. Probably just being cranky because the world is too beautiful.

I lightly flicked her forehead.

"Ouch! What's that for, my family head!?"

"If you want to be someone the Butler wouldn't be ashamed of, then look wider. Over there."

I pointed towards the plains, where dawn was breaking.



Both the Ghost Tribe and Earth Spirit armies seemed ready, beginning their advance. Thud, thousands of footsteps echoed in unison, and again from the opposite side. The two melodies converged, filling the plains' dawn with a bizarre cacophony.

-Nyahahaha! Today's the day we feast on the pigs!

The Ghost Tribe army's front naturally included the 7 Ghost Tribe heroes. They exuded a sinister aura, leading the Ghost Tribe warriors.

Viper, the player who handled the Ghost Tribe warriors from the beginning to the end of the stage, decided to actively dive into this war.

Meanwhile.

"Is this really okay?"

Ester asked with a serious face.

"If we subtly help according to the situation, it might not be noticeable. Family head, if we help without either side knowing..."

“No.”

I raised my hand to interrupt Ester’s suggestion.

“This is the time to trust and wait for those children.”

“This is like a [coming-of-age ceremony]. The vast tribe of the Earth Spirit Tribe is attempting to overcome this rite of passage. It’s free to watch from afar and cheer, to fret and pray for their fortune.”

I said.

“We mustn’t interfere.”

"....."

“Let’s trust in our children’s strength, and wait.”

“Yes.”

After that, Ester offered no further objections.

We sat on a mountain peak bent by Uburka, silently waiting for the impending war.

And then.

Boooooooooom-

A horn sounded from somewhere. Then another. Horns followed horns, merging together, soaking the plains' dawn in a strange agony.

Boooooooooom... Boooooooooom... Boooooooooom...

As the horn sounds faded.

-Attack!

Someone shouted.

-Attack! All forces, full attack!

-Crush those horned bastards so they never dare again!

-All forces, chargeeeeeee!

With that roar, the Earth Spirit Tribe charged forth. The Ghost Tribe warriors, not to be outdone, screamed ferociously and rushed with their weapons drawn.

‘I believe.’

With an unwavering heart, I watched the Earth Spirit Tribe's military might.

‘You are strong enough to carve your own path, my children.’

It was the beginning of the war.

# Chapter 246: The Celestial Martial Guild Master (1)

---

This war was, without a doubt, unlike any war seen before.

-Nyahahaha! Attack! Tear apart everything that approaches and feed them to the horses!

-Woohoo! Follow General Sword Beauty!

Before the touch of dawn could caress, the Ghost Tribe raced across the frostbitten ground.

The Ghost Tribe didn't need cavalry. Their sheer size was an act of violence. Charging blindly with their horns leading the way was as good as a cavalry charge.

-Charge! Charge!

-Slice off all the fat from those arrogant pigs!

The Ghost Tribe, covering the horizon with dust as they sprinted.

Each one of them became a steel horse, racing across the battlefield adorned with mountain peaks thrown by Uburka.

On the other hand.

-.....

The Earth Spirit Tribe was silent.

Like moles hidden in the ground, they didn't make a sound.

-.....

-.....

-.....

Even as thousands of Ghost Tribe members charged towards them, the Earth Spirit Tribe remained utterly calm. Occasionally, a young warrior would tremble with nerves, but nobody chastised his inexperience.

-Is everyone ready?

Said the chairman of the Fire River Council of this era.

The glimpse of teeth from within his beard was as sharp as the look in his eyes.

-We are.

-We are fully prepared, Chairman.

Even as they conversed, thousands of Ghost Tribe members were fiercely charging towards them.

-Today is the day the continental hegemony changes!

-Earth Spirit Tribe! You ignorant fools who waste your lives dancing! Now is the time for us, the Ghost Tribe, who breathe the sky and feel the rhythm of the earth, to rise to power!

-Long live the Ghost Tribe!

A full 9,000.

A race that invested all their ability scores into their physical form, the Ghost Tribe, charged with a wild ferocity. Their momentum was like a raging storm bringing snowstorms and tidal waves.

-Did their guardian just throw a mountain at us!

At the forefront, the 7 Heroes of the Ghost Tribe were like a single blade, charging fiercely.

-Then we shall pierce through the mountain!

Dual swords, scythes, spears, and a staff too large to be a staff were imbued with aura and launched.



An explosion.

Boom.....!

A mountain in the middle of the battlefield split in two. A road of steel was created. The Ghost Tribe became a long train, led by the 7 Heroes.

The massive train formed by 9,000 troops struck the vanguard of the Earth Spirit Tribe.

---

The Earth Spirit Tribe's formation was as sturdy as a turtle shell. However, the breakthrough power of the Ghost Tribe was even greater.

Boom.....!

The collision of two human masses created an unimaginable roar. What followed was more akin to the collapse of the terrain rather than the breakdown of a formation.

"Ah."

"Uh."

"Ugh."

Our family members watching the battlefield each expressed their distress in their unique ways at that moment.

"Those... were the Ghost Tribe and the Celestial Martial Guild Master, right? Their breakthrough power exceeded expectations."

Ester, once a leader of the Demon King's army and now my advisor, said,

"The mountain peak thrown by Chief Warrior Uburka had become a component of the battlefield, with the Earth Spirit Tribe forming their lines on either side. But to smash straight through the mountain and charge through the center... it was a complete blind spot for the Earth Spirit Tribe."

Indeed. Like an animal pierced through the heart, the Earth Spirit Tribe's formation was writhing.

But.

"It's okay."

For thousands of years, I taught the Earth Spirit children about fire. I taught them how to write, how to burn, and even how to play with it.

Blood Fire.

Even in the damp caves of the Mountain Calamity Tribe, the Earth Spirit Tribe never lost their fire. They blessed the living with fire and mourned the dead with it.

And then I taught them to dance.

Dance is fire expressed through the body. I easily transformed the love of fire in the hearts of the Earth Spirit Tribe into a love for dance.

Dance was fire, and every dancing Earth Spirit was a flame.

-Tap.

Thus.

-Thump.

The Earth Spirit Tribe's formation collapsed and crumbled, but that was not the end.

It was the beginning, and to describe it, it was more akin to blossoming rather than destruction.

-Tap.

-Thump.

-Tap.

-Thump!

The Earth Spirit Tribe did not resist the Ghost Tribe's charge. They retreated when pushed and split when struck.

However, during this process, they shook their hips and stomped the ground. Tap, tap, tap. The warriors lined up beside them also rolled their feet and stomped the ground. Tap, tap, tap! Like flames spreading and burning when fanned, thump, the sound of their feet quickly spread to the unit next to them, the unit above, even to the distant unit, instantly covering the entire camp.

Tap, tap, tap, thump, tap, tap, tap, thump!

The battlefield was soon filled with the stomping of thousands of troops. The Earth Spirit Tribe slammed their aura-wrapped feet down. Consequently, the sound was not blocked by the mountain peaks, nor did it bounce off the tall maple trees, but flowed like a single flame to the very bottom of the world.

-What, what's this!

The Ghost Tribe was perplexed.

-Dammit! What are they up to!

-Why won't they collapse!?

Like tough leather sacks, the Earth Spirit Tribe absorbed the entire long charge of the Ghost Tribe and converted the shock into vibrations---digesting it.

I couldn't help but marvel.

'Ah.'

And I was captivated by a peculiar joy.

'I have completed it... the Demonic Formation Art.'

An idea that came to me like a miracle one day.

Instead of a single person performing the Demonic Heavenly God Art, what if multiple people, hundreds, thousands, performed it together—what new possibilities could open up? That premonition led me to create my first skill.

+

[Demonic Formation Art]

Rank: Undetermined

Effect: Based on Demonic Heavenly God Art, this formation materializes shared mental images of the casters. The more casters join the formation, the more skilled they are in Demonic Heavenly God Art, and the clearer the shared mental image, the more powerful the formation becomes.

This formation's effectiveness has not been proven yet!

You are the first to conceive this skill. Now, you must demonstrate the potential of Demonic Formation Art. As sufficient data accumulates, the rank and description of this skill will be revised.

\*The current skill rank is not yet determined.

+

The Demonic Heavenly God Art was a supreme martial art capable of dominating the martial world.

Then, what if that Demonic Heavenly God Art was modified and performed as a group technique... if it could be

performed, what terrifying power could it wield?

'I taught Uburka the Demonic Heavenly God Art for that purpose.'

I sank into my thoughts.

Those thoughts settled in my heart as joy.

'Uburka spread the Demonic Heavenly God Art to the warriors of that time. It became the only orthodox sword technique in the Earth Spirit Tribe society. And I... I propagated the [Theatre of Dancing with Aura] to the children.'

For an Earth Spirit Tribe warrior, aura meant the Demonic Heavenly God Art. The plays performed on stage were all about the harmonization of the Demonic Heavenly God Art. As the number of actors increased—3, 6, 18—countless Demonic Heavenly God Arts adorned the stage.

'Naturally.'

The audience was mesmerized by the splendid Blood Fire



Drama.

Their hearts pounded.

On stage, they were quiet spectators, but outside, they were as mighty warriors as any of their kin. The Earth Spirit warriors realized that the Blood Fire Drama, when it spread from the stage to the world, became even more beautiful.

'I provided the opportunity, but it was always meant for the children to enjoy and discover on their own.'

The Earth Spirit warriors applied the Blood Fire Drama to the military.

They synchronized their rhythm and melody. That alone amplified their aura. But what was more important was that all the warriors had to imagine [the same picture] in their minds.

The [White Lion Story] told by Uburka like a legend filled that picture. The White Lion—our god, our friend, our watcher. The scenes it witnessed while roaming the world—burning mansions, dying snowfields, broken hearts in mirrors—were ingrained in the Earth Spirit Tribe's minds from their youth.

-Woo.

So, they sang.

-Woo.

-Woo.

-Ugh.

The sound of their footsteps had not stopped yet. The auraladen steps filled the plains, and above them, the sharp cries of the Earth Spirit Tribe echoed. The Earth Spirit Tribe raised their heads and howled like wolves. Thus, the lowest rumbling steps blocked the ground, and the highest cries blocked the sky.

Woo, woo, woo, ugh! Woo, woo, woo, ugh! Woo, ugh!

Tap, tap, tap, thump, tap, tap, tap, thump!

The sky of the battlefield was blocked, and the ground was

sealed.

The sun, which had been pouring dawn from the sky, bounced off the rough curtain of aura and could no longer cast its cool light. The plains where the Ghost Tribe charged into became engulfed in pure darkness.

A surging shadow engulfed the Ghost Tribe.

---

-Nyaaaa!?

Sword Beauty, at the very front, was the first to realize the ominous signs.

-What is this! It's not magic... it's aura!?

-Are these bastards, thousands of them, casting a barrier simultaneously?

-What a wasteful use of aura... If they think we'd be startled by this, they're mistaken!

The 7 Heroes encouraged their troops.

-Don't panic! It's just a bit dark!

-There's no impact! They're just trying to scare us with a show!

-We've killed 20% with this charge! Just continue the attack!  
We have the advantage!

-If they resist being torn apart, tear them up from the inside!

The Ghost Tribe warriors tried to respond to the heroes' voices. However, the growing footsteps, the expanding shadows, enveloped them.

-It's like...

A Ghost Tribe warrior muttered, feeling an ominous aura.

-It feels like we're not on a plain, but inside a cave...

The momentum of the charge eventually halted. The cries, rather than being shouts of attack and slaughter, became more like involuntary screams against a sinister sensation.

Thud.

And then, a warrior suddenly realized the sensation of stepping on the ground had completely changed.

-...Wood?

Until recently, the Ghost Tribe was stepping on bare ground. It was rough, scattered with pebbles, and if careless, one could trip on the rugged terrain.

But the sensation of the ground in this dark space was entirely different.

-It feels like wood.

-I can't see well.

-No, it's wood. Wooden flooring. And it's very old, like from a mansion.

-So these pig bastards used aura to create a wooden texture and surrounded the area?

-Why the hell would they do something like this...?

The Ghost Tribe warriors murmured.

Woo, woo, woo, ugh! Woo, woo, woo, ugh! Woo, ugh!

Tap, tap, tap, thump, tap, tap, tap, thump!

Meanwhile, the song and dance around them were growing stronger.

In the light of day, the song was merely a morale booster in war, nothing more, nothing less. But the battlefield had darkened. The diluted sunlight in the dusk was too weak to dispel the darkness.

Woo, woo, woo, ugh! Woo, woo, woo, ugh! Woo, ugh!

Tap, tap, tap, thump, tap, tap, tap, thump!

In the dark, the voices of the Earth Spirit Tribe seemed like a summoning, like a ritual curse. The Ghost Tribe warriors started to sweat beyond unease.

And that wasn't all.

Especially skilled in aura, some Ghost Tribe warriors looked around and realized something was surrounding them. Formless and without malice, but swirling around their ankles like a mist.

"Smoke...?"

It was aura flowing in like smoke.

# Chapter 247: The Celestial Martial Guild Master (2)

---

The aura of the Earth Spirit Tribe never emitted hostility towards the Ghost Tribe.

Like actual smoke, it simply flowed and gathered. However, as the smoke-like aura rose around their ankles, some started coughing.

-Cough! Cough!

-What the, it's getting hard to breathe...

At that moment.

The vast cave burst into flames.



Woo, woo, woo, ugh! Woo, woo, woo, ugh! Woo, ugh!

Tap, tap, tap, thump, tap, tap, tap, thump!

The Earth Spirit Tribe warriors surged in unison. The Ghost Tribe warriors were engulfed within the Earth Spirit Tribe, allowing the Earth Spirit warriors to strike from both sides.

Hidden within the shadows, they danced and slaughtered the Ghost Tribe warriors.

But it wasn't just a mere swing of their swords.

Their swords blazed like flames, and their spears turned into columns of fire, burning the illusionary cave. Ghost Tribe warriors screamed as they were cut by the fire.

-Aaaagh!

-It's hot! So hot!

-It's fire!

Someone shouted.

-It's fire! A fire attack! Run!

-Head for the entrance!

-Aaaaagh!

-Where's the entrance.....

-There's still light coming in over there! There! Run, you fools!

The Ghost Tribe's formation quickly collapsed. Those who had mastered aura knew it was not real fire but aura shaped to mimic fire as closely as possible—yet they couldn't inform their subordinates.

If it's hot when touched.

If it burns when it gets hot.

Then, even if it's created by aura, what difference does it make from real flames?

Demonic Formation Art.

The First Method.

Wandering Mansion of Flames.

The tragedy of the hellfire mansion was reenacted on this battlefield today.

-Run! Run! Run!

The Ghost Tribe warriors desperately ran towards the entrance. Some, unfamiliar with the dark, tripped and rolled; some fell entangled with the fallen; others crashed into the fallen. It was not a [retreat] of warriors but a [flight] of criminals. It was chaos.

-Think you can escape?

Flames hidden in the darkness growled.

-Feel the pain of burning to death.

-Witness the moment of burning alive, unable to scream but in agony.

The Earth Spirit Tribe was already deeply immersed in the Blood Fire Drama. They were warriors, but at this moment, they were actors. They were priests reenacting the myth of the White Lion on this earth, thus burning their enemies as their destined karma.

They became the fire themselves, captivated by the flames, burning in rage towards their old enemies who had once confined them in the suffocating salt mine [caves]. The terror of the caves where they had to live, trapped for hundreds of years, long ago.

Woo, woo, woo, ugh! Woo, woo, woo, ugh! Woo, ugh!

Tap, tap, tap, thump, tap, tap, tap, thump!

Myth colored the heavens and the earth, history tinted the

battlefield. The Earth Spirit Tribe interpreted the world as the followers of the White Lion, raged as slaves oppressed under the Slime Empire's tyranny, and above all, swung their swords as warriors with aura in their hearts.

-Aaaagh!!

-Save me!

-Run! It's divine fire! Run!

-Heroes! The Seven Heroes! Please save us....

Utter chaos.

Both the Ghost and Earth Spirit Tribes fell into hallucinations. The aura, thick like smoke, amplified their hallucinatory symptoms. The Ghost Tribe couldn't even think to strike at the flames with swords or spears, while the Earth Spirit Tribe bit and tore at their enemy's limbs, believing themselves to be the flames.

And like charred wood burning to its limit, the Ghost Tribe's forces crumbled.

---

Thus, the war was truly like none ever seen before.

"....."

"....."

My spectators, too, were speechless at the sight.

The first to break the silence among us, familiar with tragedy, was Kim Yul.

"Impressive, family head."

Kim Yul emotionlessly gazed at his notebook.

"I've traveled through many worlds where the martial realm and the martial arts world exist. Each time, I encountered factions that championed formations. But their formations were, at best, about using hallucinogenic fragrances to impair people's perceptions, or trapping them in pre-constructed labyrinths. Or, they didn't go beyond the level of combined attacks, combined strikes."

Kim Yul closed his notebook with a snap and looked down at the mountain base where the Demonic Formation Art unfolded.

"But this is different. All the casters have mastered the same Demonic Heavenly God Art, and all have the same image in mind. They've painted a landscape shared in their minds using aura as a tool in this world. And they're not just creating and watching the scene; they themselves become actors, jumping in and burning. You've completed the Demonic Formation Art, family head."

Then, Silvia Evanair finally spoke.

"What, what is that...? It's almost like a divine miracle. I mean, it's like a divinity descended and created a barrier around. Ordinary humans... just humans who have learned aura, wielding the power of Constellations. How?"

Uburka nodded.

"Centuries of my daddy's longing have finally been fulfilled. Ugor."

I looked down at the burning land.

Those who survived the Wandering House of Flames and barely escaped were but a handful.

Among them, there was no sign of the Seven Heroes under Viper's control.

"The Ghost Tribe Leader has been defeated."

Ester commented. All my family members nodded, agreeing with her assessment.

Yet, there was one who disagreed.

-Huhu....

From a distance, laughter could be heard.

And from the Earth Spirit Tribe's camp, where they had gained the upper hand, an unexpected commotion erupted.

-What, what's this!?



-The corpses! The horned corpses are rising!

Just as said, the corpses of the Ghost Tribe who had fallen in the Wandering Mansion of Flames began to rise one by one.

Bursting with even more ferocity than before they fell.

"That man..."

Ester murmured in disbelief.

And I too realized what was happening.

+

[Multiple Possession Reincarnation]

Rank: SSS

Effect: You possess the individuals you choose. If the

possessed individual dies, you return to your original spirit.

Cost: Priceless (obtained through special means)

\*However, you can only possess them within 1 minute of their death.

+

Indeed, the resurrected Ghost Tribe warriors bore the shadow of Viper!

-Who said the Ghost Tribe's heroes were limited to only seven?

-The heroes of the Ghost Tribe are infinite!

They—the incarnations of Viper—proclaimed.

-The Ghost Tribe's Seven Heroes seem to have been defeated.

-Huhu... Those guys were the weakest among the heroes.

-Losing to the likes of the Earth Spirit Tribe is a disgrace to the Ghost Tribe!

Amidst the bewildered Earth Spirit Tribe, 12 Ghost Tribe warriors took a battle stance.

Of course, they were all Viper.

-We are the "Ghost Tribe's 12 Winged Generals"!

-And it's not just us! Behind us stand the "Ghost Tribe's 72 Demon Kings"!

-Beyond them, the "Ghost Tribe's 108 Arhats" exist!

The resurrected Ghost Tribe warriors—Viper—shouted in unison.

-We! The Ghost Tribe is immortal!

The Earth Spirit Tribe hesitated and stepped back.

-Why are the dead rising? What is this madness? Ugh!

-This is an evil sorcery! It's black magic that insults both gods and nature!

It wasn't just the Earth Spirit Tribe who were in panic.

Even the Ghost Tribe warriors who had barely escaped from the Wandering House of Flames were trembling in fear.

-What in the world is happening now!?

-I don't know... but something... something is happening!

I was dumbfounded.

‘Could this be the countermeasure to face Uburka...’

Ester clicked his tongue.

"This is blatant cheating!"

Ester continued angrily.

"The Ghost Tribe Leader is not of this world! It was already crossing the line for him to intervene directly in the war by sending down seven possessed bodies, but now possessing all the fallen warriors! This is outrageously excessive!"

As if hearing Ester's words, the leading incarnation of Viper turned around.

Viper turned his head, finding me, us, precisely on the mountain ridge, and yelled.

-Enough noise!

From below, Viper on the battlefield shouted to us standing atop the mountain.

-I don't care if it's unsightly! I don't care if you curse me for being unfair! Go on and blabber about cheating and all!

The Ghost Tribe Leader, revered by his subordinates, roared as if spitting blood.

-If it's to make these guys win—I'll sell out any principle!

His appearance was truly disgraceful, childish, and pathetic.

But above all, it was human.

"Hmm."

Moved by the Ghost Tribe Leader, Viper's sincere dedication, I adjusted my expression.

Stepping forward, I commanded.

"Chief Warrior."

"Ugor, family head."

Uburka knelt. His expression was also solemn.

"Advisor."

"Yes, family head."

Ester knelt on her left knee, waiting for the command.

Beside him sat Uburka, who had been called earlier, silently seated.

"....."

Seeing my daughter and son kneeling side by side, I nodded.

"The Ghost Tribe Leader declared he would disregard face and honor for those under his care. Then, for such a Ghost Tribe Leader, we too should give our all in response. It's only proper."

"I will entrust all my race points to the two of you. Use them as you wish to create as much military force as you desire."

I continued.

"Then, assign Uburka as the vanguard. And Advisor, command the main force to strike down the Ghost Tribe Leader and his companions."

"Shall we annihilate them?"

"The forces led by the Advisor are composed of martial arts masters, embodying the beginning and end of the Demonic Cult. They should handle even thousands of Ghost Tribe Leaders."

"That's sound reasoning."

After bowing, Ester stood up.

On her back was a massive greatsword.



[The Red Greatsword of the Demon King], a weapon worthy of being named someday.

"Then, I will act as instructed. The Earth Spirit Tribe won't refuse a 'friend's' help in such a situation."

Carrying the continent-destroying greatsword, Ester turned around.

"I will return the dead to where they belong. The Ghost Tribe Leader might criticize our actions, but there's no need to care. He should be thankful if we even curse him for his own pettiness."

Uburka looked slightly taken aback.

"Ugh... Sister? Or should I say elder sister? Contrary to appearances, you're quite tough?"

"Go, Chief Warrior. You are the vanguard alone."

"....."

"Use the time given by the family head's race points to prepare the warriors. Hold them off alone during that time. You can do it, right?"

Uburka chuckled lightly.

"That's a piece of cake."

"Then, show him."

Ester unleashed her greatsword.

Whoosh, the greatsword plunged into the ground.

With a mere motion, Ester lifted the greatsword, which seemed to require at least half a dozen men to handle, as easily as if wielding a wooden sword.

"Show precisely what the King of Death family is."

"Ugor. Ugor."

Uburka cracked his knuckles, pushing his lips forward.

"I was slightly resentful not being the eldest son and losing the succession battle to my elder sister... Ugor. Being good at warfare is a splendid trait. Being excellent at it is even more exhilarating. Let's see how my sister fares!"

Uburka raised his head and inhaled deeply three times, then turned to the sky.

He roared out loud.

[The Constellation 'The Muscle Pig Dreaming of Parricide' roars!]

-Grooooooooooar-

The battlefield instantly fell silent.

The confused Earth Spirit Tribe, the surviving Ghost Tribe warriors, and the thousands of incarnations of Viper, regardless of race or unit type, froze for a moment at the lion's roar echoing throughout the world.

"Now."

Facing the frozen battlefield, Ester aimed with her sword.

"Move."

Our family's first battle commenced.

# Chapter 248: The Celestial Martial Guild Master (3)

---

What is a family?

To me, a family is not yet formed.

It's on the path towards becoming one.

Those who are not yet family gather, somehow form connections, desperately struggle to keep these connections from breaking, and each one of them takes on their [role].

As long as I am seen as the [Head Steward], no one will abandon me. As long as I fulfill my duties as the [Shadow], no one will abandon me. Still, still, still...

It's this desperation that drives us.

Someday, when I become someone's father, and someday, when that child becomes my child, we will desperately strive until then, which is why we are here today.

“Uburka.”

As the one who observes the efforts of all the children, I am called the family head.

“Ugor.”

After unleashing a mighty roar across the plains, Uburka, somewhat satisfied, turned to look at me. Hot breath escaped through the gaps in Uburka's fangs.

“The enemy is a top warrior from the tower, possessing cheat-like items. Therefore,”

“He's an enemy I don't even need to bother with.”

“That's right. Fight to your heart's content, in any way you wish, until you are fully satisfied.”

Uburka grinned.

“That’s the order I wanted! Family head! The daddy I love!”

Kwoong!

Uburka left the ground shaking as he surged towards the enemy, Kwoong, Kwoong. If the Ghost Tribe was born as iron horses and spears, Uburka was a tank and a battleship in himself.

Uburka alone achieved the charge that 9,000 Ghost Tribe soldiers had accomplished.

“Is there a warrior who dares to face me, Uburka?!”

Uburka bellowed. The surviving Ghost Tribe warriors gasped, dropping their spears and slipping.

“No one! Among the Ghost Tribe, there are no warriors! Ah, it makes sense! Those brats only have horns sticking out of their heads! Krahahaha!”

Laughing uproariously, Uburka looked like a giant from myths, and the Ghost Tribe was not ready to face such a myth today.

Thus, those on the path towards the Ghost Tribe confronted Uburka.

“Ghost Tribe's 12 Winged Generals! Assemble!”

Twelve heroes, incarnations of Viper, brandishing dual swords, charged at the giant. Having once died in the Burning Mansion Illusion, their bodies were severely damaged. However, they erupted with killing intent instead of blood from their wounds.

“We will stop you, giant!”

“We will kill you!”

“The Ghost Tribe has not lost yet! It's just a shitty crisis on the path to victory! Nothing has changed!”

Listening to the chatter of the 12 Winged Generals, Uburka snorted lightly. The snort, filled with Aura, was enough to fill



the entire area.

“-----Weaklings-----.”

Uburka smirked, revealing his fangs.

As the giant grinned, his fangs looked so enormous that it resembled a scene of a demon smiling in myths. Even the Earth Spirit Tribe soldiers shivered.

“I am the Chief Warrior of the King of Death family!”

Uburka laughed.

“The King of Death family, the collectors of death laid before them! Where is death without despair, and where is death without resentment! Our family bears all that despair and resentment, hence we are the King of Death family! And only my family head is worthy to lead this family.”

Uburka slowly raised his axe.

“Those lesser than our despair, do not block us, just run away. Those who still stand against us despite being lesser than our resentment, be prepared. I am Uburka, the son and Chief Warrior of the King of Death family.”

Shiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiik!!

“This axe will be your despair!”

Kwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaang!!

Uburka's mighty axe struck where the 12 Winged Generals stood. Wujijik! The axe blade that buried into the ground caused cracks and collapse.

Jjejejejeje, jjejejejejejejejejejejeje!!

Like a warrior staggered by a powerful blow, the formation of the dead instantly scattered.

Kwagaragararara...!

The place where the 12 Winged Generals stood firm like a fortress, caved in, quaked, and shattered like dry cookies. It was a monstrous feat achieved by a single swing of Uburka's axe.

The 12 Winged Generals tried to dodge but were blocked by Uburka's palm, only to be smashed into the ground. Those who attempted to flee crashed to the ground and then twitched, twitched, and finally lay still. Dead.

“Ugor.”

One shot. One kill.

Uburka had lightly crushed the formation created by Viper's cunning and schemes, as if it were children's toys.

But Viper did not give up.

“Gather!”

Viper was possessing the bodies of thousands of Ghost Tribe soldiers who had died in the Wandering Mansion of Flames.

And the benefit of a single person forming an army was that the scattered formation could be quickly reorganized.

“Charge!”

All incarnations of Viper raised their swords.

“Strike!”

Thousands of Vipers simultaneously swung their swords. Uburka snorted and lifted his huge axe to block it.

It was like a horde of locusts clashing with a single rhinoceros.

“Huhu.”

Ester laughed.

We watched Uburka's unrivaled performance from afar. Every time the Vipers hit the ground, the sound of Papak, Papak, echoed as if hailstones were carving the earth, and

every time Uburka moved, Kung, Kwoong, the petals of early summer flowers shook and flowed towards the plains.

“At this rate, the Chief Warrior will monopolize all the merit.”

“Jealous?”

“No. Why would I be, when the family head himself advised me to fulfill my role as the elder sister?”

Ester made a sly expression.

Then, she snapped her fingers and called up the [Civilization Store].

+

[Divine Descent]

Rank: A

Effect: The player personally obtains a physical body and descends.

Cost: 10,000 race points

\*However, the effect only lasts for 5 minutes.

+

"I think I should at least maintain my dignity as the elder sister."

"....."

Indeed. She plans to descend directly, not just obtain an incarnation.

I did say to use all the race points as needed, but she instantly picked an item with terrible cost-effectiveness, which even Yoo Soo-Ha rarely used in the old times.

Slightly impressed, I said, "You really do read my mind."

Ester laughed again.

“What use would an advisor be if they can’t read the family head’s mind?”

I also smiled.

“Alright. If my daughter and son want to compete over who is better, I have no reason to refuse. Okay. I grant permission. Go and enjoy to your heart's content.”

“Thank you, family head!”

Ester hugged my right arm tightly and then, as if embarrassed, quickly moved away using levitation.

“Huhu.”

I chuckled a bit at the childish antics of my eldest daughter and younger son.

“Funny, isn’t it?”

Silvia Evanair, who had been standing silently behind, spoke with an incredulous tone.

“Really now. Cheating mixed with more cheating, dancing together. Well, it was a bit funny when the advisor was ranting about cheating earlier. Aren’t you the original king of exploiting loopholes in the rules?”

"I can't argue with that."

"Congratulations, truly. A spectacular debut. The King of Death family is now undoubtedly the strongest guild in the tower. The King of Death will practically rule this tower. But..."

"But all that is unimportant."

"....."

"That’s what you want to say, isn’t it, Silvia Evanair?"

I wrapped my arms around Silvia. The Lady was so small that she fit entirely in one arm.



Usually, Silvia would have been loud with remarks like, [What are you doing!] or [I'll tell Lady Raviel on you!], but now, she was silent.

“...Family head.”

Held in my embrace, Silvia Evanair asked in a fearful voice.

“What do you wish for in this war...?”

“There is only one thing I can show people, always and everywhere.”

I grabbed my sword.

“That there are higher places in this world.”

“.....”

“Silvia, use Divine Descent.”

“What?”

“Use it.”

Hesitantly following my words, Silvia activated the skill.

10,000 race points were spent, and Silvia descended in a physical body.

For the next 5 minutes.

“Hold on tight.”

“Eh? Wa-Wait. Kim Gong-Ja, no, family head. I’m feeling really uneasy right now. We’re about to do something ridiculously reckless, aren’t we? Like, we’re at the peak of a mountaintop with its summit sheared off. What if some madman decides to jump? Wouldn’t that be a brilliant suicide attempt, plummeting from the sky to the ground? Tell me that’s not what you’re planning, family head, Kim Gong-Ja, please say it isn’t so, you son of a b----.”

And I.

Holding tightly onto Silvia Evanair, my Head Steward wrapped in my cloak.

Leaped off the mountaintop.

We flew.

Soaring like a bird with giant wings towards the sheer cliff that was once a mountaintop.

“Aaaaaaaaaah!!!”

Silvia, entangled in my cloak, screamed in terror. Despite her desperate squirming and resistance, it was in vain.

“You're in the sky now. Even if you run, you're just falling from the sky, right?”

“Aaaaaaaaaah!!!”

“Just do as I say. If you fall while in Divine Descent, there go 10,000 points.”

“Demon! You’re not just a family head; I have served a devil! Oh, my life! My poor Silvia! Serving Satan himself would have been better than this!”

“You’re skilled in Aura, Head Steward.”

“Yes, yes! Of course, I am, but what does Aura matter in this situation!”

“Release your Aura. Don’t overthink it. Just towards the sky, fly, feel the wind, and scatter your Aura.”

"What the....."

“Hurry. I’ll take care of the rest.”

"....."

A small head moved inside my cloak.

Though hidden by the cloak, I felt the unmistakable sensation of Silvia nodding.

"Hm."

And that was enough consent for me.

"Silvia, my Head Steward."

"Yes, family head."

"Remember the first ball you saw in your childhood?"

"How could I forget that damned place?"

"Then, recall it."

I prepared my Aura.

"While recalling, just spread your Aura in all directions."

At that moment.

“Ah.....”

A sigh of admiration escaped from beneath the thick cloak.

Goldencup’s Aura was golden.

Radiant and splendid, promising the glory of childhood. As Silvia in Divine Descent opened her Aura while soaring in the sky, it became millions of golden petals fluttering down to the plains.

Slowly.

Golden maple leaves slid down to the plains. Thump, golden ginkgo leaves rolled on the ground. Golden hydrangeas, buds, lilacs, orchids, roses, lilies, peonies – all the flowers beloved by ladies shimmered as they drifted to the ground.

Demonic Formation Art.

Special Method.

Chaotic Golden Flower Garden.

"....."

This was the yearning Silvia Evanair held in her childhood.

Stunned, Silvia Evanair gazed down at the garden her Aura had created. She had forgotten she was still leisurely flying in the sky, simply looking down at the landscape formed by her life.

"Family head, you..."

"I think it's beautiful."

I said.

"We can all fail. Make mistakes we shouldn't make. But even so, when we come back and reflect, the origin of your life was so beautiful."

"Look."

I pointed below.

A Ghost Tribe warrior who had survived the Wandering Mansion of Flames and was not possessed by Viper carefully picked a golden flower. Treating it as a precious treasure, he hurriedly turned to flee before anyone else could see him.

There were not many who did this. The meaning of this battle, the history of this war, the revived corpses, and the descended myths – all the absurdity and irrationality aside, captivated by the unexpected beauty, lives chose to abandon everything they had and simply run away.

“You are not a nobody, Silvia Evanair.”

"....."

"You are my Head Steward."

Thump.

Our long flight ended, and we landed on the ground.



It was the mountaintop that Uburka had split and turned into a battlefield, where the forces of Viper and the Ghost Tribe had passed through.

Standing on each peak of the beautifully split mountaintop, we looked around.

“You asked what I want, Head Steward.”

“.....Yes.”

“To show people, just as humans, how much they can achieve.”

The plains were a sea of golden petals, carved by Aura.

There, the Ghost Tribe soldiers possessed by Viper fought valiantly. But they were shattered by Uburka’s axe and cut down by Ester’s swordplay.

As the already dead soldiers faced death once more, blood splattered, and lovely golden roses were stained.

“Right here...”

Kim Yul slowly spoke.

“This has become another world.”

Indeed.

The purpose of the Demonic Formation Art was never to annihilate the enemy.

It was the most trivial of all goals, hardly worth mentioning.

“Is this the scene you wish for, family head?”

“Yes.”

Showing people a different world.

A different scenery, a different spectacle, thus different

dreams.

“The struggle for supremacy between the Earth Spirit Tribe and Ghost Tribe. The pride of the race. The wounds. All that weighs heavily on your heart. The grudges. The grief. I understand all of it.”

But.

“Nevertheless, there is so much more in the world.”

I looked at a Ghost Tribe warrior embracing a golden rose and fleeing into the distance.

“I don’t know that Ghost Tribe warrior, but still, I imagine a life for him.”

Here, someone became a soldier because it felt natural.

No one allowed questioning, no one prepared them for questioning. They accepted it as their path, like a fish blending into the flow of a great river.

But one day, on a brilliant day, if a golden rose, seemingly otherworldly, gently falls in front of that someone.

“That would be just a coincidence, but the moment they decide to flee with the petal, it becomes fate. Now, that person is no longer a soldier. No longer a despondent Ghost Tribe warrior stained black by repeated defeats. He’s simply an artist who was captivated by a golden rose, now ready to wield a carving knife or brush. He has finally found his destiny.”

I turned back.

Silvia looked dazed, gazing at the golden plains and the deserter fleeing from them, and finally, at my face.

Kim Yul had been watching me all along.

“There is no such thing as a predetermined destiny.”

"....."

“Just a bit of coincidence, a moment of miracle, and temptation enough for a person to live as a person is created. We don’t long for life when it feels like destiny, but when life

tempts us. Do you understand, Shadow? We will throw the temptation of [wanting to live a little longer] to everyone who climbs this tower.”

“.....Yes.”

Kim Yul nodded.

“There is no hypocrisy or falsehood in the family head's words. At least, I know that.”

I extended my hand towards Kim Yul, who smoothly took it as if expecting it.

“Already, family head, you have made me want to live a little more.”

Kim Yul used Divine Descent.

Our Auras, mingling from my hand and Kim Yul's, flowed out.

Demonic Formation Art.

Special Method.

Forged Dessert Beneath the Roof.

The wind blew.

Kim Yul's Aura was like the wind. It was the breeze skimming the rooftop of the school, touching the grains of sand on the sports field. Looking down, the grass of the plains had already turned into ancient grains of sand. The wind, carrying the scent of dying sand, blew forlornly.

“Yes.”

Kim Yul nodded.

Just like when he had climbed to the rooftop and looked down at the school playground – the same as that time, Kim Yul stood atop the torn mountaintop, gazing down at the sandy plains.

“I wanted to bury my head in that fake desert and die.”

"....."

“When I looked up from the rooftop, everything below seemed like a desert. There might be a spring somewhere to quench someone's parched throat. I didn't know if there was an oasis. But the scarce water was bound to evaporate soon, and I didn't want to deal with the sight of millions of hungry ghosts fighting over the last few drops.”

Kim Yul smiled.

“So, I gave up.”

"....."

“But even a rotten desert can be beautiful with rolling petals.”

Amidst the landscape of the Demonic Formation created by me and Kim Yul, Silvia Evanair's golden petals were still tumbling in the wind.

It was a breathtakingly stunning sight.

Endless wind blew across the sandy desert, and golden roses, lilies, hydrangeas, chrysanthemums, and daffodils rolled in a thousand directions or floated gently in the wind.

"....."

Kim Yul did not cease his smile.

He whispered softly.

"If my life was like a dry fake desert, then all I needed to do was wait for a few petals to enter my desert. I didn't realize this in my youth. That a vast desert can entice a single flower, and a single flower can entice a vast desert, I didn't know back then."

Kim Yul turned to me with a smile.

"Thank you, family head."



"....."

“Already, your flowery words and the Head Steward's petals have entered my desert, making it beautiful and happy.”

At that moment.

Boom!

Where Uburka and Ester fought, where the battleground was covered in Goldencup's golden petals and Kim Yul's wilderness.

On the battlefield, the possessed bodies of Viper one by one scattered their glowing Auras.

“Why.....”

Among them, one with a particularly intense Aura stood out.

His hair was disheveled. His horn was broken, signifying he was a Ghost Tribe warrior who had already been defeated

once. His body was small and emaciated, clearly a warrior who had joined this battlefield driven by sheer willpower and venom.

"Why.....!"

Viper, like a haunting guardian spirit, loomed behind the warrior.

In fury.

"Why, the children under my care...!"

Viper's possessed bodies all stomped their feet at once. Boom! The corpses, already dead twice and no longer fit for possession, were hurled away.

"Then and now, King of Death...! Why! Why can't my children be like those under your care..."

Viper's eyes blazed with fire. A wrath beyond venom, his Aura took on a fierce form, and his eyes glowed with a deep purple light.

Somewhere in a snowy field, I had seen this scene before.

‘Don't get involved.’

The same look my master, who wasn't yet my master at that time, had shown.

It wasn't difficult to guess why. The very act of [Multiple Possession] must be a tremendous drain on mental strength. Splitting oneself into hundreds, thousands, and embedding into possessed bodies to control them. It was never a sane thing to do.

If it weren't for someone of Viper's martial caliber, they would have gone mad long ago.

“Then too! Even then, King of Death! Back then as well...”

What time period was Viper referring to?

I wanted to ask, but it seemed the chance to get a coherent answer had long vanished. The Aura raged, beginning to envelop Viper and his group.

“Worry not.”

Suddenly, someone took my hand.

“All will be well.”

It was Ester.

When had she returned to my side?

Ester, with a gentle smile as if saying not to worry, firmly gripped my hand.

“A comrade of family head’s, isn’t he?”

"....."

“Strike him, and tell him to come back to her senses. Family head. As you always have.”

Yes.

“That’s what I should do.”

I nodded.

Our palms touched, and the Aura began to resonate. Ester had watched me learn the Demonic Heavenly God Art from start to finish, closer than anyone. In terms of understanding the Demonic Heavenly God Art, few among my followers could match Ester.

Was that why?

Drip,

Drip-drop, drip... drip...

Drip-drop, drip-drip-drip, drop...

Rain.

On the battlefield, on the plains, on the golden rose petals swirling in the wind, on the wind rolling the sand, in the fake desert where thousands of flower petals flowed, red rain fell.

Autumn rain.

Demonic Formation Art.

Special Method.

Graceful Rain of Lamenting Heavens.

It rained.

# **Volume 11 – Chapters 249-273**

# Chapter 249:

## Reversal (1)

---

It was raining that day.

"Ha. How on earth does it rain inside the tower?"

Viper grumbled as he walked through the dimly lit street. A few streetlamps were erected haphazardly, resembling a row of bean sprouts carelessly abandoned by a primary school student. Some of them were even broken.

"Damn it."

Glancing at a shattered streetlamp, Viper narrowed his one eye.

"The state of this tower is really going downhill."



The early days of the tower.

A time when infrastructure was still unestablished.

Buildings frequently experienced blackouts, and with no traffic lights or crosswalks, various crimes were rampant on the streets.

Fed up with this, Sword Saint declared he would create a [Vigilante Corps]... But well, could it really be successful? Viper was skeptical.

This place was a gathering spot for trash and madmen.

"Ah! The Celestial Martial Guild Master!"

Then, the voice of a representative among these madmen reached him from behind.

Reluctantly turning around, considering the social status of this madman, Viper had little choice.

"...What?"

"Ah. It is indeed the Celestial Martial Guild Master!"

A smile that seemed to scatter gold dust.

Turning around, a child resembling an angel stood amidst the trash-filled street. The child, who appeared never to have faced any hardship, smiled radiantly, enhancing his fresh golden hair that seemed just washed.

"Heretic Inquisitor."

Viper knew the name of this precarious being.

"What brings you out in the rain to call for me?"

"Ahaha, so stern! I've come because of advice from the Black Dragon Witch. She told me to talk to you in a public place!"

Viper frowned.

"What do you mean? Like having a chat with you in the middle of this rain, letting people around us overhear, to give them the impression that [relations between Celestial Martial Clan and the Temple of All Gods are cordial]?"

"Oho, indeed! That must be the reason!"

"You came without knowing? And followed her orders so obediently."

"I'm still learning. And I didn't have many other options! Hmm, to be faithful to that purpose, it would be more effective to go to a café and shelter from the rain together!"

Viper felt a twitch in his nose.

'Sure enough, we're incompatible.'

Something, instinctively, was [incompatible] between him and this creature.

They exchanged words, leading the other to a further refined conclusion. Yet, Viper never felt like they had [exchanged words]. On the contrary, it was the opposite. It felt like they

had selectively communicated in alien languages, understanding nothing of each other.

"Hmm. A café."

"Yes, it's a nice café!"

Again.

Even when simply mentioning a [café], a sense of alienation was felt.

Was this being really using the word café in the same sense as him? Understanding it? Could a parrot, memorizing patterns of conversation and responding to humans, truly be considered communicating?

"....."

Viper glanced at the Heretic Inquisitor's eyes with his remaining one.

In the Inquisitor's blue eyes, he was not reflected at all. Those blue eyes seemed only made to reflect the sky.

Then, speaking to [this guy] and [talking to the sky] were hardly different. In either case, the conversation wouldn't get through.

If the desire to converse with gods, with whom communication is impossible, gave birth to religion, then this guy being the head of a religion would be the height of irony.

"Hey, religious nut."

"Yes, swordsman!"

"Master of the Temple."

"Yes, Celestial Martial Guild Master!"

"Heretic Inquisitor."

"Yes, Viper!"

"Right."

Viper spoke to the rain-soaked sky.

"Right. Let's go to a café."

It was raining that day.

---

The rain was falling.

"King of Death—!"

A drenched roar echoed. The Celestial Martial Guild Master, known as Viper, using the body of a one-horned noble warrior, spread his red eyes wide.

The color red was not just in his eyes. Disheveled hair. The broken horn. Muscles on his chest and elongated nails. Every part of him was soaked in red rain. As red dyed his body, Viper's possessed forms twisted in agony.

“Kaaaah!”

It was the aura from the Demonic Formations Art that Ester and I had unfolded.

Graceful Rain of Lamenting Heavens.

The autumn rain scattered by Ester when she was the Demon King. Her resentment and hostility turned into countless raindrops. Viper, who fought in multiple bodies, was struck by the red downpour.

"Ha, hooo... Haha... Ahahaha!"

One by one, the possessed bodies fell, and the one-horned warrior laughed. He stood up from a heap of his kin's corpses. He stepped on, kicked, and trampled them, carving a path for himself to move.

That figure was indeed a venomous snake.

The warrior, no, Viper, chuckled softly. Redder than the rain, his eyes were filled with intense bloodlust. A clear sign of disharmony. Coated in a veil of blood, Viper licked the

rainwater dripping down his face as if it were refreshing water.

"Will you try to stop me, King of Death?"

"Yes."

I replied.

"I intend to stop you, Celestial Martial Guild Master."

"Why!"

"I was told this by one of the kids I look after."

I briefly glanced at the leader of the Earth Spirit Tribe.

"If Uburka blows you away, that's Uburka's victory, not theirs."



"Oh."

"In the same way, if you win this situation by throwing a tantrum, that would be your victory, not your tribe's."

"Uwahaha."

The madman engulfed in disharmony roared in the rain.

"Indeed, just like the tribe you lead. I have no words against such correct and upright logic."

"....."

"Ah, it's infuriating... Yes. That's right. I'm such a damn person."

"Celestial Martial Guild Master,"

"How did you manage to raise those kids so well and upright, damn it!"

Crackle-

Electricity sparked beneath Viper's feet. In response, lightning struck down from the rainy sky. Kwaah! The earth shook with the turmoil of aura. Raindrops on the ground splashed, and those adorning the sky evaporated in the lightning.

"Damn it!"

Electricity flowed in the puddles on the ground. Electrified raindrops twisted in all directions. Viper stood firmly in the middle of the electrified pool.

"My kids!"

Mysteriously, the color of the electricity and lightning was purple.

"Why do they have to suffer because of someone like me!"

"....."

"Eh? King of Death!!"

Viper yelled, pulling down the lightning from the sky.

---

It was raining that day.

"There's no need to kill."

In front of a cooling corpse in a dark alley, Viper muttered.

"Why do you kill? Is it necessary? Heretic Inquisitor, you're really something. But why do you always have to..."

"Um, well."

With his hands stained in blood, the Heretic Inquisitor tilted his head.

Whether the raining sky or the Inquisitor answered, Viper couldn't tell.

"It's efficient!"

"....."

"Corpses don't talk. They don't act. Hence, they neither break promises nor become future threats! Therefore, it's best to kill those who show enmity when you can!"

As the days of rain increased, time seemed to flow twice as fast.

In the now better-lit streets with more streetlamps, the broken deity's child, who had repeatedly turned people into part of the street, eventually spoke with a chin propped in boredom.

"Celestial Martial Guild Master."

"....."

"I know you're trying to 'fix' me."

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled brightly.

"Thanks to your efforts, the two of us have become close enough to order coffee for each other, beyond just showing off the friendship between our two guilds."

"....."

"But, that's as far as it goes."

The Heretic Inquisitor looked at Viper.

In his sky-like eyes, neither the corpse he had just created nor Viper himself seemed to be reflected.

"You, like everyone else, can only make use of me. You cannot change my fundamental principles."

Old cars raced down the street.

These cars, belonging in an antique shop, still roamed actively in Babylon. Beep! Beep! A sound like a breathless lung

echoed from somewhere.

"Why?"

"Because you can't take responsibility for me."

The words aimed in the rain were cruelly pure.

"I was born this way. I have lived like this. There is no other life possible for me, and your attempts to instill a different way of life in me are doomed to fail, despite all your good intentions."

A broken streetlamp fell under the pressure of the rain.

Even amidst this, the Heretic Inquisitor, with arms spread wide, laughed brightly.

"But, Celestial Martial Guild Master. Is that really such a bad thing?"

"I categorize anyone who tries to kill me for not being able to

take responsibility for me as an enemy. Unfortunately, 99 percent of this world is made up of enemies! In that regard, you're a rare case, Celestial Martial Guild Master. Even if you had the chance, you probably wouldn't kill me!"

Lightning struck.

Amidst the fierce rain, the lightning appeared purple. Startled by the lightning, a car nearby sped through a large puddle. Like a giant splash created by an invisible hand, water sprayed up, drenching them both.

"In a way, the two of us are friends and colleagues."

"Isn't that enough?"

It wasn't enough.

But if that was the best they could achieve, they had to be content.

That's what he thought.

He had thought.

---

Lightning struck on a rainy day.

Every aura has a different color. But it's not just the color that's different. Even the same red aura could mean [blood] or [roses]. The image harbored in the aura user's heart, the deep-seated imagery, defines the aura.

My aura resembled blood or flames.

And the sixth-ranked Hunter, Viper, seemed to have harbored [rotten purple lightning] in his heart.

“...How could I know that?”

I picked up a sword from a nearby corpse.

“Why wouldn't I know, you brat!”

Viper charged.



As fast as lightning, with his aura charged with disharmony, Viper was incredibly fast. It was almost impossible to track his movements with eyes. In just a moment, Viper's figure flashed past me.

Swoosh!

“Damn it,”

Blood spurted from my shoulder. An odd fast sword strike. If it had gone a bit deeper, I might have lost my left arm, but I was angry for a different reason.

“Why the hell are you acting like a brat!? Aren't you ashamed before a much younger junior!?”

Before I regressed, Celestial Martial Guild Master was a big shot, too high for me to even look up to.

Even after discovering he was the emperor of light novels with a silly temperament, fundamentally, I respected this man.

Even considering he was in disharmony and unable to think

clearly, I couldn't stand to see such a man behaving so disgracefully.

“Junior? Ha. Where would you find a junior like you!”

Viper's voice came from all directions. He was moving ceaselessly.

In a fraction of a second, he was already in front of me. I used aura to extend my sense of time as much as possible. In the endlessly stretched time, Viper moved to strike my abdomen, chin, and head.

Fatal blows.

Each strike was imbued with the intent to kill me.

I dodged his strikes by moving my feet, pushing with my hands, and twisting my waist.

“Why!”

Viper didn't stop.

Before the sound of his footsteps faded, he appeared on the other side. He swung his sword. I barely avoided his strike by pushing my aura to its limit.

“King of Death! Why you!”

In the moment I avoided the strike.

Our eyes met. His were ablaze with venom. It made me wonder if this is how a jar of venomous snakes would look, writhing within.

His eyes shimmered in a dark red color, like a jar of poison.

“Why is only you, making others happy!”

“What are you talking about all of a sudden,”

“You inherited the Martial Arts of Demonic Heaven!”

That was unexpected for me.

Frozen for a moment, Viper shouted as if coughing up blood.

“You provided the Heavenly Demon with her greatest moments! You gave her gifts. Despite being devoured by the pain of death, the Heavenly Demon could genuinely smile because of the gifts you gave!”

He was a comrade who had entered the [Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon] with me.

I fought on the side of the Demonic Cult, and Viper on the orthodox side.

I revered the Heavenly Demon as my master, and Viper had the Head of the Martial Alliance as his master.

“Why!”

The comrade who shared winter with me yelled.

“Why couldn't the Head of the Alliance do the same!”

"....."

His cry had the power to momentarily stop me in my tracks.

Blood splattered from my cheek as I was struck by Viper's aura, but I couldn't help but stand still.

“Namgung Woon, my gramps, also fought desperately! To become a human who could rival the Heavenly Demon... he dedicated his life to training! To me, the Head of the Martial Alliance seems more noble! But why... why did he have to find his late happiness in taking care of clueless fools rather than meeting such an end...”

Viper's aura darkened further.

The purple aura rose from his shoulders, slowly rippling, and eventually stretched into the air.

“Is it my fault?”

"....."

"Is that also my fault? Did I fail to understand the Head of the Martial Alliance deeper, just like I couldn't properly take care of these guys... Why do I..."

Viper was still looking down.

But as quiet as his voice became, the amount of aura emanating from his whole body was massive. Now, Viper's aura hung on his back, moving like wriggling tentacles.

Silence.

The fight between the Celestial Martial and the King of Death Family was reaching a conclusion.

Every time Kim Yul swung his sword, a couple of possessed bodies died. Each time Uburka chopped with his axe, half a dozen bodies were severed. When Ester swung her red greatsword, a line of possessed bodies attempting a counterattack evaporated in an instant.

"....."

Only Viper's own screams were heard.

The deeper the defeat, the deeper the silence grew.

“King of Death...”

“Yes, Celestial Martial Guild Master.”

“Why me...”

And then.

Viper slowly raised his head.

Our eyes met.

His eyes were writhing in pure darkness, and I realized.

‘Ah.’

Only after locking eyes with him did I fully understand. I grasped the meaning behind Viper's eyes and the vibration in his voice. Maybe it was because I, more than anyone, could deeply understand it.

Because it was the same look and voice I had once harbored.

My first wish. The resentment I couldn't fulfill until my first death. My desire and essence to swing my sword as I pleased, walking only the paths I wanted, breathing clean air on high mountains, living as I wanted.

The first skill I acquired.

[I Want to Become Just Like You].

The moment I looked into Viper's eyes, I acutely understood the name of the venom within them.

“Me too.”

Viper gritted his teeth.



If there was a soul, it would be tearing out from his molars right now.

“I, too, wanted to be someone like you.”

Indeed.

At some point, I had already become that kind of existence to others.

# Chapter 250:

## Reversal (2)

---

I had become an object of envy.

"....."

No, this isn't simply an emotion that can be expressed as 'envy.'

Jealousy. Yes, jealousy best describes that bubbling loneliness.

'It's not the first time.'

Yes, it's not the first time.

Hunters I didn't know. Those who couldn't leave the first floor, waiting day after day, wondering when their skills would

awaken.

To countless others, [King of Death Kim Gong-Ja] is already an object of jealousy.

'I knew that.'

I quite enjoyed the overwhelming attention like a tidal wave – the articles praising me, voices seeking autographs, the whispers pointing at me on the streets.

'But.....'

Yes, but.

'Even you.'

I slowly looked at Viper.

'Even someone like you, is jealous of me.'

Who is Viper?

The kind of casual conversations and jokes we exchanged now would have been [impossible] to the me of the past, to the point of shock.

'My idols in my heart.'

To me, who was a fan of the top hunters, they were no different from idols.

Even though the idol group's leader, Flame Emperor Yoo Soo-Ha, retired due to unfortunate events and was preparing to become a trainee again, Viper was still one of my idols.

And there he was, boiling with aura in all directions, crying out in jealousy of me.

"Ah,"

Facing that heart directly in front of me.

"Ahahaha, Ahahahaha!"

I couldn't help but laugh out loud.

"Ahahahaha, ah, ahahahaha!"

A plain under the moonlight.

The vegetation crumbled in the sand desert, the fine sand colors undulating here and there in the wind. Millions of rose petals rolled in the valleys and hills of the sand desert.

And then, it rained.

The rain of autumn.

Red rain poured from all sides. It was a downpour. The sand desert soaked in water, the lines of the valleys glistening. The rose petals, drenched in raindrops, became much fresher.

And so, the world, the sand desert, came to life with the sound of falling rain and flowing water, and the golden petals

embroidered the surface, creating the illusion that something sacred was sleeping there.

An oasis created in the middle of the desert.

When the scenery around us became an oasis, I finally stopped laughing.

"Ahaha...ha, ha.....ahaha."

Viper glared at me.

"You laughed?"

With my face wet from the rain, I nodded.

"Yes. I feel like I've laughed all I will for the year right here."

"You brat!"

Swoosh!

Viper, making use of his lightning-fast specialty, tried to decapitate me in one go.

But it was in vain. Where he stepped to take his stance, there were grains of sand from Kim Yul. In the air he passed through to fly at me, there were petals from Silvia.

Above all, no matter what stance he took, he was already soaked in Ester's rain.

"I'm sorry, Celestial Martial Guild Master."

As if I had anticipated exactly how and where he would attack, I countered Viper's strike.

"Because I was strong, I could fully serve my master? Because I was strong, I could raise children strongly? You're right. But... you seem to be misunderstanding something, Celestial Martial Guild Master."

"A misunderstanding...?"

“I wasn’t strong from the beginning.”

I grabbed a short spear rolling on the ground. Then, gathering and compressing aura, I shot the glowing red spear.

Towards Viper.

"Kuk...!"

Viper desperately rolled to avoid my attack. Shashashak! The sharp spear tore through petals and deeply burrowed into the desert sand.

Raindrops dripped from the handle of the spear, falling drop by drop.

Viper stood up, bleeding. He hadn’t completely avoided the spear I fired, and his body was already a mess.

“Damn...! What are you saying!”

“Exactly what I said, I wasn’t strong from the beginning.”



I created three aura spears. A few petals, grains of sand, drops of rain gathered and quickly focused into the form of deep red spears. The three spears circled in the air, waiting for my command.

“Even this trickery I’m doing right now.”

I lightly gestured, sending the spears towards Viper.

“Kuheeeeuuk!?”

Blood splattered.

“Really, it’s surprisingly recent. Without the support of Ester, Silvia, Kim Yul, and my vassals, I couldn’t waste aura like this.”

Viper successfully avoided two of the three spears. But that was my intention.

The last aura spear, hitting Viper’s shoulder, penetrated his flesh. He screamed and fell.

“It wasn’t because I was strong from the beginning that I defeated the Demon King of Autumn Rain. It wasn’t because I was strong from the beginning that I could reassure and comfort my master, definitely not.”

When I heard Viper’s words, I remembered when I first met my master.

So, I laughed.

Back then, I practically begged to be acknowledged as an outer disciple by my master.

My master said, [Let’s see if you qualify to be a direct disciple], and took me somewhere, where a pit swarming with martial arts zombies was dug.

The so-called hunger training of Demonic Heavenly God Art. A training course for realizing the Sword of Starving Death.

-What are you hesitating for? Fall into hell already.

As I was being battered by the zombies, my master said.

-Remember the longest time you've ever starved.

-The longest was about three to four days...

-What? Three to four days?

My master's reaction to my answer was incredulous.

-Oh dear. Oh. Tsk tsk tsk. We're not on the same page.

-Okay, it's my fault! I had some expectations, but as expected, you're just all talk.

And then my master... left me behind.

I had been abandoned in the pit, struggling and fighting fiercely, and he left me without a second glance.

-Heavenly Demon! Heavenly Demon!? Please wait a moment! Seriously, being starved isn't an achievement! How can it be that I can't learn martial arts because of that!? What!? This is absurd...

In the moment of my swearing, I was devoured by a martial arts zombie.

"Ahahaha...."

It was the memory of that time that made me burst into laughter.

My master, so cold and noble.

It was so hard to offer even a single flower to you.

And now, there are people who, out of jealousy, are striving to beat me, trying everything to surpass me. What should I do about this?

My master must have also received a lot of jealousy and envy during their lifetime. I wonder how you would have acted then. It's a bit regrettable that I can't ask you these questions now, and I can't hear your voice.

"Celestial Martial Guild Master... It wasn't because I was strong from the beginning that I achieved everything."

"....."

"It was simply that I was allowed a little more time than others."

Viper was panting heavily, looking up at me.

Of course, he didn't understand my words.

'So different from me.'

Ah, I understood Viper's heart.

I could understand it completely, without any falsehood or misunderstanding.

Not only because I had once been in a position where I envied others.

'Because I heard it.'

Since the moment Viper swung his sword at me and cried out.

Images of Viper and the Heretic Inquisitor from times I had never met and yet to meet flickered in my mind, like mirages.

Not just their appearances but even their voices.

-I know you are trying to 'fix' me.

-Because.

-You cannot take responsibility for me.

I looked at Viper.

He was still looking up at me. Under his dark, swarming eyes, his thick lips were tightly shut.

But...

-We could be friends and colleagues.

-Isn't that enough?

Even now, I could hear the voices clustered in Viper's heart.

It wasn't the awakening of a new skill. My skill list was still filled only with footsteps proving my life. It wasn't a sudden inspiration to read people's inner thoughts, it was simply.

‘The remnants left by the Tower Master.’

The aftermath of being killed by the Tower Master and witnessing her trauma.

Jaa Soo-Jeong, the master of this tower, embraces all the misfortunes and miseries of life. The moments of their suffering are all witnessed and remembered by the god. Countless, perhaps innumerable, humans' [traumas] are transplanted into the Tower Master.

As much as they suffer, the Tower Master suffers too.

When they scream, the Tower Master screams along.

Thus, the trauma of all people becomes the Tower Master's trauma.

‘The moment I saw the Tower Master's trauma... Did I also start to see the trauma of everyone dwelling in this tower?’

An overwhelming amount of memories, almost impossible for one person to bear.

Therefore, I usually don't remember, can't recall, and live on having forgotten.

‘But when Viper cries out with his past hatred like now...’

It [starts to become audible] to me.

‘Just like when I see the trauma of those who killed me.’

Scenes the Tower Master witnessed, the wounds he implanted in his heart.



Whether it was truly something that happened in the [past] of this world, or something Jaa Soo-Jeong intervened in and created, or perhaps something that will occur in some [future], I wasn't sure.

The Semi-Divine Eye.

I had opened my eyes to it.

“.....Ha.”

I let out a hollow laugh again.

This is the world the Tower Master sees.

Just by encountering people, occasionally, I could hear their screams and cries; it made me sad, wondering for whom such a life is meant.

"What have you been laughing at!"

I shook my head to clear my thoughts.

Then, I looked down at the human before me.

"Celestial Martial Guild Master... Do you want to beat me?"

Viper hesitated at the sudden question.

I continued without concern.

"Fair and square. Just you and me, one-on-one, without anything else, just to beat me up?"

Viper made a sound.

"What if that was the case..."

Blood gushed from Viper's mouth.

"Then what will you do...!"

I didn't avoid his blood.

Since Viper was lying down and I was looking down at him, a few drops of blood from his mouth splattered on my cheek.

“I’ll give you a chance.”

Like I didn’t wipe away the rain, I didn’t wipe off the blood either.

“Again, I wasn’t strong from the beginning. Time. I needed a lot of time. During that time, the children I mingled with, the children I took in, became my family.”

I grabbed the energy spear stuck in his shoulder and pulled it out. Cough! Once again, Viper’s body writhed and blood spurted.

“And there is a way to buy a lot of time for the Celestial Martial Guild Master.”

I slowly opened my lips.

“200 years, 6 months and 21 days.”

“.....?”

“That’s the time the Heretic Inquisitor endured alone on the 31st floor.”

Silence.

For a brief moment, it seemed Viper didn’t understand what I said. But slowly, his eyes widened. Drip. Raindrops from the sky flowed down my hair onto Viper's body. Drip, a few drops fell before Viper finally spoke.

“You mean, that is... so...”

“Yes.”

I nodded.

“Whether it takes 200 years or 300 years, endure time alone in this stage like the Heretic Inquisitor. Train and practice over centuries. Gather people.”

"....."

"And then challenge me again, Celestial Martial Guild Master."

Centuries.

A closed-door training trapped by time, not space.

That was the method I suggested to Viper.

# Chapter 251:

## Reversal (3)

---

Viper slowly opened his eyes.

Black liquid dripped from his eyes, and the intense heat that had plagued his face subsided. I could tell his reason was gradually awakening from being ensnared in delusion.

"To tell me to go into seclusion..."

"More precisely, it's not about closing yourself off in seclusion but being confined to this stage, this world. So it should be called 'Closed Realm Training.' To take an entire world as your training ground, there's no more luxurious or lavish training than that."

I smiled.

"Jealous of me, you say? Ah, I must've grown too much without realizing it. Me. How the people by my side feel, I should have paid more attention to that... How lacking I am as

a person. Such a bad person... Did you expect me to look at the Celestial Martial Guild Master with a pitiful expression in this manner?"

"....."

"I am feeling absolutely fantastic right now!"

I laughed out loud, so heartily that during my laughter, petals from Silvia's flowers stuck to my lips, and tears from Ester entered my mouth. Nonetheless, I didn't mind and continued to laugh heartily.

"Being the object of jealousy, Celestial Martial Guild Master, really makes me feel so good. Ah, ah, I must've been born into this world to experience this. To think that my purpose in life is just to make everyone jealous of me, it feels just... ecstatic."

"You..."

"I mean it."

At that moment, a spear flew from the pile of corpses opposite us.

With a flick of my hand, I disrupted the trajectory of the spear, sending it off course. Thud! Simultaneously, Viper's possessed body charged at me, springing from the pile of corpses.

"Hraaaaaah!!"

Though small in stature, he wielded a great sword. Was this Viper's hidden trump card? Buried in that pile of corpses, waiting for a moment of vulnerability to strike, even if just once.

"Celestial Martial Guild Master. Or should I say, Mr. Viper."

I stamped my foot.

The ground in this vicinity turned into sand, making a rustling sound under Kim Yul's control.

"Why are you so persistent?"

I slashed the ground with my sword.



Whoooooosh-

Simultaneously, right where Viper's possessed body was charging, sand holes started to appear. He tried to backpedal in surprise, but it was too late. More sand holes appeared there. Before he could escape, the sand holes swallowed his toes, calves, thighs, torso, and finally, his head.

"Do you see?"

Resting my hand on Kim Yul's shoulder, I looked at Viper's possessed body.

"Whether it's twelve wings of the Ghost Tribe or thirty-six thousand, no, even the entire Ghost Tribe turned into clones and fought, you can't beat me now."

"....."

"Shall we fight like this? What do you say? Throwing away all honor and driving the Ghost Tribe to extinction? Anyway, if we lose the fight, we haven't lost our pride, so it's okay... A funeral where everyone says it's okay. Celestial Martial Guild Master, Mr. Viper, is this the scene you wish for?"

I grabbed Viper by the collar.

"It's not, is it?"

"....."

"You don't desire such a glorious defeat, do you?"

Silence followed.

Then, Viper's lips parted.

"I want..."

"Yes."

"I want, even if just once..."

"Yes."

"To get ahead of you."

"Yes."

"I want to be the protagonist!"

Right.

That was the real bottom line.

If we were to articulate this wish, it would be a pitifully mundane sentence.

[I] [want] [to be like you]

What a raw desire.

"Ahaha."

Yet, this mass of desire appeared beautiful in my eyes.

Because Viper is a man of action.

He's different from someone who merely envies and types away on a keyboard. Different from someone who waits for an uncertain fortune, wasting away their days.

Viper is different from me.

He thought, strived, and acted to catch up to me while envying me. He is a strong person who turns his jealousy into personal growth.

How could I not laugh?

"Celestial Martial Guild."

Looking at Viper, I said.

"As you said, Namgung Woon, the Head of the Martial Alliance, is the Celestial Martial Guild's Supreme Leader."

A question arose in Viper's eyes.

I continued without regard.

"I've heard that he usually trains the guild members of Celestial Martial Guild. But no matter how well-off the guild members of a tower's famous clan are, would they ever catch the eye of the head of the great family, who was once revered as a genius in one world? That must be why you're suffering too."

Viper's face contorted in pain, silently acknowledging the truth of my words.

I spoke slowly.

"But think back to the last Great Orthodox-Demonic War."

"....."

"On either side of the vast snowy field, a thousand troops of the Demonic Cult were arrayed. Their lives as shadows, they were draped in black robes from head to toe. A grand total of a thousand. As the world was being engulfed in snow, leading to its downfall, they gathered from all over to escort the Heavenly Demon, truly the epitome of the Demonic Cult's might."

As I continued.

The warriors of our family, who had been quietly arrayed until then, began to move.

They formed a precise and exact line on the wide sandy plain.

Even the moonlight seemed to fade as it neared their battalion. From a distance, they appeared as one gigantic mass, like a black dragon.

"....."

Viper swallowed dryly.

Even if he hadn't regained his body yet, the sight of a thousand elite Demonic Cult troops arrayed on the sandy plain was worth seeing. Being a spirit didn't mean he couldn't recognize their strength.

"But, Mr. Viper. They are not the only ones here."

I activated my skill.

"Ghoul Reincarnation."

Then.

On the plains right opposite where the followers were arrayed, new moon shadows began to cast.

It was murky. Various shadows peeked out from the dark bushes. At first, it seemed like a weasel peeking through the bushes, then it looked like a deer running through the reed forest.

The skins they wore over their bodies were white, and their fur was utterly white. Thus, they seemed to illuminate the world simply by existing. As the summoning ended and they fluctuated as one entity, they stood firm in place, resembling a great white tiger.

"They are..."

Viper recognized them.

I nodded.

“Yes.”

The ghouls I had never summoned before.

Though I had the ability to summon them, I didn't feel worthy to call upon them, so I had left them in their final rest.

“The Martial Alliance’s 1,000 orthodox elites.”

“.....”

“You are a disciple of Namgung Woon, the Alliance Leader. Therefore, just as I, as a disciple of the master, became the Vice-lord of the Demonic Cult, you too have the right to lead them.”

Viper gazed blankly at the 1,000 orthodox troops etched across the plains.

“But now, they will not swear loyalty to you.”



“That’s right. ...You were the one who prepared for the Great Orthodox-Demonic War there.”

“It won’t be easy to win their loyalty, one by one.”

“Are you saying I should try...”

“No.”

I looked at Viper and said.

“You can do it.”

Viper plucked the spear stuck in his chest with a crackle.

He stood upright, his face twisted in pain and humiliation.

“Those orthodox warriors will vanish along with you when you leave the stage.”

“Yes. They exist as part of my skill.”

“Then, winning their acknowledgment will have to wait until after the closure of the world.”

“It seems so.”

Viper spat out blood-stained saliva, glaring at me.

“Wait for me, King of Death.”

The eye of the Ghost Tribe warrior he possessed, the one eye of Viper within him, focused on me like the tip of a spear.

“I lost this stage! Yes, our Ghost Tribe children have lost! But next time will be different... Next time! Just you wait quietly there!”

“No.”

And again, I negated his words.

“What will the loser do even with closed realm training?”

Viper seemed momentarily unable to understand.

However, my retainers understood. Especially Ester, the advisor of the King of Death family, who had bought Divine Descent for a steep price of 10,000 race points for just 5 minutes in the real world, surely understood my thoughts better than anyone else.

“Princess! I forfeit this stage!”

Even when I shouted so, my retainers remained unshaken.

Only Viper was disturbed.

“What!? Wait, forfeiture, why...”

I raised my hand to stop Viper.

“Look behind me, Celestial Martial Guild Master.”

The heat in Viper's eyes cleared again. Through his hazy vision, he would have started to see the scene beyond my shoulders.

The Earth Spirit Tribe was there.

-.....

-.....

Thousands of Earth Spirit warriors. They all had their arms crossed.

The weapons they once held and aimed at enemies were now placed at their feet.

Their angry gazes were directed at our family's retainers, the great white giant Uburka.

-.....

-.....

The Earth Spirit Tribe remained silent. Yet, it was clear what they meant, despite their silence. [They could not accept such a victory].

“Ah, ah. No matter how absurd things get, it seems I've crossed a line.”

I laughed bitterly, spreading my arms.

“Taking care of children is truly a difficult task. What you think is best for them can sometimes be an intrusion and disregard for them.”

Viper's eyes, now free of fever, would have seen more.

Including the Ghost Tribe survivors who had fled from the fiery mansion, looking at the resurrected Viper in their borrowed bodies with incomprehension.

“But there's a significant difference. Do you know what it is, Celestial Martial Guild Master?”

Between the Earth Spirit Tribe protesting me and the Ghost Tribe fearing Viper, I said to Viper.

“The winner has the right to refuse a victory they don't cherish.”

Viper's eyes widened.

“You...!”

I nodded and said.

“On the other hand, the loser has no right to refuse such a refused victory.”

“Stop joking around!”

Viper roared in protest.

“I can't accept such a victory, this kind of victory...”

Viper's words faded, not because he understood the phrase 'the loser has no right to refuse a refused victory' intellectually.

If the King of Death's family hadn't intervened and he had possessed the corpses of the Ghost Tribe to annihilate the Earth Spirit Tribe, the surviving Ghost Tribe would not have wanted such a victory either.

Recognition dawned in Viper's one eye. Even amidst the scorn of the Earth Spirit Tribe, I couldn't help but find it gratifying.

Viper will become stronger.

Stronger and stronger, endlessly stronger.

“Celestial Martial Guild Master.”

Therefore, I had no complaints or fears about stepping down here.

The Earth Spirit Tribe will do well.

The Black Dragon Witch, the Paladin, the Sword Saint, and of course, the Celestial Martial Guild Master, will splendidly complete the climb up to the '40th floor,' or in effect, up to the '50th floor.'

“Work hard. See you next time.”

As I was about to turn away.

“Liǎofàn!”

Viper called out.

“Yes?”

“My name is Liǎofàn!”

Viper glared at me.

“It’s not an alias or a nickname, my name is Liǎofàn! Got it!”

"....."

“Liǎofàn! Next time, I’ll call you by your name, and you’ll call me by mine! Don’t forget!”



In that moment.

Whoooooosh-

A white light began to envelop us.

[Stage forfeited.]

[You have forfeited clearing the 36th floor.]

Enveloped in white light, nothing else was visible.

Not just me, but all my family members, excluding Uburka, along with Silvia Evanair, Kim Yul, Ester, the Four Demon Lords, the followers, everyone began to fade away in the white luminescence.

“You crazy bastard!”

Then, below, a Ghost Tribe member, his horns broken and his body battered, but his eyes unwaveringly focused on me, was giving me the finger.

So, I also calmly raised my middle finger in response.

“A lunatic only sees lunatics-.”

“What? You damn bastard, just you wait! When I see you next time, I’ll—”

As Viper grimaced.

[You will be transferred to a temporary space!]

The transfer finally took place.

And our consciousness faded.

# Chapter 252:

## Independence (1)

---

The luminescence enveloping me slowly dissipated.

Swoooooosh-

Despite the somewhat drained sound in my ears, the sight before my eyes was nothing short of divine.

Starting from the light encircling my head, then my neck, shoulders, arms, and eventually legs and feet, the light unfurled like silk threads, dispersing in all directions.

‘Perhaps these luminescences are some sort of skill.’

Then, whose life might be encapsulated within them?

I quietly observed the shimmering silk threads dissipating

with a somewhat poignant sentiment....

“No way! A forfeiture!”

I couldn't just stand by and watch.

The familiar face of the princess suddenly popped up from the ground.

Not only the sound effects but even the background seemed drained, with a hole forming on the ground and her emerging with grunts. A ghost, perhaps? Had the horror movie industry hit a slump, leading her to take up roles in comedy films? Such a pity....

“King of Death, what are you thinking? Why forfeit here!?”

The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages.

Being both a pillar supporting the tower and the daughter of the Tower Master.

The girl, who likely held the most powerful influence next to the Tower Master, was venting her stress, flailing her usual pillow.

“Are you mistaken? Huh? Our King of Death, just pretending to forfeit while concocting some cunning plan, right? I trust you completely. Come on, speak up!”

“No.”

I replied calmly.

“I’m really going to forfeit.”

“What! Seriouslyyyyyy!?”

The princess exploded in disbelief.

“Not even spoiling the broth! What’s going on! After all the effort you put into nurturing the Earth Spirit Tribe kids! It was just about time for the real Earth Spirit Tribe to unify the continent. But why, why would you forfeit...”

“The kids didn't want it.”

“Huh?”

I sat down on a white chair. This space, with only white extending to the horizon, was surprisingly convenient. Just thinking, [It would be nice to have a chair here], made one appear.

As I sat, tea and cups also appeared as if they had been waiting.

“Hmm.”

I lifted the tea to smell its fragrance. It was indeed a sophisticated peach tea. To put it metaphorically...

"....."

It was as if a Lipton iced tea, knighted for its service, led to significant victories in battle across three generations, finally receiving formal nobility.

Hmm.

I tasted the tea, bowing my head slightly.

“I wonder when my food metaphors will become more elegant...”

“Sigh...”

“Don’t sigh, Princess. I’m the one who wants to sigh.”

Seeing my commoner-like attitude, perhaps the princess regained some of her noble dignity.

She propped her forehead and plunked down opposite me, shrugging as if postponing her reprimand.

“Well, it’ll get fancier, won’t it? When I first tried pizza as a kid, I was as moved as when eating 3 pork cutlets. But as I grew older and ate seasoned chicken, I was shocked as if it were 5 pizzas.”

“So, in your world, there are pork cutlets, pizza, and seasoned chicken.”

“Yeah. So now, my basic unit of taste is seasoned chicken. Compared to my childhood, I’ve indeed become quite a gourmet.”

Truly a luxurious palate.

‘Is this befitting a kingdom’s noble... or rather, a pillar of the tower?’

For someone like the princess, who lived a life above the clouds, the idea of someone like me, who had to count how many rice cakes were given on the street, must be unimaginable... I was thinking this when she spoke, hugging her pillow.

“But still, the most delicious thing was the bean paste stew my mother cooked.”

“There’s bean paste stew too.”

“Yeah. That’s the one taste I couldn’t express with any



amount of seasoned chicken. It's literally the taste of memories. That's why I still often ask her to cook it."

"I understand. I also often recall the egg fried rice with sesame oil and soy sauce that the director used to make. Actually, before challenging the 31st floor, I asked a few times and got to eat it."

If my family members were here, Ester would have asked, 'Does the Tower Master cook bean paste stew?', Silvia would have wondered, 'Is your family really noble...?', and Kim Yul would have scolded, 'Stop exploiting my friend for egg rice, family head. Do you not have hands or feet? Make it yourself.' But none of that happened.

It's metaphorical, indicating that only the princess and I were present, not the family members.

-Crazy bastard....

[Shiny deeply agrees in silence with the Sword Emperor.]

As always, let's not mind these two.

Anyway, that's how the princess and I, from different economic classes, dramatically reached a consensus.

‘Huh.’

Suddenly, I felt slightly dizzy.

The Semi-Divine Eye activated while facing Viper.

Without warning, it flickered before my eyes, pulling me into a daydream.

---

-My child.

It felt like stealing someone's past in a trauma.

-The daughter of a humble servant...

It was a dark underground place.

The Amethyst Viscount, not yet the Tower Master, was caring for someone with a face she had never shown before.

A small child.

Much smaller than now, but I recognized her as [The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages].

-The daughter I love...

The figure who would become the Master of All Lives and the Goddess of the Tower caressed the child's cheek,

-Yes, let's go home. Let's go to sleep, mommy.

said the girl, not yet the overall administrator of this stage, caressing her cheek in return.

"....."

I blankly watched the daydream.

The place where the mother and daughter caressed each other's cheeks was a sanctuary. It seemed that no one should dare approach. In the eyes of the Tower Master looking down at her daughter, there was only affection, a kind that brought tears to the eyes just by watching.

Perhaps this was one of the true faces of a god.

The god and her daughter held hands and left somewhere. That was it.

In the daydream shown by the Semi-Divine Eye, I couldn't tell where they were going or why they said [let's go home].

Just as the two left the dark underground and climbed some stairs,

"....."

Thunk,

the daydream ended.

---

I blinked my eyes.

Reality continued where the dream had broken off.

“---So, I’m actually quite good at cooking, you know?”

The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages chattered excitedly.

“If I had to grade my cooking, it would be EX rank. It can’t be anything else. Anyway, I’ve inherited my mom’s cooking skills. If I, instead of bean paste stew, make seasoned chicken... If that becomes the taste of memories, King of Death, that would be a revolution in taste. A journey worthy of being chronicled in about 200 novels titled ‘Princess Cooking’...”

The princess, unaware that I had just had a daydream, proudly rambled on about what she wanted to say.

In her eyes, I appeared troubled. Not just because of her terrifying plan for a culinary revolution.

I was pondering the [phenomenon] that had just occurred to me.

‘Is this also a fragment of the Tower Master's trauma?’

For Jaa Soo-Jeong, her entire life was practically trauma.

She collected not only her own traumas but also those of others, and even created countless parallel worlds under the premise [what if something else had happened]. In each parallel world, Jaa Soo-Jeong saved someone, died, was tortured, or was brutally murdered.

‘All those memories are now potentially hidden within me.’

It seems the speculation I had while facing Viper was correct.

‘Even now.’

The volume of information is so vast that I can't consciously grasp it while awake,

But occasionally, unconsciously, like in a dream, it appears.

‘This is troublesome.’

I might see a scene from decades in the future or an event from hundreds of years ago in a world completely unrelated to me.

No, or perhaps I'll see a possible world like the one where Yoo Soo-Ha was with Jaa Soo-Jeong.

What else should I call this if not a daydream?

‘I understand why she tried so hard to dissuade me back then.’

I inwardly smirked.

When I declared I wanted to see the Tower Master's trauma, she desperately tried to dissuade me. Offering other gifts or rewards, she begged me not to look at her trauma.

-Please, I beg of you.

-You will be torn apart.

The Tower Master pleaded with me like that.

Now, I think I somewhat understand the meaning of her warning.

After sipping what seemed to be an ultra-evolved version of Lipton iced tea, I looked at the princess.

“Princess.”

“Huh? When will you let me taste your cooking? Sorry, King of Death, but first, you need to convince me with your cooking skills. I’m like the final boss in cooking manga. When you bring your best dish, I’ll easily surpass it and expand the universe of culinary arts—”

“No, Princess, it’s not about that... You really love your mother, don’t you?”



The princess paused.

After a moment, a smile formed on her lips.

“Yes. I love my mom.”

Her smile was immediate, without a hint of hesitation.

“As a daughter of a god, didn’t you ever feel burdened? Why, in typical clichés, they say, ‘I wish I was born in a normal family.’”

“Ahaha. What’s that?”

The princess laughed while fiddling with her teacup.

“Well, okay. I was going to question you about forfeiting. But for now, I’ll indulge in the King of Death’s banter.”

“How is it really? Living as the daughter of a god?”

“Hmmmm. Being my mother's child is incredibly nice and happy!”

The princess beamed brightly.

“But there’s an error in one of your questions. You know, like, ‘Wouldn’t it have been happier to be born in a normal family?’ That doesn’t apply to me... well, to any of my mother’s children.”

“Huh?”

I tilted my head, not understanding her point.

The princess sipped her tea, peering at me over the rim of her cup.

“It's hard to grasp all at once, isn't it? Imagine it like this.”

Beside the teacup was a glass jar filled with sugar cubes.

She opened the jar and delicately picked the topmost sugar

cube with slender fingers.

“There exists a certain ‘special’ human who inevitably commits massacres upon birth.”

The lifted sugar cube slowly moved out of the jar.

“In any world, this person is the same.”

The sugar cube, transferred over the teacup, dropped with a plunk.

“Ruining people, burning lands, destroying countries, crumbling continents.”

The sugar cube dissolved, swirling in the tea.

“In any world. In any family. Under any parents, this doesn’t change. This person is truly, truly ‘special’ in that sense.”

That was the wish I once harbored for Yoo Soo-Ha.

Wishing that Yoo Soo-Ha would be an irredeemable being from the moment of birth, or even before, envisioning some demonic entity.

“No one can reform this person. No one can teach this person about love. No one can convince or persuade this person that ‘the world is better existing as it is rather than not.’”

The princess lifted her cup to her lips.

As she set the cup back on the table, I anticipated the conclusion and shivered at the conclusion I surmised.

Chills ran down my spine.

“That’s...”

“There are exactly 24 of these ‘special’ ones across all creation.”

The princess smiled broadly.

“And coincidentally, there are 24 children of our mother.”

“Hmm, among them, I'm the eldest. In our kingdom, I'm known as Baek Soo-Jeong\*, or Quartz. Really. It's tough with such mischievous siblings!”

\*Her name has the hanja for ‘Quartz’, a white crystal. ‘Baek’ in korean means ‘White’ and ‘Soo-Jeong’, as mentioned before, means crystal.

I remained silent.

Unconsciously, I murmured the Tower Master's often-spoken maxim.

“There are no humans born wrong in this world...”

“That's right!”

Clap. The princess clapped softly.

“Our mother might seem a bit foolish, right? Anyway, she

gathered only those children who would have been born wrong and made them her own.”

“And she taught us all about love.”

The princess winked playfully.

“But that’s where the limit was.”

“The limit...?”

“We now understand the emotion of love. But we only love our mother. Our scales are much different from others, you see, if you weigh the entire world against our mother, she easily outweighs it. Hmm. The world is almost like a feather.”

I see.

In other words.

In stark contrast to the relationship I formed with the Earth Spirit Tribe as their father...

"Yep."

The princess before me, the daughter of a god, is

"Right now, the only reason I don't bring down the tower or towers is simply because Mom asked me not to."

She's completely dependent on her parent.

The princess, who sits in a completely different parent-child relationship than mine, smiled radiantly.

"Don't worry. We don't really disobey our mother's requests, maybe as a joke sometimes... but we never do anything that would truly make her sad. There are a few crazies, but they can't enter the tower, so don't worry."

"....."

"So, what was it... Ah, right. Forfeiture! Why did you forfeit, King of Death! The Earth Spirit Tribe was just two steps away from conquering the continent! It doesn't make sense to forfeit there!"

I calmed myself down.

Perhaps, just now, the princess wasn't aware of the expression she wore.

When she said [I could bring down the tower], her eyes... No. Let's not speak of it. What's the point of describing a demon? There's no need to unlock a curse sealed in solitude with words.

The princess is the manager of the floor. I am the one climbing the floor.

That should be enough for our relationship.

"As I mentioned, the kids didn't like it."

"The kids? The Earth Spirit Tribe didn't like it? That's why you forfeited?"

"That's right."



I nodded.

“We offered our help to the Earth Spirit Tribe. In the midst of life and death battles, who wouldn’t want help? Yet, the Earth Spirit Tribe flatly refused, saying, ‘This is our matter.’”

“Hmm.”

“They are already forging their own path. Everything happening there, the mistakes... even the deaths, they believe they can and must handle on their own. They have the capability too.”

I recalled the current Chairman of the Council who had replied to Uburka in a way that said, [Ancestor, please just back off], and smiled slightly.

“They’ve grown up.”

"....."

“I shouldn’t interfere with them anymore. Of course, not interfering might lead to greater harm. It’s sad and infuriating, but unless the Earth Spirit Tribe kids ask for help

themselves, I'll just observe them."

Luck and ability favored me, and I succeeded in raising the Earth Spirit Tribe to be the top race of the continent.

But I don't want to say or hear things like, 'It's all thanks to me raising you' or 'You should worship me as a god.'

'This is it.'

My role in guiding these kids from outside their world ends here.

The Earth Spirit Tribe kids have stood on the ground with their own feet.

They have proved they don't need more than their own strength to defeat their enemies and don't need a god's shoulder to reach their destination.

Then, the only thing left for a god is to step back and watch them.

“But still! Aren’t you worried or curious?”

The princess flapped her pillow.

“Like, what disasters await the remaining layers? What will become of the Earth Spirit Tribe’s last evolution? The identity of the deferred rewards?”

“I do know the identities of the remaining layers.”

Naturally.

Before regressing, I had seen Yoo Soo-Ha clear up to the 40th floor.

‘Especially from the 37th floor, they’re what you call [World Quests].’

No longer localized missions, their content wouldn’t stray far from what I knew.

“I also know about the rewards.”

Once, I told my comrades in the tower that the mystery itself of the sequential clear rewards not being revealed was a puzzle.

This will be disclosed the moment the 40th floor is cleared.

Moreover, for that reason.

“I don’t worry about not meeting the Earth Spirit Tribe after their final evolution.”

I stated confidently.

“I, the King of Death, will forfeit at the 36th floor. Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages.”

"....."

“And soon, I’ll resume climbing and, as promised, save your mother.”

I bowed my head.

“So, please.”

"....."

“Allow me to let these children be independent.”

A long, long silence followed.

The princess sighed and looked at me. Intently. Endlessly. The aroma of the tea had settled, and its temperature had all evaporated. After many minutes of mutual silent observation, the princess slowly spoke.

“Okay.”

The princess smiled bitterly.

“The goblins are gaining independence before me.”

With that quiet lament, the voice of the tower announced.

[Stage forfeited.]

[You have forfeited clearing the 36th floor.]

['The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages' acknowledges the King of Death's forfeiture!]

Here we go.

Children.

Now, it's your era.

# Chapter 253:

## Independence (2)

---

“Shall I transfer you to the first floor of Babylon? Or...”

“No, I'd like to wait here.”

I set down my luxurious Lipton black tea and replied.

The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages gave a slight smile.

“Alright, good. As a service, I'll add one camera for you.”

With a clap of her hands, a vast hologram unfolded in the air.

The screen showed the Earth Spirit Tribe and the Ghost Tribe. I could inspect any city I wanted, even quickly scroll to

cities far away from the continent.

“This is... impressive.”

“Yes. You can even set the playback speed! X10, X100, X1000, X10000 speeds are all possible. Watch as you wish.”

“Thank you.”

Thus, we watched the flow of the [world].

---

On the screen, warriors of the Earth Spirit Tribe roared, waving their arms.

-Charge, everyone!

Amazingly, they were fighting Uburka.

-Ugor! Damn ancestor! We refused your help!



-Hahaha!

Uburka laughed heartily.

-Yes, you did say that! But the Ghost Tribe wanted to oppose you with the power of gods! They couldn't even properly resist, having been caught off guard, could you defeat that?

-That too was a trial we had to endure!

-You talk well! But the right theories of the powerless are just empty talk!

Wielding his axe, Uburka exclaimed.

-If you say you could overcome it by yourselves! If you say you don't need my help! Ugor, you damn guys!

Uburka laughed.

That laugh was the same as when he blocked the holy site of the Mountain Calamity Tribe.

-Fight me, win, and prove your words are not just bravado!!

Flames sparked in the eyes of the Earth Spirit Tribe warriors.

-That's what we wanted!!

While the Earth Spirit Tribe took their 'final exam', the defeated Ghost Tribe also confronted their god.

-I'm sorry.

Viper bowed his head to his followers.

-The work of gods for gods. The work of humans for humans. If I, as a god, was to help, I should have at least revealed that I am a god.

-.....

-I failed as a god and a warrior, not adhering to this basic courtesy. Moreover, to fail after all that, I'm truly ashamed...

Viper scratched the back of his head, a forced smile on his lips fading like morning dew.

-I just... could have done better....

Tears flowed from the eyes not covered by the eye patch.

-Just... could have been better....

The surviving Ghost Tribe members were few, and even they were battered. But they did not blame their god.

-Please raise your head, O God!

-You did your best!

The Ghost Tribe shouted.

-We have not perished yet!

-Our horns have not yet broken!

Some even smiled.

-We have lost countless times!

-We are familiar with defeat!

-Hahaha! God, you should get more used to it too! With such a tofu-like mentality, you'll ascend from frustration!

It was neither self-mockery nor self-hatred.

It was simply their way of comforting their god, a strong testament that the first joke ever made was not to ridicule but to comfort.

-You guys...

Viper murmured, his face a mess of tears and snot.

The Ghost Tribe bowed to their god.

-We have much to improve.

-That means there's much room for growth!

-We can win!

-Please guide us toward that.

-Lead us, O God!

Viper was silent for a while.

Then, clenching his fist, he shouted.

-Damn it! Of course! Follow me, my children!

The Ghost Tribe answered loudly.

-Yes!

So, while the Earth Spirit Tribe fought with their proud heroes, the Ghost Tribe pledged a comeback to their god who appeared before them.

It was a touching moment of contrast.

“This is epic!”

“Wow, what a surprise!?”

While engrossed in the screen, a familiar voice suddenly rang next to me.

Not the Princess's, but a voice I knew well. The woman with dark hair tinged with blue, wearing clothes as dark as her hair, watched the hologram excitedly.

My friend.

The Black Dragon Witch.

---

I shouted in shock.

“B-Black Dragon Witch? No, Anastasia. How did you suddenly...?”

“I called her!”

The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages cleared her throat, beaming like a child who had done something praiseworthy.

“You called her?”

“Yes. She was eliminated from the mission.”

“How did that happen?”

I asked, and the Black Dragon Witch shrugged.

“I went bankrupt, that's what.”

“Bankrupt as in...”

“Literally. My race points went into the negatives. Trying to merge the Vampire and Dream Demon tribes, I ended up in debt knowing I couldn't repay it.”

Dream Demon tribe.

Hearing this name after what felt like an eternity, I blinked in surprise.

“You met with the Dream Demon tribe again?”

“Yes. They've grown quite a bit.”

“What exactly happened...”

“You'll see it soon enough. But now, you guys! Hurry over here and sit down.”

You guys?



Looking around, not only the Black Dragon Witch but also the Paladin, Countess, and Heretic Inquisitor were summoned. All of a sudden.

“Indeed, I called them. Everyone must be curious about how their nurtured tribes are doing, right?”

The Princess coughed again.

It seemed she had deliberately arranged this gathering.

“Thanks for calling. I was worried about how the Mermaid children were doing.”

The Paladin approached the sofa, sighing deeply.

As everyone settled, I contemplated the profound changes unfolding before us - the Earth Spirit Tribe challenging their greatest heroes and the Ghost Tribe recommitting to their god under new understanding.

Meanwhile, the Countess coiled herself atop the backrest of the sofa.

“It’s fine. Haven’t they tightly grasped the logistics? With good relations with the Earth Spirit Tribe, as long as they don’t get greedy, they’ll firmly hold onto maritime logistics.”

Hmm.

It had been quite a while, but the Countess’s specialty is [Transformation Technique], cat transformation to be specific.

So, the one coiled on the sofa backrest wasn’t the Countess but a cat. Even if the Countess wasn’t a master of yoga, it was still a plausible sight.

“It’s great to see you after so long! Master!”

The Heretic Inquisitor hopped over and leaned on my sofa.

I carefully observed the scene that had turned into a social gathering or a picnic mat for top-tier hunters. The Princess served cup noodles and Lipton iced tea to the hunters, and they happily partook.

“What chaos...”

“How did you know?”

“Huh?”

“This time, upon returning to Babylon, I rooted out heretical forces lurking within the Temple of All Gods. Ahaha, I thought I managed the personnel well, but they were still crawling around! Just now, I crushed a secret organization called [Chaos]!”

“Uh....”

No.

That's not what I meant....

I was just saying the situation itself is chaotic....

“Everyone! Look at this!”

The hero to quell this chaos was, as always, the Black Dragon Witch, Anastasia. She pointed at the screen with sparkling

eyes.

“The Earth Spirit Tribe’s Fire River Council has been challenged to a duel by the Ghost Tribe!”

We were all drawn into the Black Dragon Witch’s enthusiasm and watched the screen together.

In the brief moment I looked away, significant time had passed in the world. It was hard to say how many years, but since the mountain peak Uburka flung away had turned into a fenced tourist site, at least half a century must have passed.

In that world, after so much time, the current Fire River Council President was brutally defeating seven Ghost Tribe members one after another.

“Getting thrashed, aren’t they, Anastasia?”

“That’s not the important part! King of Death... Gong-ja, you too! With that sharp mind, why only be dense at times like this!”

-No, it's the opposite. This guy is naturally dumb, he only

becomes smart when scheming.

Though the Guardian Spirit added a remark, fortunately, his words were only audible to me, preventing his disgraceful distortion of facts from spreading to the members gathered here.

Meanwhile, Anastasia continued her explanation.

“It’s crucial that a non-Earth Spirit Tribe member entered the Fire River Council! Look, Gong-ja! Those Ghost Tribe members attended as official delegates!”

“Delegates? But, the Fire River Council is an Earth Spirit Tribe assembly. How did the Ghost Tribe...”

While the two of us were discussing the scene on the screen, I suddenly felt something odd about the reactions around me.

“...Why are you all acting like that?”

As I expressed my confusion, the cat Countess, who had been staring blankly at me, panicked.

“Oh, no. If my ears aren’t deceiving me, just now, the Black Dragon Witch... and the King of Death, referred to each other by their names...”

“It’s not a misunderstanding.”

I nodded.

“Anastasia and I are friends.”

"....."

Ever seen a cat with a look of astonishment? At least for me, it was a first. Mouth agape, eyes widened - not exactly a beautiful expression worth seeing twice.

“Yep, that’s right. Gong-ja and I are friends.”

The Black Dragon Witch added fuel to the fire.

Or, to startle the cat further, perhaps throwing a cucumber would be more accurate.

“We decided to call each other by names. We even wrote a friendship contract about it.”

The cat Countess straightened up in a bizarre angle.

“Friendship contract...? Is that some kind of friend payment...?”

“Countess... you can't buy friends with money.”

“You just destroyed most of my social relationships!”

“Anyway, that's not what's important right now.”

While the cat Countess wallowed in the sorrow of lost friends and the other hunters were still in shock, Anastasia nonchalantly pointed at the screen again.

“As you said, Gong-ja, the Fire River Council, initially an exclusive property of the Earth Spirit Tribe...”

Anastasia picked up where I left off.

“Given the Earth Spirit Tribe’s nature of being utterly useless in anything but combat, it effectively became an assembly anyone could join, regardless of their tribe.”

Lastly, the Countess licked her paw, purring.

“At first, the Fairy Tribe, being the closest economically and culturally, began to enter the council. Then, as the Mermaid Tribe grew in the logistics sector, they followed. Now, even the Ghost Tribe has started sending their representatives.”

We fell silent.

"....."

"....."

We looked at each other. Anastasia’s eyes were still ablaze with excitement. The cat Countess, seemingly acknowledging her fervor, nodded gently.

The Paladin crossed her arms.



“A global council, huh.”

An assembly where all tribes participate.

That future was unfolding right before our eyes.

# Chapter 254:

## Independence (3)

---

Time swiftly passed.

As the flag symbolizing the Fire River Council became more splendid, the number of tribes gathered under it increased. The rapid pace of development left us, the onlookers, occasionally exclaiming in amazement.

“Wait, wait! Slow down a bit!”

The most excited among us was the Black Dragon Witch, my friend Anastasia.

“Another tribe has challenged the chairman of the Fire River Council!”

“Which tribe is it this time?”

"The Mountain Calamity Tribe! Look at their attire, they are miners. A miner from the Mountain Calamity Tribe has challenged the council chairman!"

"Really?"

The Black Dragon Witch pointed to a corner of the hologram with her finger.

"Don't just sit there with your eyes! Enhance your vision and take a closer look!"

Ah, it was true.

It was the Mountain Calamity Tribe with seven tentacles. Originally having eight, it seemed one was lost to life's hardships.

But losing one tentacle didn't seem to negatively affect them. Like a soldier wearing scars as medals, the one-armed miner sat with a stern face.

On the ground was a red carpet, with the Earth Spirit Tribe members lined up on both sides. Each member of the Earth

Spirit Tribe was immensely built, glaring down at the small Mountain Calamity Tribe member with intimidating auras.

-Lime.

The Mountain Calamity Tribe spat out phlegm.

Their phlegm wobbled, reminiscent of a slime toy from childhood.

It appeared as a declaration of, [From now on, I will play with you like toys].

-First, on behalf of the Mountain Calamity Tribe, I pay my respects to you moldy bastards!

The Mountain Calamity Tribe shouted.

-Without you, we would have perished long ago, and those who survived would have become slaves, worked to the bone until our shells cracked and our skin melted, Lime. Being able to live moderately while mining is all thanks to you! Especially thanks to the legendary chairman Uburka!

Despite the seemingly friendly words, the face remained fiercely stern.

-Thank you! But enough is enough. We're now capable of fending for ourselves. It's been hundreds of years since anyone tried to destroy us, and it's shameful and embarrassing to rely solely on your protection!

-Ugor.

The current chairman of the Fire River Council chuckled softly.

-Shame is a mark of greatness. It leads to bravery. I acknowledge your shame. Now, speak of your courage.

-I am the strongest among the Mountain Calamity Tribe!

Shrrrk, clank, shrrrk.

The Mountain Calamity Tribe member raised its seven tentacles. Its chosen weapon was neither a sword nor a spear. An unassuming tool, far from ornate armaments, was held in its grip.

A pickaxe.

The modest miner's pickaxe was firmly held in each tentacle.

-Ugor!

The Earth Spirit Tribe warriors laughed. Excluding the chairman seated on a massive rock, dozens of Earth Spirit Tribe warriors chuckled simultaneously.

-We thought some outstanding creature from the Mountain Calamity Tribe was sent as a representative!

-Daring to defeat us with a pickaxe!

-A miner should return to the mine and dig! Mine salt! If you find silver or gold, take it as the blessing of your life! Ugor! Who brings a pickaxe to a sacred duel arena!

-Ugor! Ugor!

The Mountain Calamity Tribe remained silent.

They did not glare.

Simply, from beginning to end, they looked up at the chairman of the Fire River Council.

-Hmm.

The chairman nodded.

-I order those who just sneered. Duel with this Mountain Calamity Tribe member.

The Earth Spirit Tribe warriors stirred.

-Chairman, that's...

-When we were still trapped in the vast caves of Limepolis, we had no weapons. Spears? Swords? Don't make me laugh. We only had buckets of water and hammers. With those hammers, alongside the beloved White Lion, we toppled the empire of the Mountain Calamity Tribe.

-.....

-A hammer is a weapon that destroyed an empire. A weapon of our ancestors, our people, our own. How is a pickaxe any different? A warrior who fails to recognize the essence of a weapon does not deserve to boast their rank in the Fire River Council. If you lose to this Mountain Calamity Tribe member, relinquish your rank and return to Guru!

The expressions of the Earth Spirit Tribe turned pale.

Yet, the chairman, ruling over fire and river, the Fire River Council, did not retract his command.

-Quickly!

Five Earth Spirit Tribe members timidly stepped into the duel arena.

-Lime.

The Mountain Calamity Tribe's expression remained unchanged. However, when she shook her tentacles, whoosh! The pickaxe sharply



swept through a radius of three meters.

-Come at me, one by one or all at once, as you prefer.

The five Earth Spirit Tribe members were easily defeated.

The true duel began thereafter.

Warriors who could easily restrain their own ridicule stepped forward. They lost.

Warriors who had long discarded prejudice against other tribes followed. They too lost.

Warriors who observed not only the appearance of a person but the movements of the aura pulsating from their hearts, considering them as important as the words they spoke, came forward. They also lost.

A warrior who saw the aura in all things as beautiful, believing the world to be an [Eternally Burning Flame], stepped up. He too was defeated. However, the Mountain Calamity Tribe member lost five out of seven tentacles in the process and one was crushed, leaving her with only two

tentacles, like human arms.

-Huff... hah... huff... hah.

Bloodied.

-This is easier... than mining caves, Lime.

Her snail shell was crumpled like a car bumper after an accident. Blood and mucus flowed from her body.

Looking down at the injured Mountain Calamity Tribe member, the chairman of the Fire River Council, seated on a rock throne reserved for the strongest warrior of the era, laughed heartily.

-What is your name?

-Seimslam.

The Mountain Calamity Tribe member groaned, oozing mucus.

-I am the last descendant of the Lekamulime family, one of the seven lords who ruled the now-destroyed Ravine City, and the successor of the Spirals.

-Impressive.

The Earth Spirit Tribe chairman revealed his huge fangs.

-From now on, you, Seimslam, are the second-ranked Vice-Chairman of the Fire River Council.

Time swiftly passed.

In the history of the Earth Spirit Tribe, a Mountain Calamity Tribe member ascended to the position of vice-chairman. It was unprecedented. Considering the Earth Spirit Tribe once ruled over the Mountain Calamity Tribe, this was like entrusting a crucial position to an arch-enemy.

Many Earth Spirit Tribe warriors challenged this decision. Each time, the vice-chairman of the Fire River Council, the Mountain Calamity Tribe member, Seimslam, repelled the challengers. She never refused a duel.

-Someone with pride.

The Earth Spirit Tribe decided to dissolve the bitterness of their long history.

-A strong being.

The Earth Spirit Tribe buried the sorrows of the past in the beauty of the present.

-That is enough.

Thus, the Mountain Calamity Tribe was officially accepted into the Fire River Council.

At least, those of the council with sufficient strength to hold their rank, should never be ridiculed or ignored anywhere. Strength Resides. This was the only commandment uniquely observed since the White Lion led them to Guru.

".....Amazing."

As we all watched the hologram, Anastasia suddenly murmured. In the hologram, Seimslam, the Mountain Calamity Tribe vice-chairman, was receiving respectful greetings from warriors of lower rank.

"Less developed than us, with a much more rugged society... not capable of achieving as much as us, certainly knowing less than us."

The Black Dragon Witch slightly parted her lips.

"Yet, as strong as us, or perhaps, even stronger."

"....."

"These children live with pride. The Mountain Calamity Tribe miners in the salt mines, the Gill Fish Tribe swimming in the waterways, the Fairy Tribe touching gold and occasionally gracing the stage of the Fire River Council, the Ghost Tribe always sending duelists in place of war... all of them. Truly strong."

I nodded.

"Yes."

Feeling an endless sense of pride within.

"These children are as strong as us... and healthier than us."

At that moment, a strange emotion curled up in the center of my heart.

Something transparent, yet not sticky, spread slowly from the center to the edges of my heart.

Glancing slightly to the side, I saw the Black Dragon Witch and the Paladin with similar expressions.

'That's right.'

I realized the nature of my emotion.

'This is what pride feels like.'

I wasn't sure if it was the pride a parent feels for their child.

Simply, humans can feel proud watching others, not just themselves.

This realization brightened my mood.

[The 37th floor commences.]

The hologram displayed a snowy landscape.

In the frozen North, a Red Dragon that had been slumbering in the permafrost awoke. This very dragon had once arisen long ago, setting off a volcano and flying away.

Every hunter gathered here knew where that volcano was, how hot its lava was.

“...So it was this dragon that caused the volcano in the 31st floor jungle.”

Anastasia frowned, reading the quest description.

We couldn't interfere with the stage anymore, but thanks to [The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages], we could briefly read the quest descriptions.

"Hmm. It looks formidable, like a Constellation-level!"

The Heretic Inquisitor glanced at the hologram, stroking his chin.

"If necessary, Uburka is there, so we can intervene..."

"No."

I shook my head.

"The Fire River Council will try to handle it on their own. Look."

The Fire River Council was gathering its forces.

What started as a small assembly of the Earth Spirit Tribe had become, over time, not exclusively theirs. Gill Fish Tribe,



Fairy Tribe, Mountain Calamity Tribe, Vampires. Numerous warriors gathered under the flag.

The Earth Spirit Tribe still made up over half of the warriors. However, everyone here earned their rank through fair combat. There were no complaints from the Mountain Calamity Tribe about the Earth Spirit Tribe's dominance, nor grumbles from the Vampires about the Fairy Tribe's presence.

They were warriors.

-Are we assembled?

The chairman of the Fire River Council asked.

Thousands of warriors thumped the ground in unison.

The chairman nodded lightly.

-We are gathered. Let's go.

To the icy North.

On the way north, they encountered an army. One-horned giants. The Ghost Tribe's army.

-Ugor.

-Krrr.

It hadn't been 100 years since Viper descended to wage war with the Ghost Tribe. There was still an odd sense of rivalry and competitiveness between the Earth Spirit Tribe and the Ghost Tribe.

The two armies faced off across the Tundra Plains. The Earth Spirit Tribe's chairman rode a lion to the Ghost Tribe, while their High Priest, who worshiped the serpent god, tapped his staff as he approached.

The Earth Spirit Tribe's chairman asked.

-Are you here to fight?

The Ghost Tribe's High Priest answered.

-We must fight. But not with you.

-The Red Dragon?

-If left alone, it's said to cause a catastrophe of mythic proportions. All mountains will erupt, all rivers will burn, leaving the land uninhabitable.

-It's a scene I'd like to witness once. Ugor.

-Agree, but the youngsters think differently.

The chairman and the High Priest chuckled together.

-What does your serpent god say? Does it wish to descend?

-Our god pondered...

The Ghost Tribe's High Priest slowly shook his head.

-But in the end, announced non-interference.

The Celestial Martial Guild Master.

Viper, who would have wanted to care for the Ghost Tribe more than anyone, decided not to intervene this time. He chose to step back, allowing them to face their crisis on their own.

It was the choice of the Celestial Martial Guild Master, still residing in that world.

-When the red dragon spread its wings before, the gods protected us. But much time has passed. The gods trust us now. We are strong. We will become stronger.

-Weaker than us, but, Ugor.

-Damn moldy bastards.

The High Priest grumbled, and the chairman extended his right hand.

-Dear parents and friends watch over us from the heavens.  
Let's show them how strong we've become.

-Let's unite in battle.

We hunters silently watched the 37th floor.

-Kooooooooo!

In the middle of the snowstorm, the giant Red Dragon roared.

Blizzards swirled around, insufficient to cover its blazing red skin. Heavy snow fell from the sky, but too feeble to bury the dragon's intense heat. The permafrost cracked and screamed with every movement of the dragon.

-Let's go.

In the first battle, the Ghost Tribe's High Priest perished.

Caught in the dragon's breath, he vanished into the frozen

snow without leaving his ancient staff.

-Let's go.

In the second battle, the chairman of the Fire River Council died.

Someone had to buy time for the warriors to complete the Demonic Formation Art. Just a minute, even 30 seconds, for the warriors to focus their aura, share their visions, and bring their landscape into this world.

The chairman of the Fire River Council lasted 1 minute and 23 seconds. His axe sliced the dragon's scales, and his fist burst its left eye. Facing the mythic monster that could cause earthquakes and volcanic eruptions by its mere existence, the lone warrior swung his axe and died, crushed in the dragon's jaws.

-Let's go.

In the third battle, the Red Dragon's neck was severed.

The dragon's skin was thick. Its flesh, thicker. Its bones,

thickest.

The first pickaxe scrape grazed the skin, the second opened it, the third finally cut the flesh. The fourth severed it, the fifth tore it, and the sixth scratched the bone.

The seventh pickaxe strike severed the bone.

-Lime.

With one remaining tentacle coiled around the pickaxe.

A lone Mountain Calamity Tribe member sat atop the dragon's neck.

-Easier than mining caves, Lime.

And delivered the final blow.

The dragon's head, as large as a hill, kept screaming as it fell endlessly into the abyss. Even plummeting down the ice cliff, the screams continued.

Eventually, the sound of water signaled the end of the screams as the dragon's head sank into the icy sea.

-Lime.

Atop the cliff, the Mountain Calamity Tribe member shook her head. Mucus scattered.

Turning around, she saw fewer warriors than when they set out from the North. One. Two. Three. In total, seventy-four warriors had died, including the Ghost Tribe's High Priest and the chairman of the Earth Spirit Tribe.

-Impressive.

Yesterday, the second strongest warrior on this continent, and today, the strongest, the Mountain Calamity Tribe member smiled bitterly.

-Let's return to our homeland, Lime.

Seimslam.



629th Chairman of the Fire River Council.

The first time in history a Mountain Calamity Tribe member became chairman.

[Stage Clear!]

[Today, the 37th floor has been cleared!]

A success without any hunter's help.

It was — the first time a stage was cleared without any 'player' intervention.

-Gong-Ja.

‘Hmm? What is it, Sword Emperor?’

-Aren't you forgetting about some old man and the tribe he's taking care of...?

Hmm.

To clarify.

It was — possibly the first time a stage was cleared without any 'player' intervention.

'Something about that sentence doesn't quite resonate...'

Anyway, what does it matter?

Right next to me, the Black Dragon Witch is shouting "Ajaajaaaaa!!" in excitement, even hugging my arm and jumping for joy. Surely, the Celestial Martial Guild Master's and the Sword Saint's issues will be resolved smoothly.

I smiled, deciding to simply bless those reflected in the hologram.

'Congratulations on your independence, kids.'

Proud of our children, more than anyone.



# Chapter 255: One Who Did Not Clear the Stage (1)

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Time passed swiftly.

Despite the unprecedented rise of a Mountain Calamity Tribe member as the chairman of the Fire River Council, there was no significant turmoil. Those who harbored doubts nodded in agreement upon hearing, "That Mountain Calamity Tribe member beheaded the Red Dragon." Numerous warriors from both the Earth Spirit and Ghost Tribes testified to Seimslam's accomplishments.

"This is no longer just a nation of Earth Spirits!"

The Black Dragon Witch exclaimed excitedly.

Seems this topic suits Anastasia's taste.

“Our children’s nation will be greater than Rome! Do you realize how incredible this is, Gong-Ja?”

“Anastasia, I’m a middle school dropout. Dropped out of high school too. Please explain in a language I can understand...”

“Ah, okay. Rome initially began as a nation solely for Romans. But it truly became a great empire encompassing everyone when outsiders from different provinces were allowed to enter the center, and a certain faith from a remote border became the state religion.”

Looking at that world, the Black Dragon Witch pointed to her cheeks.

“But Rome had its limits... Do you know what they were?”

That’s why I’m saying I don’t know.

There was no need for me to interject.

"It’s because religion became overly sanctified!"

“It ran out of nations to conquer, making it difficult to sustain a war economy, right?”

“It's because of the corruption in politics and society's decadence.”

It wasn't me but the Heretic Inquisitor, the Countess, and the Paladin who interjected these points.

The Black Dragon Witch uttered an "Oh", waving her arms dismissively.

“You all go away. I'm talking to Gong-Ja.”

They retreated with drooping faces.

The Black Dragon Witch cleared her throat.

“Hmm. There were many limits, but I think it was because the interests of each group were not distinctly divided.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look over there.”

The Black Dragon Witch pointed towards the seats of the Fire River Council.

"While the goblins manage national defense and food production, the Fairy Tribe handles capital. The Gill Fish Tribe takes charge of logistics, and the Mountain Calamity Tribe oversees underground resources... This creates factions on a biological level. As long as one tribe doesn't go extinct or become enslaved, it's impossible for someone from a specific tribe to monopolize power!"

The Black Dragon Witch's cheeks were slightly red, perhaps from drinking too much.

Her words even slurred.

"This is important. Decisions made on a biological level. Mutual dependence naturally leads to checks and balances..."

"....."

"This system is strong and robust. Even gentle to

newcomers. Any tribe, say, a new one, if they excel in an area that an existing tribe manages, they naturally take over that domain. But, yes, it's a treacherous journey until the system is established."

The Black Dragon Witch brushed her hair back.

"For instance, if a tribe fears challenges to its domain. Fears being ousted from their specialty. And decides to oppress the newcomers. And if the established tribes see this as normal. If such a trend dominates, this system will decay over time. But..."

No tribe went extinct.

Uburka did not allow the extinction of the Mountain Calamity Tribe.

When it seemed like the Earth Spirit Tribe would dominate the continent, the Fire River Council timely eradicated racial discrimination.

Ssonia. That Fairy Tribe child who yearned to dance, dedicated his life to performing the Blood Fire Drama on stage.



The discovery of the new continent bolstered the standing of the Gill Fish Tribe, who led the way, and the natives of the new continent, the Dream Demons, reportedly merged with the Vampires led by Anastasia.

And through the war with the Ghost Tribe, people gained a sense of distance from the gods.

One by one.

One life at a time.

One life changed the world, and finally, a Mountain Calamity Tribe member ascended as the chairman of the Fire River Council for the first time.

The Fire River Council was transforming into a council that truly embraced both fire and water.

"Everything, yes, fell into place so perfectly."

The screen showed a grand festival celebrating the defeat of the Red Dragon.

A flamboyant Fairy Tribe member showcased all sorts of circuses and fire dramas, and tourists from across the country laughed along with the festival.

“What we see before us, this scene, Gong-Ja. It’s like a sacred scripture created by the footsteps of countless people, a grand miracle.”

The Black Dragon Witch murmured dreamily.

Not feeling bad about it, I slightly smiled.

“That’s true. Truly a miracle...”

“Unless this miracle was ‘created’ by someone.”

I paused.

Before I could blink, the dreaminess in the Black Dragon Witch’s voice was gone. Simultaneously, the atmosphere, more precisely, her eyes changed.

“You, Gong-Ja.”

The Black Dragon Witch turned to me.

Everyone else who had been dismissed was far enough not to hear our voices.

In this place where only the two of us were having this conversation, those purple eyes focused on me.

“You didn’t [Return] without telling me, did you?”

"....."

“You have a return skill, Gong-Ja. Like when you defeated the [Demon King of Autumn Rain]... Did you go ahead to the stage alone, die, find a non-lethal route, and bring us to this point where everyone is happy... You didn’t do that, did you?”

The Black Dragon Witch’s hands gripped my shoulders.

The beer can fell, and the chair rolled away. I lay on the cold

floor, pinned down by the Black Dragon Witch.

“This world wasn’t built upon your corpses, was it.”

Ah.

"....."

I see.

'Um.'

Embarrassingly, I almost cried.

Not because my efforts were being recognized. That emotion, now past its expiration date, had been discarded long ago from the fridge of my heart.

It wasn't that.

‘As expected, senior is a beautiful person.’

In Anastasia's eyes, there was regret, gratitude, something like anger, and things not quite like that. Even the numerous things that almost reached that state were starkly mixed.

Even though I lack a mind-reading skill.

[I hate the idea of a friend dying without me knowing.]

I deeply understood what senior's eyes meant.

Because Anastasia had already experienced it with me.

A battle thought to have ended miraculously and harmlessly... The war in the Aegim Empire was actually a flower bloomed from my countless deaths.

Now, she knows too.

“Senior.”

Therefore.

“Let’s renew our friendship contract.”

I spoke earnestly.

"Huh?"

“Our previous contract. Oh, can you move off a bit? If Raviel sees me like this, she’ll mock saying, ‘As usual, you get drunk and someone jumps you at every gathering.’”

“Ah, that’s vividly imaginable... Sorry, I’ll sober up a bit. The contract is here.”

The Black Dragon Witch extended her nails and sliced through the air. Like opening a zipper, the air split apart, revealing a pitch-black abyss.

Nonchalantly, the Black Dragon Witch reached into the abyss and swiftly pulled something out.

## [Friendship Contract]

This contract is established upon the agreement of Anastasia Zelensky (hereinafter referred to as A) and Kim Gong-Ja (hereinafter referred to as K).

A, not trusting the shelf life of human emotions, believes that only a diligent attitude and an industrious intellect can solidify the relationship between two people. Accordingly, A and K agree as follows:

1. All promises are valid only when both parties agree.
2. All promises can be voided if both parties agree.
3. However, the establishment or voiding of a promise is only possible on weekends (Saturday or Sunday).
4. In case of disagreements, roll the dice and follow the opinion of the person with the higher roll.

Signature: Anastasia Zelensky

Signature: Kim Gong-Ja

+

“Yeah. This is our contract... Why this?”

I slightly concentrated aura on the tip of my finger.

“I’m adding a promise to it.”

Scribble, scribble.

The aura on my index finger carefully wrote the letters. Or rather, it was slightly burning the surface of the paper, so “burning letters” would be a more appropriate description.

+



5. Just as both parties can say what they want to each other, they can also choose not to say what they don't want to, and can even lie.

6. However, when asked a question with the phrase "I swear on the contract," they cannot lie.

7. And we will never doubt the answer that comes with the phrase "I swear on the contract."

+

I looked up.

"How about that?"

"....."

"It should help us build more trust, don't you think? A bit childish, yes, but we were already out of the ordinary when we wrote a friendship contract. I was thinking of aligning with senior's thoughts..."

“I swear on the contract.”

Before I could even finish talking, Anastasia grabbed my right hand.

And looked me straight in the eyes.

“Did you never die in creating this world?”

"....."

Just a few lines of text.

A few promises.

Text and promises are so powerless that ignoring and breaking them is too easy.

If these easily breakable things suddenly become difficult, it's only because the hand that wrote the letters and the fingers that made the promises are far from ordinary.

"....."

As a child, she lost her father when her country split apart. I never asked what happened to her mother, and she never told me.

But she once abandoned the world.

The Black Dragon Witch's coldness was evident in abandoning the world, Anastasia's deficiency was revealed in craving recognition despite having abandoned it, her nobility was clear in rebuilding the tower in that forsaken world, and her anxiety was felt in her inability to detach from the tower she had built.

If the heart has a color, hers would surely be blackened too.

Yet, she never stopped acting.

Instead of sitting and crying, instead of curling up and hiding, she always took a step forward and addressed the problems in front of her.

Anastasia is a strong person.

“I died once.”

I said quietly.

“Talking about that death requires a lot of stories. Who I met, why I died, what happened as a result... I'll tell you about them, perhaps right after these stages are over.”

“But Anastasia, there's one thing I can promise.”

I spoke to Anastasia.

“From the 31st to the 37th floors, up until now as we climbed these stages— I never died once.”

“The children we nurtured, the children you nurtured, are amazing. Really. I didn't reverse anything. All these miracles you mentioned, they were possible even without me.”

"Okay."

Suddenly.

The Black Dragon Witch stroked my head.

"That's right."

"....."

"I see."

Once, twice.

The hand of Anastasia stroking my head was trembling.

"I..."

"I..." she said.

After a moment of silence, she continued.

"One day, I'll ask you to 'die'."

.....

“For the tower. For the world. For the people.”

It was a scene I could easily imagine.

“To die. To bring back the dead. To reverse time.”

The day I revealed I was a returner, Anastasia said.

“Under the pretext of sympathy. Using justice as bait. Setting friendship as a trap. Shamelessly, I’ll make such demands of you.”

Using me.

Proclaiming herself as a person who can exploit my life, and even our friendship, for something she values more, for the tower.

“So, I really don't have the right to say this but...”

I knew that Anastasia was that kind of person, and she knew she was that kind of person too.

Yet.

“Still, let me say it now.”

Anastasia showed a smile.

“I’m relieved.”

That smile was as complex as the hues of her heart, but like her eyes that had looked at me just before, it carried an unmistakable emotion.

“I’m really relieved that you weren’t hurt while leading these children.”

I nodded quietly, accepting her words.

“Yes.”

I smiled back.

“Thank you for worrying, for feeling relieved on my behalf.”

Then, the voice of the tower echoed calmly.

[Announcing to everyone.]

[Entering the 38th floor.]

[Repeating.]

Together, we turned our heads to look at the hologram.

[We are now entering the 38th floor.]

The races living in this world.

Our children were facing the next trial.





# Chapter 256: One Who Did Not Clear the Stage (2)

---

[We are now entering the 38th floor.]

The moment the voice of the tower resounded.

A change occurred in the hologram we were watching.

“Look over there!”

The Heretic Inquisitor exclaimed with excitement.

I was sitting on the sofa, so the only place for the Heretic Inquisitor to lean in was the back of the sofa. Hanging onto the backrest like a child getting a piggyback ride from their dad, he looked forward.

“Something is emerging from the sea surrounding the right side of the continent!”

It was just as the Heretic Inquisitor said.

In the hologram, something gigantic was rising from the depths of the sea.

“Aha! It’s incredibly huge!”

The Heretic Inquisitor chuckled like a child watching a monster movie.

However, the other colleagues gathered in the waiting room for being eliminated couldn't share his excitement.

Speaking on behalf of all of us, the Black Dragon Witch murmured.

“What’s that?”

[It] resembled a long-necked turtle.

When it fully rose, waves rolled from its knees. As the monster lifted its long neck akin to a skyscraper and roared, its bellow alone caused tidal waves in all directions.

“That’s a dragon that has been sleeping since the dawn of this world.”

Said the Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages.

The Black Dragon Witch flinched.

“...A dragon? There was a dragon on the 37th floor, and now another dragon on this floor?”

“Yeah. And actually, that dragon is the true dragon... In your terms, it can be considered a [Constellation].”

The Princess smiled brightly.

“Think of the Red Dragon from the 37th floor as one of the apostles controlled by that dragon!”

Grrrrrrrrrr-

The monster in the middle of the sea belched.

Thud!

The blue-shelled, blue-eyed monster lifted its massive front legs and headed towards the shore.

Thud!

With each step, earthquakes occurred. Kuwoong! Kuwoong! Without even taking a few steps, the monster had already left the middle of the sea and was trampling the sandy beach. Kuwoong! On its final movement, the monster crushed the dense jungle trees like straws.

Grrrrrrrrrr-

The monster shook off the seawater on its head. Each drop formed its own pond. The fish from the sea, crabs wandering the beach, and beasts hiding in the jungle tangled up as they fled in panic.

[The Constellation 'The Ki Dragon Dwelling in the Abyss' roars!]

Even though we were just spectators from afar.

"....."

"....."

We all fell silent.

It's natural to become quiet when faced with a monster almost the size of the Korean Peninsula.

“Hmm! It’s tricky.”

Let me correct that.

Bambolina seemed to have something to say.

“I just checked with my skill, Temple of All Gods... it’s really difficult!”

“Well, it’s that big. It’s hard to figure out what to do with human power.”

The Countess let out an incredulous remark, which Bambolina shook his head at.

“Of course, size is an issue, but it’s not just about the size! More problematic is the nature of that Constellation.”

Right.

Constellations have types, and they vary greatly. Simply being strong does not make one a Constellation. At least from what I know.

Uburka didn’t become a Constellation just by lifting dumbbells. He overcame himself again and again to reach the status of a Constellation.

Born with albinism, destined to be an enemy of the sun. However, Uburka overcame the sunlight by learning Aura and

enveloping his body with it. Physical limits. Life limits. Every time an unavoidable limit approached, Uburka overcame it by reconstructing flesh and bones with Aura.

The overcomer.

Those who defy the world that birthed them, the sun that nurtures the world, the life indebted to the sun, everything - and ultimately transcend. The Constellation [The Muscle Pig Dreaming of Parricide] proved its will and thus earned the right to become a constellation shining in the night sky.

‘On the other hand.’

Constellations like that monster were different.

“That Constellation belongs to the ‘beginning’!”

Beginning.

Nature.



Constellations that [constitute] this world.

“That giant monster is actually not the main body. It’s a kind of terminal, an puppet controlled by connecting consciousness!”

If the main body of the Constellation is likened to a giant hydra, that monster was just one of its tentacles.

“Therefore, fighting and killing it is nearly impossible! However, if a way is found, hmm. Instead of destroying that puppet, sealing it to trap the Constellation's consciousness within and inflicting continuous pain to shatter that consciousness might be the only way!”

Shiny shuddered. So did I.

What Bambolina described was almost the same as what the Constellations of the world where my master lived had suffered at the hands of the Constellation Killer.

Unaware of such details, the Black Dragon Witch stroked her chin.

“Indeed. It’s like a curse.”

“Yes! Initially, the medium is a puppet. The counter must be along those lines.”

“That’s right, there is a way to confront it... But can those children over there use it?”

“The idea itself is straightforward. Saying the medium is a puppet means it's rooted in primitive sorcery!”

As the Black Dragon Witch and the Heretic Inquisitor continued their discussion, someone crossed their arms.

It was the Paladin.

“The problem remains whether such a method is necessary.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“If we go by the Inquisitor's words, that Constellation seems like a creator of that world. Meaning the residents of that

world could only exist because of that Constellation, so why would they antagonize such an entity unless they are mad fanatics with a belief like [Constellations must absolutely be killed]?”

I shivered. So did Shiny.

After all, there was someone with that background among my vassals.

Nevertheless, the Paladin's point was sharp.

‘As expected of the Paladin.’

Before I returned,

Flame Emperor Yoo Soo-Ha only cleared up to the 40th floor.

And since it was a world quest and not an individual racial quest, I knew the contents of this floor.

“But that creator is trying to destroy the world now, isn't

he?”

“The same logic can counter that, Black Dragon Witch. If the Constellation doesn't want to commit suicide, there's no reason to destroy the world. It's not like the world's residents are causing havoc against the whole world.”

That was also true.

‘Actually, even if they caused havoc, it wouldn't lead to destruction.’

Flame Emperor.

During the past when Yoo Soo-Ha climbed the tower, the continent was in a mess incomparable to now.

The elven fanatics who worshiped the Flame Emperor as a god. Yoo Soo-Ha, commanding those elves to slaughter and conquer. Every race going crazy and turning all others to extinction or slavery.

‘Except for the Earth Spirit Tribe.’

The reason why those children survived, let's talk about that later. Anyway, the important point now is this.

‘That Constellation doesn’t destroy worlds.’

Just a bit more malicious.

[The Constellation 'The Ki Dragon Dwelling in the Abyss' roars!]

The jungles, beaches, and seas trembled.

The roar emitted by the Ki Dragon was so grand that it resonated clearly to the opposite coast.

-To those living upon my skin!

-To the races born from my breath!

-I am the great flow! There is no flow in this sky, land, or sea that does not originate from me.

-I am the flow, and the flow is me. Those who can feel the flow are my priests, and those who can use the flow are my warriors.

People around the world turned their heads.

The Earth Spirit Tribe wrinkled their noses, the Mountain Calamity Tribe trembled their antennae, the Fairy Tribe perked their ears, the Capable Scribes Tribe opened their gills, the Vampiric Tribe flapped their wings, the Pure Humans Race turned their eyes, and the Ghost Tribe rotated their single horns.

In an instant, in a fleeting moment.

Their noses, antennae, ears, gills, wings, eyes, and single horns all pointed in one direction, and beyond that, in the distance, lay a gigantic monster. Its hind legs on the tidal beach, its front legs in the tsunami-swept jungle.

...This is unbelievable.

The Guardian Spirit, with crossed arms, let out a groan.

-That turtle kid, it just sent 'Aura' 'Telepathically' to 'all races' living in this world, didn't it?

It was as the Guardian Spirit said.

That immense ability instantly resonated across the entire continent.

[The unidentified voice causes the Pure Humans Race to tremble in fear!]

[The unidentified voice causes the Capable Scribes Tribe to drop their scales!]

[The unidentified voice puts the Earth Spirit Tribe on alert!]

[The unidentified voice startles the Fairy Tribe!]

[The unidentified voice aggravates the Ghost Tribe's mood!]

[The unidentified voice makes the Vampiric Tribe swiftly fall asleep!]

[The unidentified voice surprises the Mountain Calamity Tribe, and they continue their work.]

Utter chaos across the continent...

“It's a bit too varied to call it chaos, isn't it...?”

What's going on?

Why aren't they all running away in panic or lying flat on the ground or crying out loud?

‘During the Flame Emperor's time, it was like that...’

Especially the Vampiric Tribe and the Mountain Calamity Tribe. Why are the Vampiric Tribe suddenly falling asleep, and why are the Mountain Calamity Tribe just continuing their work?

"....."

I glanced back and forth between the Black Dragon Witch



and the Heretic Inquisitor. Neither avoided my gaze; in fact, they seemed very confident.

“Didn't I tell you? The Vampiric Tribe merged with the Dream Demon race. They just entered a strategic meeting at the racial level. It's very, very, very, very important to consolidate opinions before acting.”

Anastasia said it nonchalantly, as if stating an absolute truth.

“I educated them to continue working if it seems they're not about to die immediately! Swinging a hammer one more time is more beneficial in life!”

Bambolina said it with a ridiculously bright smile.

"Indeed....."

I couldn't help but lament.

“Are these really my close friends and subordinates...”

As I looked at my human relationships, I heard a tsk-tsk-tsk sound.

-Really, birds of a feather flock together. A match made in heaven.

The Guardian Spirit glanced at the hologram while cleaning his ears.

-So, what's this 'flow' the turtle is talking about?

Ah.

That.

'Aura.'

-Huh?

'It's evident in the name of the Constellation. Ki Dragon. The world's Aura flows through the breath of this Constellation.'

-Ho ho.

If the Amazon rainforest is the Earth's lungs, then this Constellation can be considered the lungs of Aura.

The Guardian Spirit wiggled his thick eyebrows.

-Indeed. Indeed. So that's why the kids in that world are exceptionally good at Aura? There's a lot more Aura floating in the atmosphere compared to other worlds?

'That's right.'

-Well then.

The Guardian Spirit nodded as if he understood everything.

-After all, you're damn smart when it comes to Aura, but the Earth Spirit Tribe was learning at an alarmingly fast rate. Now I see, those brats were spoon-fed by the world. Huh? I knew about silver spoons and gold spoons, but an Aura spoon too?

‘...Well, I'm not sure if that's such a good spoon to have.’

-Huh? Why? Isn't it always a good thing if Aura learning is easier?

'.....'

I didn't respond to the Guardian Spirit's question.

-Blessings to you all for your achievements!

The Ki Dragon in the hologram roared again.

-You are truly my priests and warriors!

It was an acknowledgment of those who live.

-But sadly! There are still those who are neither my priests nor warriors, walking on my body!

It was also a denial.

-After being given such a long time, how are there still so many 'worthless ones'!

Worthless ones.

‘Those who can't use Aura.’

The majority of the world's population, who can't use Aura, were referred to as 'worthless' by this world's nature-formed Constellation.

"....."

Anastasia's face darkened.

The use of such [words] was all too familiar to her, having fled from Ukraine.

-I can no longer tolerate those who are 'worthless', unable to accept and feel my breath, using resources that should belong

to the worthy.

As the atmosphere in the waiting room grew heavy, the blue Ki Dragon shouted.

-[Selection] will begin!

Then.

A voice echoed in our heads.

[Displaying the 38th floor quest.]

Perhaps it was the consideration of the Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages.

Even we, who had already been eliminated and had no right to participate in the quest, could see the contents of the 38th floor quest.

## [The Great Selection]

Difficulty: EX

Objective: The Constellation that has been forming this world since the beginning has awakened. 'The Ki Dragon Dwelling in the Abyss' is a being made of Aura, and for this reason, this world was richer in Aura than other worlds.

Now the Ki Dragon wants to claim its dues for those prosperous times.

Those who cannot feel its breath. Those who cannot use or detect Aura. The Ki Dragon treats these people as 'worthless' and seeks to sweep them from this world.

Among the native races of the continent, those who are Aura users will survive.

All others will perish.

Save as many lives as you can!

+

And then, silence fell.



# Chapter 257: One Who Did Not Clear the Stage (3)

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The 38th floor.

Before my regression, it was a place solely conquered by Yoo Soo-Ha.

At that time, I was not part of the [Raid Team]. Far from it, I was just a lowly hunter who couldn't even make it into the rankings.

‘How exactly was it conquered?’

I only learned this much later, from an interview article.

-38th floor? It was damn easy.

The strategy revealed by Flame Emperor in the interview was simple.

-Just do nothing.

Inaction.

-The boss that appears there isn't meant to be defeated. Ah, you know, like those invincible monsters in game tutorials? The ones that can't be killed even with cheats or hacks. Like, the Demon King on the 13th floor or the Librarian that appears on the 21st floor.

To Yoo Soo-Ha, Constellations were like [boss monsters designed for forced defeat], and the elves he personally led were no different from [NPCs in a game].

-The 38th floor boss is the same as those guys.

Therefore, Yoo Soo-Ha's conclusion was simple.

-No need to do anything.

Observation.

Ignorance.

-The boss monster there... something like a Ki Dragon from the sea. Anyway, that thing isn't really hindering stage clearance. It's more like a sieve filtering out those moving from the 38th to the 39th floor.

Hunter Yoo Soo-Ha, who always topped the rankings, acted accordingly.

No hunter could dissuade Yoo Soo-Ha.

Looking back now, it wasn't just his sole opinion.

He was so devilishly unique, making such inhuman decisions, I can no longer say that.

-The NPCs did die in large numbers. But what can you do?

Regarding the Tower's residents as 'NPCs' and Constellations

as 'bosses'.

Denying all contexts of those who lived, are living, and will live, and defining all stages as tactical spaces.

Viewing the Tower as a 'dungeon'.

-What matters is us climbing the Tower.

That was not only the Flame Emperor's view but also a principle shared by all who climbed the Tower at that time, and even after my regression, it was a principle that lingered with me for a long time.

'And that principle will bring about the worst outcome in the next stage... the 39th floor.'

I shook my head.

Ending my reminiscence and returning to reality, I heard Anastasia gritting her teeth.

“What the heck is this quest!?”

Anastasia was visibly enraged.

“Selection!? Just killing off kids who haven’t awakened their Aura, isn’t that setting the bar too high!?”

“That’s what I’m saying. They should at least provide an option to handle it with a tribute or something.”

The Countess also couldn’t hide her dismay.

“Hmm! This is quite a predicament.”

Bambolina said, lightly smiling while stroking his chin.

“The Paladin said the creator would never destroy their own world, but the owner of the estate does arrange the garden to their liking. And a deity with a personality is more akin to the owner of an estate.”

Paladin remained silent amidst the heavy atmosphere.

Seeing my companions like this, I bitterly smiled.

‘Not bad, this situation.’

I was satisfied.

‘Compared to before my regression... No, frankly, it’s embarrassingly better.’

No one thought it was a quest that would clear itself if we just stayed put and did nothing.

‘Everyone views the Tower’s residents as people just like themselves.’

Naturally, when you start seeing people as people, you adopt a corresponding attitude.

Thinking of those who can’t use Aura as throwaways, you can no longer consider the same approach.

‘Even if they adopt such an attitude after much deliberation,

it's not from the standpoint of a [game player] but that of a [leader].'

Thus, the weight of the decisions they make cannot be the same.

It simply cannot be.

“...Kim Gong-Ja.”

Anastasia called out.

As a leader of the Tower, she turned to me.

“You have something in mind... right?”

Her question was laden with various meanings, each carrying its own weight.

I nodded.

“Yes, of course.”

I looked at the hologram.

There, the Earth Spirit Tribe, along with the other seven races, were displayed, already heading towards the Fire River Council. The Mountain Calamity Tribe was slowly climbing the walls, the Ghost Tribe strode confidently on the main road, and the Vampiric Tribe flapped their wings, hanging on the pillars of the conference.

“I planted seeds there a long time ago and left a farmer to tend to them.”

---

The building of the Fire River Council wasn't imposing.

Rather, it was crude.

A circular amphitheater was dug down to create a basin, and

in the center, the chairman sat on the bare ground. The ground was just as hard-packed as the steps, with only some small props used in blood dramas scattered around.



It was hard to believe this place was the [pinnacle of power ruling over the continent].

-Heard some dog barking, Lime.

In the center of the circular basin lay a representative of the Mountain Calamity Tribe.

-Wonder if you heard it too, Laimu.

629th Chairman Seimslam.

The hero who decapitated the dragon in the last stage.

The hero had now aged into an old woman. Her shell was wrinkly, her tentacles had lost their plumpness. The severed tentacles hadn't regrown, leaving only one tentacle wriggling.

-They said they'd let those who use Aura live, and kill those who can't... I thought some fearless bastard was messing with me through telepathy. I tried to trace it back, but it was a way higher being than me, so it failed.

Seimslam's remaining tentacle gently scratched her shell.

On the shell of the Mountain Calamity Tribe representative, there was a beautiful pattern painted in blue.

Perhaps influenced by the custom of goblins tattooing their bodies, which I introduced in the first stage as [Primitive Fashionista], it had persisted until now. Though the pattern became more complex over time, there was something uneroded by time, and I felt a bit moved.

-What do you all think?

-We also tried to trace it back but failed!

-We felt something much bigger, much, much bigger than us.

Mountain Calamity Tribe's chairman asked, and Earth Spirit Tribe warriors replied politely. It was a wise stance. At least 11 warriors who underestimated the chairman, thinking she was weak with only one tentacle left, ended up with only one leg themselves.

-It felt too powerful to be just a living being.

-Right. It's more like the will of nature, the violence of the world.

-What are you talking about? So are you saying we should just let those unknown bastards prattle and leave those who can't use Aura to die? Eh?

-This is why it's impossible to have a conversation with the Fairy Tribe. They always jump to conclusions. What I'm saying is, the guy who sent us the telepathy is a damn powerful monster.

-Doesn't that mean we're surrendering!

-It could also mean let's give it a fight.

-We, [The Group Dealing with the Voice in the Head Incident], demand the establishment of an investigative team to thoroughly uncover the conspiracy involved in this incident....

Debate raged in the Fire River Council.

Much had changed in the decades since Seimslam became

the chairman, with the Earth Spirit Tribe previously dominating the conference. The multi-racial conference became more adept at handling various situations, but it also meant dozens of opinions easily clashed.

There were also more oddballs spouting strange things.

Just then.

-Everyone, quiet down! Fresh information just came in!

Amidst the uproar in the Fire River Council.

The representative of the Vampiric Tribe, who had been sitting in the middle, seemingly asleep to the world, suddenly opened his eyes and shouted.

-Everyone, close your eyes and take a nap for an hour! I will use [Dream Notification] to send you the footage!

The members of the Fire River Council looked at each other. Soon, one by one, they leaned back in their chairs and fell asleep.

Sleeping during a conference often indicates negligence, but in this case, it was a clear execution of duty.

In the dream brought on by the Vampiric Tribe representative's [Dream Notification], a privilege gained by merging with the Dream Demon Tribe. While it couldn't abuse people in dreams like the Dream Demon Tribe in its prime due to many restrictions, it could send brief footage, and that was enough for now.

-Incredible.

-What kind of monster is that?

Thus, the cutting-edge intelligence obtained by the busy wings of the Vampiric Tribe's intelligence unit was relayed to the members of the Fire River Council.

The Ki Dragon Dwelling in the Abyss. The location and identity of the giant turtle were revealed in less than a day.

-It's huge!

-Damn, is that a continent or a turtle? You could live on that

thing.

-No matter how sharp the blade, it wouldn't leave a scratch!

-And what's with the Aura surrounding it? No, it seems like its entire body is made of Aura!

One by one, the awakened council members began to stir up commotion again.

-Silence.

Snap!

The strongest entity of this era smacked the ground with his tentacle, quelling the noise.

-Let's sort out the situation first.

The commotion gradually subsided.

Seimslam spoke.

-An unidentified monster, this turtle, called itself the [Deep Sea Dwelling Ki Dragon]. It's probably a being with a special name like the gods we worshiped, so we must seek advice from someone who has directly communicated with the gods.

The council stirred at Seimslam's words.

-Gods?

-Are you referring to beings like [The Great Puppy], Chairman Seimslam? But Lime, hasn't the bloodline of that divine beast ended?

-Damn it! Even when we lost the holy land, we still managed to escape with the descendants of the Great Puppy!

-If only it weren't for the chocolate that came from the new continent, Lime... We, [The Group Commemorating the Great Puppy], strongly recommend the council establish an investigative team to look into the conspiracy of poisoning the divine beast....

-Silence!

Snap!

Seimslam smacked the ground again.

-[The Great Puppy], [The White Lion], [The Serpent God], there was a time when gods were with us. Lime. And there were people like Gorke, who directly communicated with them.

Seimslam scanned the audience.

His gaze transcended the prejudices and distrust inherent to his race, filled with a kind of street wisdom.

-And isn't the second prophet, succeeding Gorke, still alive, waiting for the day his master calls him while sitting alone on the harshest snowy mountain of this continent?

Indeed.



Just as Viper decided to stay in the stage enduring all the time, Uburka also stayed in his homeland.

‘If I also disappear when things get tough, it'll be a problem.’

‘After all, Daddy is a father who needs to watch over his child's independence. But as the eldest son of the family, I'm like the big brother to the Earth Spirit Tribe. Big brothers always meddle, whether the younger siblings are independent or not. Ugor.’

‘So go, Daddy.’

‘I'll be waiting, just like I did before.’

But hoping for a sooner reunion than before.

That was the conversation Uburka and I had when we parted.

‘Such a reliable guy.’

Just as I was proud of how well I raised my son, the Fire River Council decided to formally invite Uburka. Although some protested, not wanting the intervention of an ancestor, they failed to present a practical plan to match their will.

Unproven will is nothing but childishness. Seimslam broke their petulance with his remaining tentacle and shouted.

-Bring the 212th Chairman of the Fire River Council, Uburka!

The summoning ritual commenced.

Uburka had apparently told his descendants to perform a special ritual if they ever needed him.

Twelve warriors with an exceptional amount of Aura gathered, exerting all their strength, shooting a beam of Aura straight into the sky.

Boooooom!

Blue, yellow, apricot – twelve different colors merged in the beam piercing the clouds. The beam, a clear beacon visible

even from the opposite side of the continent, lasted barely six seconds before fading.

-Gasp, gasp...

-Can't do this again, Ugor...

The warriors collapsed, drained of their energy.

-But, does this really bring the ancestor?

-I don't know, Ugor. Probably the first time we're using it.

-Even if he comes, it won't be immediate...

Then, how much time passed?

1 minute, 2 minutes, 3 minutes... Just as it was about to hit 200 seconds.

-Ugor?

One of the Earth Spirit Tribe members, looking up at the sky, tilted their head.

-Something like a meteor...

In that instant.

Something crashed with a thunderous roar into the center of the Fire River Council.

Kaboom!

The Fire River Council was thrown into chaos.

-Agh!

-Lime!

Dust engulfed the area like a wave. Those with antennae, horns, wings, or gills trembled under the pressure.

Once the dust settled, a giant figure stood in the crater.

[The Muscle Pig Dreaming of Parricide has descended.]

Uburka.

A living legend had appeared.

-Ugor, I thought you'd call me soon.

Uburka didn't ask why he was summoned.

Obviously, the situation unfolding in this world was clear to anyone.

-Uburka!

Seimslam called out.

-We seek wisdom from you, the former chairman! Do you have any advice for us regarding the threats of that turtle creature?

-Hmm.

Uburka grinned.

-Seeing as you call it a turtle, you've identified the monster. Ugor. You're really quick with your work.

-We appreciate the compliment, but does it relate?

-Of course. My advice is quite simple.

Uburka crossed his arms.

-If you've figured it out, that Ki Dragon is a massive Aura entity. It's like a pure Aura crystal.

Uburka, a martial artist who reached the heavens, sat in a lotus position and inhaled.

It was a basic Aura cultivation technique.

-So, Ugor, that means.

A white stream of Ki flowed into his nostrils, sweeping through his body before escaping.

-Why not just do this, Churrrrrup, and suck it in?

The council members tilted their heads.

-Suck it in...?

-What do you mean?

Uburka stood up, grinning.

-You don't get it.

-What?

-You fools! That huge-ass turtle is made entirely of [pure Aura]. The Aura you all have been desperately building up. Ugor, that massive body is nothing less than an [Elixir of Life], superior even to a thousand-year-old ginseng!

Only then did the council members pause.

Realizing Uburka's point, their eyes widened or antennae twitched, and they began to murmur.

Among them, Uburka delivered the final blow.

-Gather people. Not just those who can use Aura, but also those who haven't even stepped into it. Tens, hundreds, thousands, millions of people. Ugor. This isn't a crisis but an opportunity! Even those stuck in low-level cultivation can soar to first-class in one go, a once-in-a-lifetime golden opportunity!

-.....!



Mass Aura cultivation.

Or rather, should be named a Constellation-Absorbing Technique, as Uburka proposed.

-Gather everyone, have them sit on the turtle's back in a lotus position, and cultivate!

The council members gaped.

My colleagues, watching the children through the hologram, also gaped.

And I smiled lightly.

‘I really raised my son well.’

Yoo Soo-Ha did nothing and conquered the 38th stage.

My method, declared to be different from the Flame Emperor's, was somewhat similar.

‘Now they’ll reap the benefits on their own. Well done!’

Inaction.

But unlike Yoo Soo-Ha, who did nothing and let hundreds of thousands of children die, my inaction would lead to a markedly different outcome.

Beyond the hologram, my son was proclaiming that [different outcome].

With a wicked smile on his face.

-Let’s suck up that turtle bastard like beef soup and all become top-class masters!

# Chapter 258:

## Sealing the Dragon

### (1)

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-Whether it's a Ki Dragon or whatever, it's just a mass of Aura!

-Let's suck it up like an elixir and nourish ourselves!

An outrageously simple proposition.

Yet, this simplicity stirred the members of the Fire River Council. The amphitheater-like sunken meeting room quickly filled with buzzing voices.

-To absorb such a monstrous creature through Aura cultivation? Is that even possible?

-That's nonsense.

-But if it really is a pure collection of Aura as the monster claims, then there's no reason we can't devour it....

Snap!

Chairman Seimslam smacked the ground with his tentacle.

-Quiet.

Everyone instantly silenced. In the Fire River Council, where the rule of the strong prevailed, the chairman's action was understood as "Excuse me, but I'd appreciate it if you weaker ones would kindly shut up."

Seimslam was strong, and a graceful silence followed.

-I ask Uburka. Are you saying we can eliminate this monster through Aura cultivation?

-Ugor! In my opinion, that's exactly right.

Although the much younger Mountain Calamity Tribe used

informal language, Uburka didn't mind at all. He just chuckled as if indulging in a mischievous prank.

-Think about it. What we eat becomes part of our bodies, right? Similarly, the Aura we absorb, even if it comes from that creature's breath, becomes our Aura.

Uburka clenched his fists, making a thumping sound.

-So, you take a bite, I take a bite. If we all come together and share bite by bite, Ugor! That turtle will vanish without a trace, leaving us stronger!

-Hmm.

Seimslam pondered deeply.

The Mountain Calamity Tribe was naturally smaller in size, similar or even smaller than goblins. Now that the Earth Spirit Tribe had evolved into Hobgoblins, they were no match. Even the one sitting next to Seimslam, arms crossed, was Uburka—the largest warrior in Earth Spirit Tribe history.

-Lime.

So imagine how small Seimslam looked next to Uburka?

Even Seimslam's tentacles, the pride of the Mountain Calamity Tribe, were reduced to just one. His old snail shell was wrinkled and unsightly.

Yet, even next to the green mountain that was Uburka, Seimslam was dignified, and his dignity felt natural.

-Listen, everyone.

Maybe it was inevitable.

-We'll now decide the Fire River Council's stance on this unprecedented situation.

In that world, my teachings of the Demonic Cult had spread, and the Earth Spirit Tribe was trained and disciplined according to those teachings. The Mountain Calamity Tribe had been subservient to them for hundreds of years. The teachings of Demonic Heaven permeated the Fire River Council. Therefore, if Uburka was the first Heavenly Demon, then Seimslam was the 417th.

The scars from losing all but one tentacle were not a source of shame under the doctrine of Demonic Heaven but a source of pride. The more scars, the longer the path of the sword; the deeper the wounds, the freer the Demonic Heavenly God Art.

-We accept the former chairman Uburka's advice and will absorb the Ki Dragon's Aura!

It was the moment the Fire River Council's stance on the Ki Dragon incident was decided.

Soon after, as if waiting for this landmark decision, the council members stood up.

-Chairman! We'll send a summons to all of the Fairy Tribe!

-What are you antler heads rushing for? The Serpent God went first, so we horn-bearers have the right of way!

-Ho ho... everyone is so eager. But can we really get there without our ships?

-Ah, everyone's so greedy. We, [The Group Firmly Against Monopolizing the Ki Dragon], strongly propose establishing a

committee for fair and equal use of the Ki Dragon....

-Silence!

Seimslam smacked the ground again.

-I know you're here representing your tribes, Lime! But that's true for 'everyone'! Everyone here represents their respective tribes!

The council members paused.

Seimslam continued.

-Therefore, we can come to a conclusion representing 'all tribes'! And it's our duty as council members to reach such a conclusion!

This statement caused the council members to cough awkwardly.

She was the first in history to become chairman without



being from the Earth Spirit Tribe. Not only was Seimslam strong, but she also possessed the political acumen to maintain that strength.

Before long, a consensus was reached in the Fire River Council.

-Our Vampiric Tribe will immediately announce this to the world. We'll use Dream Notification to spread the word.

A Vampiric Tribe council member spoke.

Other tribal representatives followed.

-Our Fairy Tribe will mobilize all merchants to host [Pilgrims]. Just announcing it will cause chaos.

-Our Ghost Tribe will ensure the safety of the roads to prevent bandits from causing trouble.

-Our Gill Fish Tribe will gather ships for the pilgrims. Leave the large-scale passenger transport to us.

-Our Mountain Calamity Tribe will handle construction, Lime. That turtle is huge, so we'll need construction to climb onto its shell.

-Our Earth Spirit Tribe will mobilize all Blood Drama Troupes. Ugor. We'll share the troupes' know-how to make Aura cultivation easy for beginners through learning Blood Dramas.

Even after resolving these issues, Seimslam was not satisfied.

-Fools! The most important problem remains! To eat turtle soup, we first need to catch the turtle. Lime. But that turtle is alive! Discussing which plate to use and how to cook it before that is absurd!

Again, the council members' faces flushed with embarrassment.

Watching them with content, Uburka, the former chairman of the Fire River Council, laughed.

-Ugor. Right. It's indeed a tiny problem.

-Tiny? It's a pretty major problem, Lime.

-One could say that. That Ki Dragon has a [self-awareness].

Uburka stroked his chin.

-The dragon you recently beheaded and threw into the sea....

-Recently? That's ancient history from decades ago, Lime.

-Ah, sorry, Ugor. When you become a Constellation and focus solely on training, your sense of time becomes quite different from ordinary people. Anyway, that dragon you obliterated had no self-awareness. It just cried when hurt, retaliated when attacked, nothing more than an animal. But that turtle is different.

Uburka scratched his chin while speaking.

-How a massive Aura mass developed a [self-awareness] is a fascinating topic for scholarly types who love to think, but Ugor, it puts us in a tough spot while they have their book party.

-It's a messy situation. If it gets annoyed with the parasites clinging to it, it'll kick them off. To prevent that, we have to decapitate the turtle as previously mentioned....

Seimslam scratched her remaining tentacle on her shell.

-It's far too big for us to handle. How many warriors will die, or even if they do, whether we can decapitate it, I can't say.

-Ugor. We could just stick to it and start Aura cultivation right away. Eventually, its resistance will weaken.

-Don't think with your standards, Lime. Aura cultivation should ideally be done in a calm state over a long period, but the turtle's shell is a terrible place for meditation, acting up unpredictably.

Seimslam scratched the back of her head with her tentacle.

-Plus, if it acts up at that size, it'll surely affect the world. Ships traveling between the New Continent and the mainland will capsize, cities on the coast will be swept away by earthquakes and tsunamis, and the damage will be unimaginable. Heck, the pressure might cause a series of volcanic eruptions, popping like acne. Lime.

Seimslam sunk into deep thought.

The extent of her concerns was vivid even beyond the hologram. The fate of the continent and all tribes depended on this council, and she was its chairman.

And her being the council's 'chairman' also meant she wasn't the 'king'.

-Excuse me.

A representative of the Vampiric Tribe raised his hand.

The same person who had used Dream Notification to reveal the location and identity of the Ki Dragon.

-I have a clever idea.

Since Seimslam was not the king but the chairman, she didn't have to come up with all the solutions herself.

A council is a place for exchanging ideas.

As Seimslam herself said, the council members gathered were those whose job was to propose ideas.

-A clever idea? What is it?

-That would be....

The Vampiric Tribe council member began his story. His lips moved precisely, and his neatly groomed Kaiser mustache followed suit.

Moments later, as he closed his mouth, the council members who heard the story were engulfed in shock.

-Oh, indeed.

-Certainly a clever idea.

-Hmm. But is that even possible?

-Having a [self-awareness] means it's possible, doesn't it?

Amidst the flowing opinions, Seimslam tapped the table with her sole tentacle.

-It's worth a try. Lime.

The Vampiric Tribe council member smirked.

However, Seimslam's statement was not yet finished.

-We need to attract the turtle's attention for that clever plan to work effectively.

Sounds of agreement like 'Hmm!' and 'Hmph!' resonated around the meeting room.

The task was no different from putting a bell on a cat, an understandably challenging proposition, but Chairman Seimslam was unfazed.

-I'll volunteer first.

The council members hesitated.

Chairman Seimslam looked at them and chuckled in the unique way of the Mountain Calamity Tribe.

-Think about it, you moldy fellows. The first ones to contact the Ki Dragon and sit in meditation will be the lucky ones to savor the biggest honey, right?

".....!"

-As the 629th chairman, I declare that I will lead the vanguard. I have no intention of entrusting the role of the lucky one to anyone else.

Seimslam turned her head to look at Uburka.

-What about you, ancestor?

-Ugor. Whether the turtle belches or throws a tantrum, I'm confident in sticking to its shell and savoring the honey.

Uburka smiled, revealing his fangs.



-As the older one, it would be shameful to covet only the honey. Ugor. But it would be embarrassing as a younger brother to always rely on the elder in times of need.

In the past, the Fire River Council had rejected Uburka and my help.

Even on the 37th floor, Uburka did not intervene, and Viper, known as the Serpent God, also refused to participate.

Issues of this era should be handled by the people of this era.

Issues of this world should be addressed by the characters of this world.

Such was the atmosphere at the Fire River Council.

But...

-Ha!

Seimslam snorted.

-Willpower is only beautiful when there is the strength to prove it, Lime. Willpower without proof is just vain struggling. And as a result, those who suffer are not the vain strugglers, but Lime, the powerless people who should have been protected by them.

Seimslam slammed the desk with a whip-like sound.

-That turtle bastard said it would kill all those who cannot use Aura.

The council members' expressions darkened as they recalled the Ki Dragon's declaration.

-It's essentially the same as saying it will kill all newborn babies who can't understand language.

Seimslam slammed the desk again.

-I'm not sure if there's any creature that wouldn't get angry when its offspring is threatened, but we are not that kind of creature.

-Uoooo! That's right!

The council members raised their voices.

-Correct, Chairman!

-We are not that kind of creatures!

-We are not...! We are not...!

-We, [The Group That Isn't That Kind of Creature], openly support the chairman's declaration and....

-Silence!

Seimslam smacked the desk again.

Amid the awkward silence of the council members, Seimslam turned to Uburka, annoyed yet hopeful.

-Therefore, we have to use even dog poop if it's useful. Can you help, ancestor?

-Ugor. Calling it dog poop is harsh, but alright.

Uburka laughed.

-I'll help.

-Good.

Seimslam nodded.

-Then, centering around the ancestor and me, we will form a special task force to attract the turtle's attention, Lime. As mentioned earlier, those who volunteer for the task force will have the right to be the first ones on the turtle's shell to meditate.

The task force was quickly formed. Requests to join came flooding in like ants to dropped honey candies.

The Fire River Council was a gathering of both council members and warriors. With their chairman leading the way, there was nothing to fear.

-Hmm. It's a bit lacking.

However, Seimslam frowned.

-Excluding me and the ancestor, frankly, the quality is a bit lacking. It would be perfect if about 200 to 300 more powerful guys would drop out of nowhere....

-Kuk-kuk-kuk.

It was at that moment that the doors of the Fire River Council opened.

-I've been waiting for that.

The large doors opened, letting in sunlight.

The sunlight that couldn't make it in cast long shadows on the floor. Hundreds of shadows, especially the horns on their heads, stood in a row.

-We who serve the Serpent God.

-The Serpent God's direct Shadow Troop.

-All of us from the [256 True Color Ghost Division] are here!

A moment of silence ensued.

-Hmm.

Seimslam propped her chin.

Uburka scratched the back of his head.

-Hey, current generation.

-Hmm.

-You said you'd use dog poop if necessary.

-I did.

-Are we using those?

-Hmm... just wait a moment, Lime.

I'm in deep thought right now...."

After a long time passed, that day's Fire River Council came to an end.

Soon after, those who took on the mission began their journey towards The Ki Dragon Dwelling in the Abyss.

It was the opening of the pilgrimage route that would come to be known as the "Path of Aura."

---

Guooooooooo-!!

The Ki Dragon, the strongest among the dragons dwelling in the deep sea, roared.

The Ki Dragon, which had sunk into the deep sea, was

incredibly powerful, the strongest in this world.

-Uaaaak!

-Gaah...!

Both Uburka and the entire 256 True Color Ghost Division were defeated. Even all together, they were no match.

The Ki Dragon in the deep sea was unique in the world.

Anyway, it roared.

-Uaaaah, it's over!

-Damn, let's run!!

The worthless ones who couldn't awaken their Aura fled.

But the Ki Dragon was stronger than them.



-Ah, damn...!

-If only I had studied Aura more diligently...!

Therefore, their regrets were nothing but vain hopes.

Guooooooooo-!!

The Ki Dragon Dwelling in the Abyss.

That was the moment it completely and irreversibly annihilated all those who couldn't awaken their Aura....

---

-Brother, that turtle is smiling?

-Leave it. Must be having a nice dream.

The leader of the Vampiric Tribe said as he lit a cigarette.

Behind him, tens of thousands of Vampiric Tribe members—merged with the Dream Demons—flapped their wings, shooting out flames.

# Chapter 259:

## Sealing the Dragon

### (2)

---

[The Ki Dragon Dwelling in the Abyss sea falls into sleep.]

The massive turtle slowly buried its head in the jungle.

Kwoong!

Dust and sand whirled around the palm trees felled by its massive body.

[The Ki Dragon Dwelling in the Abyss sea falls into a deep sleep.]

The Ki Dragon's back rose and fell gently. It began to breathe comfortably. The breath was so immense that, with each exhale and inhale through the Ki Dragon's nostrils, the jungle foliage trembled as if caught in a fierce wind.

"Hmm."

Beneath the trembling palms, stirred by the dragon's breath, there was someone flapping their wings.

"We have selected only the best Dream Demons from our race, who are adept at manipulating, guiding, and leading dreams. There's no need to worry."

A high-ranking member of the Vampiric Tribe.

During his speech, the vampire never blinked. His posture was awkward, and the language he spoke seemed jumbled and clumsy, as if translated by a machine.

It was expected.

This vampire was a kind of conduit. Currently, he was completely possessed by the Dream Demons, his memory, mind, and even his body fully under their control.

"Ugor."

Uburka looked somewhat perplexed in front of him.

"Excuse me, but what's your name...?"

-[We] have no name.

The handsome vampire stated blandly.

-We are us.

"[As crazy as 'Daddy is a lunatic'] is a pointless proposition."

-For us, there is no you and no I. Only dreams. In dreams, anyone can become you, and anyone can be I. That's why we are us.

Uburka shrugged his shoulders.

"Ah, well, I take it as you saying there's plenty of you. Alright?"

-.....

"Your silence seems like a yes. Ugor. So, Dream Demon gentlemen, or should I say gentlemen and ladies, how long can you keep that Ki Dragon asleep?"

Uburka pointed at the behemoth.

The Ki Dragon was unimaginably huge, like an island. This monstrous island took a deep breath every approximately 20 minutes, exhaling and inhaling with a vast, echoing sound.

A literal heaving mountain.

"Now is the time! Finish the construction quickly, Lime!"

On the slope of that heaving mountain, snails were crawling up with great effort.

"We must complete all work before the dragon awakes!"

"Surround the whole body with support structures! We need

to create space for as many people as possible to simultaneously perform Aura synthesis. Lime. Keep in mind that this thing keeps moving and adjust the construction accordingly!"

"We will finish it within the day!"

They were the Mountain Calamity Tribe, in charge of construction for this operation.

Thousands of Mountain Calamity Tribe members climbed onto the body of the monster. Unlike most races that had to walk on the ground, the Mountain Calamity Tribe could climb walls by secreting a sticky mucus.

Even now, they were the same. The slightly trembling mountain slope was just a light picnic course for them. They wielded tools and lumber with four or five tentacles and started the construction. From afar, they looked like tiny people crawling on the body of the giant Gulliver.

"We can't let those little guys get hurt during the construction."

Uburka commented.

"Millions are flocking from all over the continent right now. It might even exceed a million. They all need to cling to it and absorb its Aura for this to barely work, but if that dragon wakes up, it's all for naught."

-7 days.

The vampire, possessed by the Dream Demon, spoke.

Uburka immediately dropped his nonchalant demeanor and turned to the vampire with a serious expression.

"7 days? You can keep it asleep for 7 days? Ugor. That's impressive...."

-Our Dream Demons, if classified in your terms, number a staggering 800,000. These 800,000 Dream Demons are creating a sea illusion, showing the cool origins of waves in fantasies, and fulfilling the Ki Dragon's desire to tear apart and kill impure beings. They are presenting a continuous dream. 800,000 of them.

"....."



-We satisfy the happiness of the Ki Dragon, console its sorrows, guide it to where its sorrow was born to overcome its trauma, and support it in understanding why it exists, and if it must exist, what the purpose of that existence is. 800,000 Dream Demons are working on it.

The vampire sighed softly.

-Anyway, for the next 7 days, we'll ensure that monster sleeps soundly without even snoring. How much Aura you can absorb from this monster in these 7 days will be the key to this operation. Ideally, absorb the Aura vigorously enough to shrink it down like a doll.

With that, as if concluding his words, the vampire flapped his wings.

At that moment, Uburka reached out and grabbed the vampire's leg. The flapping continued, but the vampire couldn't fly away.

-What is it?

The vampire—now a Dream Demon—asked incredulously.

"Sorry, but. Ugor. I still have something to ask you."

-Ask.

"From what I know, hundreds of years ago, before our daddy visited your dreamy or whatever world. You guys were just selfish, weren't you?"

-.....

"You didn't care whether the Merfolk or Earth Spirit Tribe outside died or lived as long as you could expand your dream world. You were content living in dreams, enjoying endless plays. But why, what change of heart made you cooperate with us on such a monumental event involving the fate of our races?"

Silence lingered for a moment.

-People don't trust in goodwill, Chairman of the Fire River Council.

"Regrettably, I only trust my own goodwill."

-Half right, half wrong.

"Hmm?"

Uburka tilted his head.

Looking down at the largest Earth Spirit Tribe in history, the Dream Demon slightly lifted the corner of his mouth.

-You not only trust in your goodwill but also in your father's goodwill.

"....."

-Tell your father when you see him. Next time he visits our world, we won't be so easily subdued as [last time]. Even the creator who claimed to have made this continent was put to sleep by us. Would your father, revered as a god by you, be any different!

For the first time, the Dream Demon laughed out loud. As Uburka's grip weakened, the Dream Demon pulled away and flew into the sky.

Flap, flap, flap!

As one Dream Demon flew away, hundreds, thousands of vampires followed. They had been waiting in the dark shadows of the jungle for the conversation to end. Countless vampires flapped their wings, and their wings, along with the palm leaves, covered the sky.

And soon, they vanished into the distance.

"Ugor."

Uburka chuckled bitterly.

"Going around capturing people, regardless of their race. Our daddy, truly a man burdened with sins."

Clang! Clang!

The sound of the Mountain Calamity Tribe working with their tools echoed through the heart of the jungle.

---

"Amazing! Truly incredible!"

We were watching the whole story unfold from the disqualified contestants' waiting room.

The Mountain Calamity Tribe had actually finished the construction in just one day. The wooden beams and stairs formed a geometric harmony, allowing anyone to easily climb onto the monster's body. The Heretic Inquisitor's eyes sparkled as he admired the holographic architecture.

"The architectural knowledge I taught is still intact! The empire has fallen, and we've been living abroad for hundreds of years. Ahaha! It's more delightful than I thought to see that my teachings haven't been forgotten by the children!"

"You consider them your children only at times like this..."

"What are you talking about, King of Death? I've always regarded the Mountain Calamity Tribe as my children! I'm proud to have nurtured and cared for them."

Yeah. The image of a very affectionate parent who gifts their children a slave from the Ghost Tribe for Christmas, saying, 'Kids, this year I brought you a Ghost Tribe slave as a present! Be careful not to break it while you abuse it!' springs to mind.

"...It truly is a magnificent sight."

Black Dragon Witch murmured from the side of the couch.

"The Earth Spirit Tribe and Mountain Calamity Tribe, along with the Ghost Tribe, have almost all arrived. Other races are also gathering steadily. ...We might actually clear the stage without any harm."

The hologram showed a scene of races from all over the continent converging.

Many of them were Aura users. When the warriors took the lead and swung their swords, the wildly overgrown jungle trees flew away like straw. Where the trees were cut down, roads were formed. Like hundreds of spread-out blood vessels, main roads and alleys appeared throughout the jungle, and through them, the races walked unimpeded.

Undoubtedly, the jungle was pulsating with [all races] at that moment.

-This way to the Aura absorption ascent!

The Fairy Tribe set up stalls to welcome visitors. Where people gather, money gathers, and where money gathers, fairies gather.

Unfortunately, that's what the Fairy Tribe is in this world.

-Feeling tired from Aura synthesis? Oh my, miraculously, here's the famous fatigue recovery white ginseng in abundance! What's the use of accumulating Aura if you're just tired? A true master is not someone who accumulates Aura, but someone who enjoys life! Have a bowl of white ginseng soup before you go!

-If you meditate in the lotus position all day without sleep, it'll be disastrous! You need at least seven hours of sleep a day! There are many nasty bugs here, and the leaves are sharp, making it impossible to sleep, really impossible. But don't worry! Cozy hammocks are prepared for you!

-Buy insect repellent! If you apply it to your body, you won't get bitten at all! Buy insect repellent!

.....

Isn't this a bit too spirited?

Aren't you guys there to make money rather than absorb Aura?

We all looked at the Countess in disbelief.

"Eh? Why are you looking at me?"

Still transformed into a cat, the Countess leisurely scratched her chin.

"Money should be made when there's an opportunity. Money is a flow that needs to be grasped when fortune comes. In that sense, I think I've raised my children well. If I could, I'd even send the subordinates of Sang-Ryun to learn from these kids."

"Countess... No, never mind. Just stay as you are forever..."

The Paladin patted the cat's back and sighed. Meow, the Countess contentedly settled on the Paladin's lap.

While the disqualified contestants' waiting room was leisurely, the characters in the hologram were bustling with activity.



-Now's the time, oooooo!

-Leave it to me, FFFFFFF!

256 members of the Ghost Tribe climbed onto the Ki Dragon's shell and sat in the lotus position in unison.

-Hhhhhhhm!

Then, the Ghost Tribe members each radiated a brilliant Aura, performing the Aura Absorption Technique.

The so-called 256 True Color Ghost Division.

The legacy left by Viper and currently, in real-time, the culprits tormenting our hearts. What's with that codename? Do you really think that's the best, Celestial Martial Guild Master...?

"Are all 256 of them Vipers?"

Black Dragon Witch said with a disgusted expression.

"No. Only one of them is the Celestial Martial Guild Master. The rest must be Viper's elite disciples or their descendants."

"How do you know? It's not easy to distinguish them here..."

"Somehow, I just know."

I grinned wryly.

'After all, I've become a rival.'

There was one among them where gray and violet Aura intertwined. The codename would probably correspond to the gray something or other.

Centered around that Aura, like a rainbow, the brilliant Auras burned brightly.

Apparently, Viper had established [Celestial Martial Guild] in this other world from floor 36 to 38.

"Anyway, now the opportunity has come to catch an

[Impossible] rated monster."

I smiled.

'Go, guys.'

And I cheered in my heart.

'Drain it dry, down to the last drop of marrow.'

Not only the rainbow-colored Ghost Division but also the Earth Spirit Tribe, Pure Humans, and other constantly arriving warriors and workers of different races, all gathered around [The Ki Dragon Dwelling in the Abyss] and sat in the lotus position.

On the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th day...

The jungle soon became a sea of people.

The warriors approached those who did not know how to synthesize Aura and guided them kindly. The 'mother' of the

Earth Spirit Tribe held a child's hand and climbed the wooden stairs made by the Mountain Calamity Tribe. None of them seemed to think they should display hatred towards each other.

Something unimaginable a thousand years ago.

But facing the arrival of [The Ki Dragon Dwelling in the Abyss], the races united as one.

'Go.'

I clenched my fist.

'This 38th floor isn't being cleared by gods from another world.'

Despite the night, the jungle was as bright as the Milky Way.

The Auras raised by countless children burned in red, green, blue, and the colors imbued in their imaginations.

The night sky shimmered like silk, soaked in the colors emitted by those races.

'You guys. You are the ones breaking this quest!'

And.

The father's encouragement undoubtedly reached the children.

[The Earth Spirit Tribe is about to evolve!]

# Chapter 260:

## Sealing the Dragon

### (3)

---

Let's discuss the last [enemy] humanity fought in the tower for a moment.

---

This story is from before my return.

Flame Emperor - Yoo Soo-Ha, true to the alias he received, was good at burning everything.

-Hahaha! Haha!

His ability was to burn objects well, his sin was to burn people equally well, and lastly, his cruelty was to burn the world itself.

And that was the misfortune of everyone else.

-Being a god feels pretty good!

Yoo Soo-Ha possessed the Fairy Tribe and led the other races. They burned anything that obstructed their path. Burned people they encountered on the road. Even tried to burn the world surrounding them.

The Karma Flame Army.

That's what Yoo Soo-Ha called the fairies following him. Indeed, they were the incarnate of karma flames that descended upon the continent, burning everything that came into their sight.

-Burn it!

When Yoo Soo-Ha commanded,

-For his highness! For his highness! For his highness!

The elves chanted in response.

Their voices were fierce, sharp, and venomous.

-For the sublime being!!

Primitive worship.

-O god of fire, we offer these sacrifices! Please accept them!

Human sacrifice.

-Burn!

-Purify the world!

-We are the only ones chosen by the god of fire! The only ones with worth!

Ethnocentrism.

-Your weakness, your hunger, it's all because you were born



lowly!

-How dare you, the lowly trash, step on the sacred flames!

Contempt and discrimination.

-They are strong, their rank is high, all because they took it from us!

-Priest, no, the former priest! Look! This is proof you're no longer favored by the god of fire!

Hatred and lust for power.

-Yes, that's right. This is how people live.

-Love? Friendship? Dedication? Bullshit. Don't rely on such fantasies! How can people love each other!

-Come on, kids! You are the true humanity! Now, unify this continent! Understand!

The elves saluted.

-For his highness! For his highness! For his highness!

Yoo Soo-Ha set the world ablaze.

And to lead that fire, he kept purchasing the [Character Possession] and [Divine Descent] items whenever the timing was right.

-Why bother with farming? Are you a fool?

-Farming isn't easy, you know. You need to make a farm, and to make one you need the technological prowess, for which you need researchers, and to support them you need money, and to gather money you need a market, and for a market, you need a village, and for a village, you need a ruler, who uses all these - the villagers, market, money, researchers, and farmers - to finally after six months or a year, produce tiny grains of rice. Oh.

Yoo Soo-Ha scoffed.

-Are you all fools?

The elves growled.

-We are not fools!

-We are not fools! We, [Flame Cross Order] who are not fools, strongly support the oracle of the god of fire!

It seemed like lava, not blood, coursed through their veins.

The elves, naturally born with physical and intellectual prowess, channeled all of it into killing. Born with the innate ability to sense Aura, the elves were formidable killing machines. These killing machines, with their superior brains, pondered how to efficiently sever limbs of their enemies, how to climb to higher positions.

Zealous followers of the god they called the Flame Emperor.

In that era, that's what the Fairy Tribe was.

-Little rascals. Carrying heads in their hands, they're not fools, I see.

Yoo Soo-Ha stood on the altar, igniting Aura in his right hand.

Whoosh!

The head of a Mountain Calamity Tribe member he was holding burned instantly, turning to ash.

-You don't need to farm! If you're hungry, eat the crops others have harvested. Kill their cherished chickens and throw a feast!

-You don't need villages either. If you kill everyone in the village, isn't that a luxury hotel just for you? Leave a few villagers to serve you, and relax in that hotel for a couple of weeks. Eat the food and meat they bring regularly. Isn't that paradise? Huh?

-After two weeks, kill the food-bearing villagers too. Kill them all. How does that feel? Light, right? After resting for a fortnight, you feel unstressed and energized again, right? That's it. Guys, that's it.

-Time to find the next hotel!

The Fairy Tribe shouted.

-For his highness! For his highness! For his highness!

-For the god of fire!

-For his highness!

Wherever the Karma Flame Army went, nothing was left. Yearlong crops were burned, prized cows in barns were scorched and roasted. Everything the people had painstakingly built for tomorrow, next year, for the future, crumbled to ashes overnight.

All that remained was an unbearable reality. Whenever the Karma Flame Army plundered a village, they deliberately left five or six people alive, but only after breaking their legs, arms, or backs. The surviving villagers blankly saw their vanished past and severed future, the corpses overflowing at the village edges. And then,

After the Karma Flame Army left, ropes quietly hung on the streets. The surviving villagers hung themselves there.

Yoo Soo-Ha, the tyrant who set the world on fire.

However, he encountered a crisis on the 39th floor, and upon reaching the 40th floor, he fell into unprecedented danger.

It was a mystery that he even faced a crisis.

The Karma Flame Army had long exterminated many races. They tore the Mountain Calamity Tribe to death, nailed the Ghost Tribe, beheaded the Pure Humans, burned the Gill Fish Tribe, and trapped the Vampiric Tribe to death.

Who, from where, would dare to bring crisis to the god of fire?

-Ugor.

Only one race.

For thousands of years, as the continent groaned in the fiery hell, the only children who escaped [extinction].

-Who's that? The crazy elf leader.

Earth Spirit Tribe.

Their world was harsh. Only the strong survived in the ever-burning inferno. Luckily, they were tenacious. They survived doggedly, planted seeds, and a few of those seeds grew into warriors.

Yoo Soo-Ha's opponent on the 40th floor was them, the Earth Spirit Tribe.

-What about you? 38th floor... No, you won't understand if I put it like that, being NPC monsters. Well. Right. How did you survive the The Ki Dragon Dwelling in the Abyss or whatever?

-We survived.

-Interesting. How?

-Dozens among us can use Aura. Those dozens clung to the Ki Dragon and absorbed as much Aura as possible for as long as time allowed.

-Hmm. So...

-That's right.

Kwoong.

Fourteen members of the Earth Spirit Tribe stepped forward.

-We are the last of the Earth Spirit Tribe in this world.

-.....

-Despite all our kin being dead, we survived and became incomparably stronger than before.

Yoo Soo-Ha let out a short sneer.

-Just fourteen of you left and you dare call yourselves a race? Ridiculous. Fine, dirt-poor brats. I'll send you comfortably to join your million kin today!



But.

That day, Yoo Soo-Ha did not accomplish the quest.

Instead, he had to admit he was woefully unprepared to face [these enemies] and had no choice but to retreat.

Usually, he could've easily won by charging with his Karma Flame Army.

But for some reason... Yoo Soo-Ha lost the trust of the elves on the 39th floor.

Not just lost, but became the enemy of all elves.

-Damn it.

Yoo Soo-Ha had no allies. There were rumors of a romance with the Saintess, but in hindsight, it was probably just gossip spread by irresponsible media.

Even the fairies who could've been his subordinates had

turned their backs on him.

The term 'all alone' was made for Yoo Soo-Ha.

-Fighting unfairly with numbers, huh? Fine! Fuckers. I'll prepare thoroughly and come back! Understand!

[Retreating from the 40th floor.]

[You have failed to achieve the quest!]

[Please try again next time.]

Thus, Flame Emperor - Yoo Soo-Ha's unbridled conquest of the tower paused here.

He wasn't exactly defeated by the 40th floor boss. He just retreated. There weren't many who mocked this as Yoo Soo-Ha's [failure].

After all, he was the legend, Flame Emperor - Yoo Soo-Ha, who had conquered every stage from the 11th to the 39th floor.

-Breaking news.

Yoo Soo-Ha wasn't the only one frustrated on the 40th floor.

-The Black Dragon Guild's assault on the 40th floor of the tower.

-They were confident this time they'd show the true strength of a top-tier guild, right?

-Unfortunately, they returned empty-handed again.

Her fame overshadowed by Yoo Soo-Ha, she, the most powerful in the tower, set out to reclaim her guild's honor. She attacked with all the elites of the Black Dragon.

[Retreating from the 40th floor.]

[You have failed to achieve the quest!]

[Please try again next time.]

She too failed.

Unable to defeat "the mere fourteen remaining Earth Spirit Tribe members," the Black Dragon Witch retreated. She had killed six of them and injured four. That was the limit of the Black Dragon Witch's power.

Eventually,

-Number one in the Hunter rankings!

-Flame Emperor has once again soloed the boss!

The one who landed the final blow on the prey wounded by the Black Dragon Witch was Yoo Soo-Ha, who had been waiting for the right moment for revenge.

Despite a previous retreat, the Flame Emperor remained the unshakable top-ranked hunter. With six corpses and four wounded, the remaining Earth Spirit Tribe members stood no chance against Yoo Soo-Ha.

-Damn it!

-Cursed brats, they've been a real pain!

Yoo Soo-Ha cursed as he set the Earth Spirit Tribe's heads ablaze.

With that, the last of the Earth Spirit Tribe on the continent perished, marking the extinction of a race.

-You...

The Earth Spirit Tribe member opened his mouth. He was the last remaining one. Held by the head in Yoo Soo-Ha's grasp, his entire body burning, he recited emotionlessly.

-You will be cursed.

-Huh?

-You're not a god, but a devil. You masqueraded as a god and led the fairies down a devil's path. You set the world on fire and destroyed it. Everything is your karma. If there is truly a god in this world, not a devil like you...

-What the hell are you talking about, monster?

-You will surely face revenge.

Woosh.

The Earth Spirit Tribe member's head burned to the brain. Only after that, his words disappeared. Even though his throat was burned, his tongue turned to ash, and his bones melted, the last of the Earth Spirit Tribe used Aura to leave his final words.

-Bastard.

Yoo Soo-Ha brushed the ash from his hands with a flick.

-Talking about revenge, such insignificant beings.

Thus, Yoo Soo-Ha conquered the 40th floor of the tower.

Media outlets waged wars to get an interview with Yoo Soo-Ha. On the internet, people were divided between praising and

mocking him, proving how significant the name Yoo Soo-Ha was in their lives. Hunters ridiculed the incompetent Black Dragon Witch, and someone like me admired Yoo Soo-Ha.

That was the era.

That was the day.

-Talk? Ah, talking. Good. Very civilized.

-But I set the rules for the conversation.

That very night, the Saintess died.

-But you know I'm the Flame Emperor. You saw that the Saintess died by my hand.

-Then you should die too.

An F-rank hunter also died.

Thus.

The 40th floor was the highest stage humanity had ever conquered in a standard manner.

Although I briefly visited the 50th floor to meet Constellation Killer, it was a trick using a bug. It was not officially recognized. Before and after my return, the last realm humanity had ever reached was up to the 40th floor.

The being who once defeated the Flame Emperor and made the Black Dragon Witch retreat on the 40th floor.

That being, who made me choose 'Goblin' as my race amidst the mockery of my peers, left a deep impression on my mind.

[The Earth Spirit Tribe is undergoing evolution!]

That very being was now entering my timeline.

---

The change began with a small Hopgoblin child.



-Ugor?

The child sat cross-legged between his mother on the left and father on the right. Tiny toes wiggled. The parents preferred to channel their Aura into their child rather than themselves. As warriors at the bottom of the Fire River Council, their combined Aura cultivation technique was quite exceptional.

That's why the child was the first to experience the glory of evolution.

-My child?

-This is...

The child began to glow.

His parents were shocked, but soon realized this change was not limited to their child.

-Hmm?

-Ugor?

Whoosh!

The Earth Spirit Tribe members, whether perched on the Dragon's back, sitting atop its knee, or just on a claw, began to glow one after another.

-What, why is my body...

-This is ominous! Something terrible is happening, Ugor!

As the Earth Spirit Tribe members were about to unravel their cross-legged posture,

"Don't panic!"

A roar came from atop the Dragon's head.

[The Constellation 'The Muscle Pig Dreaming of Parricide' admonishes its kin.]

It was my magnificent Muscle Pig, Uburka. He sat between the giant creature's left and right nostrils, i.e., the philtrum. Every time the [The Ki Dragon Dwelling in the Abyss] exhaled, Uburka's body rose and fell as if riding a violent roller coaster. Despite the intensity, he looked as comfortable as if lounging in an armchair.

"Never unfold your legs! Keep channeling your Aura!"

-But...

"This is not an ominous sign. It's similar to what you call metamorphosis!"

The Earth Spirit Tribe members widened their eyes.

-Metamorphosis?

-Isn't that the realm only Uburka, our ancestor, barely reached?

Uburka grinned, showing his fangs.

"Ugor. It's just similar. I know because I've experienced it. While similar to metamorphosis, it's different. Besides, aren't all our kin glowing at once?"

-Then what's happening, ancestor?

"I don't know. But exploring unknown caverns is always exciting!"

Whoosh!

Uburka too began to glow. His flame was wilder than any Earth Spirit Tribe member's.

"Fellow tribesmen! Do not fear. Fire has always been our ally. Even when our ancestors moaned buried in smoky caves, fire burned for us. How can the monster that created this continent extinguish our fire?"

Red flames fiercely enveloped Uburka, but they didn't burn his body or the world, merely entwining quietly around the Dragon's head. Many Earth Spirit Tribe members admired their ancestor's realm and looked up to Uburka.

"Breathe! Accept the world's temperature into your bodies! Concentrate! Remember the ancestors who mined salt with pickaxes long ago!"

The commotion subsided.

The Earth Spirit Tribe members immersed themselves in Aura cultivation again.

"Everyone, unify your mind images!"

My family's Chief Warrior, like an orchestra conductor, led the flames emitted by the tribesmen.

"Whether this is metamorphosis or whatever, when we open our eyes next, we will be different beings! But what's the use of tomorrow and the day after for those who forget yesterday? They just pass time, not live it. So remember. Never forget the screams of our long-dead ancestors! We burn eternally just to [not forget]!"

The flames grew fiercer.

From the Dragon's scales, knees, toes, and philtrum, various

flames soared. Millions of flames in myriad hues, but soon the strongest color — the clearest one — swallowed everything.

Red.

Just the red flame consumed blue, jade, yellow, black, and white. The [The Ki Dragon Dwelling in the Abyss] was entirely engulfed in blazing flames. The giant creature became like a wick of a huge candle.

[The Constellation 'The Muscle Pig Dreaming of Parricide' is using Demonic Heavenly God Art.]

And then,

[The Earth Spirit Tribe is using Demonic Heavenly God Art.]

Crack.

The children's green skin, their shells, peeled away.

Like burnt charred shells, their green skin dropped away in

red flakes.

[The Earth Spirit Tribe is experiencing evolution!]

No.

It wasn't just the skin that turned red due to the burning Aura.

[The Earth Spirit Tribe's status is changing!]

The children's skin truly turned red.

It wasn't the green of spring's goblins or the summer scent of Hopgoblins.

[The Earth Spirit Tribe has evolved into its final form, Asura!]

For millennia,

The Earth Spirit Tribe, which had embraced all seasons, turned their experiences into red blood and flesh.

"....."

In the dropout waiting room,

We blankly watched the Earth Spirit Tribe harvest red autumn.

The Earth Spirit Tribe grew larger. Their fangs sharper. Their eyes gleamed red. The Aura born from their minds merged fiercely with their bodies. Red muscles seemed ready to burst on their forearms, back, abs, and thighs.

“Ogre...?”

The Black Dragon Witch murmured unconsciously.

“...No. I've never seen Ogres with reddish skin. They're not just big like Ogres, their Aura purity is unbelievably high. That's...”



“Yes, it's not.”

We kept our eyes on the hologram.

“This is a place only they can reach.”

I whispered to myself.

Watching the majestic Blood Flame raised by the children,

‘Open race status.’

Sssk.

Text appeared before me.

+

[Asura]

Extinction Grade: F (No Danger)

Maxim: 'We are fire.'

Political System: Fire River Council

Description: Earth Spirit Tribe.

Born from the earth, digging burrows, loving the swamp to smear their bodies with mud, knowing the scent of rain from the sky as happiness, a race that loved all shadows and moisture has, after enduring a long time, finally embraced the world's flames in their hearts.

Ignition.

They symbolize an unquenchable fire. When they kindle their aura, the flames split into six directions, and when they step onto the battlefield, their arms strike as fiercely as if wielding six swords.

They lament the lives fading in this world. By mimicking the faces and gestures of the dead, they transplant the lives already vanished from the dark and shadowy stage into reality.

They can always become others, themselves, and us. Thus, they are often metaphorically described as having three faces.

Asura.

Loving the waterways made by humans and taking pride in the flames they kindle, the Asuras will forever race through this world turned into hell.

If someone calls the Earth Spirit Tribe demons, it is perhaps because they have willingly chosen to dwell in hell.

Their beloved father still laughs in hell. Where else could be their home?

May fortune be with you.

Traits: [Fire River Council], [Blood Fire Drama], [Demonic Cult], [Demonic Heavenly God Art], [Demonic Formations Art], [Doctrine of Malice], [Legacy of Records], [Competitive Spirit], [Multiracial Culture], [Conquerors of the Continent]

Evolution: Complete.

Alias: Asura is a name unique to them.

+

I nodded.

".....Yes."

In the silence of the dropout's waiting room, where all my colleagues were silent, only my voice flowed softly.

Perhaps because people naturally don't hear their own voice well, I felt as if I was both expressing joy and suppressing emotions that couldn't quite be expressed.

"They are my children."

Still.

I spoke the words I wanted to, could, and needed to say.

"All of them... every one of them, are my proud children."

[Stage Clear.]

[The 38th floor has been cleared.]

[You did not participate in the stage.]

[No rewards are given to you.]

Those were.

Words of immense happiness.

# Chapter 261: Idol Destruction (1)

---

After my children completed their final evolution, soon after.

[The Dream Demon Tribe is evolving!]

[The Gill Fish Tribe is evolving!]

[The Mountain Calamity Tribe is evolving!]

Changes occurred in other races as well.

The ability to evolve wasn't exclusive to the Earth Spirit Tribe. The children of the earth simply opened the gate first. Several other races capable of evolution also began to emit their aura one after another.

Paaaah!

The world under the sky was momentarily dyed in a rainbow of colors.

-Oh!

-This is...

Millions of people had gathered around the [The Ki Dragon Dwelling in the Abyss]. They sat cross-legged on the limbs of the giant beast, even on its toenails, as they all ignited their colorful auras.

The area lit up as if wrapped in a rainbow.

[The Ki Dragon Dwelling in the Abyss's existence becomes faint.]

This light was also like a candle, with the giant beast as its wick, burning brightly.

[The Ki Dragon Dwelling in the Abyss is unable to wake up from its sleep.]

[The Ki Dragon Dwelling in the Abyss's existence becomes faint.]

'It's over.'

I opened my eyes slightly as I watched the hologram.

The colossal body of the dragon turtle shrank rapidly. This was a phenomenon I had witnessed before in person when I fought the Demon King of Autumn Rain. It was a fall from grace.

'But this is much more subdued than last time.'

The dragon turtle didn't resist.

Rather, it couldn't.

The Dream Demon Tribe was holding it in the dream world.



The giant turtle probably didn't feel any pain or despair.

[The Ki Dragon Dwelling in the Abyss's existence becomes faint.]

[The Ki Dragon Dwelling in the Abyss can no longer maintain its authority.]

[Beginning the authority adjustment process.]

[Stripping the alias of the The Ki Dragon Dwelling in the Abyss.]

A good death.

Finally, the monster's body crumbled.

The Throne, who virtually created this continent itself, was devoured by its own offspring.

".....It's a fair ending."

The Black Dragon Witch spoke.

Anastasia was speechless for a while after watching our children evolve, but now she seemed to have regained some composure.

"Even if the dragon's contribution enriched the continent with aura... and all eight tribes owe it a debt, there's no room for pity."

Anastasia calmly assessed the death of the monster.

"A being that tried to kill its own children. How can it be a creator or a parent? Once it bares its teeth, it's a beast. Fighting and killing each other, with only the strong surviving."

"And our children were the strongest."

"Right. Our children did a great job."

Anastasia and I smiled at each other. Not just us, but the expressions of other colleagues were also bright. They seemed happier than when they directly conquered the stages

themselves, perhaps even more so.

It was a warm atmosphere.

"Well, every tribe did well, of course."

I said with a smile.

"But if I had to pick the best performing children, wouldn't it be the Earth Spirit Tribe?"

".....Huh?"

Anastasia frowned.

"What do you mean? Without the Dream Demon Tribe putting the dragon to sleep, we couldn't have conquered the stage in the first place. The Vampire Clan, who brought them, should be credited the most. If you think about it, the Earth Spirit Tribe just stole the show."

"Hmm! A valid point, but without the Mountain Calamity

Tribe's construction skills, millions couldn't have climbed onto the dragon's body each day!"

The Heretic Inquisitor laughed.

"The key to this operation was aura absorption. The more people clung to it at once, the more successful the operation, so the Mountain Calamity Tribe played a crucial role in realizing the strategy!"

"Huh. You all don't know anything. What's the use of having millions of people?"

The Countess licked her cat-like hand.

"They need ships to move quickly, food to eat while moving, and living space after moving. Needless to say, the continent's capital and logistics are managed by the Fairy Tribe. See? Objectively, the Fairy Tribe's hidden contribution is the greatest."

"By the way, all the ships transporting the logistics were led by the Gill Fish Tribe. Um. My point is, that is also an objective fact."

Huh?

Are these people seriously thinking their own children did the best?

"Aye. No way. It's obvious the Earth Spirit Tribe did the best. You guys are so biased toward your own children. It's clear as day, and yet you defend them."

"....."

"....."

Uh-oh.

The mood turned serious.

What was a warm atmosphere a moment ago, now grew chilly in the dropout's waiting room.

'Really?'

Do they really believe their own children played the most significant role? Isn't that almost a level of cognitive dissonance?

As much as our Earth Spirit Tribe stands out, this seems like ugly jealousy and envy, too sticky and excessive.

[Ding! The King of Death harbors negative feelings towards his colleagues. At this moment, he didn't know yet. The camaraderie and friendship that seemed eternal would be twisted by their children.]

"What are you doing, Princess?"

"Playing with messages."

The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages intervened among us.

"You know? All those messages and descriptions, statuses you receive, are all manually typed by someone."

"Really? .....Yes?"

"Anyway, you've conquered the 38th floor! Congratulations!"

The Princess mimicked a celebratory sound with her mouth.

"The stages you've been conquering are different in each world. From floors 1 to 10, they're similar because they're tutorials, but from 11 to 31, they're entirely different. There are more worlds than stars in the night sky, and countless stages await you, the ascenders!"

"Heh."

Anastasia and other colleagues turned their attention to the Princess's words.

"Different stages appearing in each world... does it mean there are other worlds with towers besides ours?"

"Yep! Until the 49th floor, ascenders from other worlds hardly meet."

"Is it a beginner's consideration?"

"Something like that. From the 50th floor, you'll have to compete with ascenders from all sorts of worlds."

My colleagues looked fascinated. I already knew or guessed this information a long time ago, but they seemed to be hearing it for the first time.

'Ah. Right.'

I suddenly realized.

'They really are hearing it for the first time.'

My colleagues are different from me.

I already knew about the existence of [Hunters from Other Worlds], thanks to the Guardian Spirit. After all, the Guardian Spirit itself was a legendary figure who had reached the 99th floor in another world.

'But... apart from the Sword Saint, the others wouldn't have known.'



I, who met with the Tower Master and delved into the truth of the tower, was a special case.

Most wouldn't seek nor have a way to know such things.

While I was feeling the disparity in information, the [Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages] continued to chatter.

"But from the 31st to the 49th floors, it's generally the same. Universal, or should I say, multiversal?"

'Hmm.'

This was new information for me.

"In the end, it's about how you handle the stages. Some choose the easy path, while others deliberately seek a more difficult one. Consider it a prior experience to prepare for when you'll mingle with people from other worlds on the 50th floor!"

The Princess smiled brightly.

"And now, it's time to face the consequences."

The consequences.

"When a child grows up, they eventually see their parents' true faces."

Just as my colleagues were about to question what that meant, the next moment came.

[Sequential layer progression in process.]

[Challengers will be forcibly transferred to the 39th floor.]

[The 39th-floor quest is displayed.]

Words appeared before our eyes.

+

## [Idol Destruction]

Difficulty: Undecided

Objective: You have aided your chosen race.

Your chosen race has overcome numerous obstacles. Sometimes fierce nature, sometimes different races inhabiting the same world, sometimes mysterious plagues from new worlds, and sometimes the very being that created this continent posed challenges.

Now, it's time for you to be the final test!

You have reigned above your race as a 'god'. But you are not a god. You are a human who needs to earn a living each day, eat, laugh, or get angry. Just like those races, you are nothing but a human.

Make your choice.

Will you reveal to your race that you are human?

Or will you hide the truth forever and rule your race as servants?

\*However, if you choose to hide the truth, you will no longer be able to ascend the tower.

+

"....."

Yes.

I nodded slowly.

'This quest.'

The reason our tower faltered before my regression.

Why the Flame Emperor struggled when reaching the 40th floor.

The trigger for one's own written history to become the enemy, not monsters or thrones.

'We are not gods.'

Just the same people as those races.

It's time for the children to know that too.

---

For a long time.

I had been preparing for this 39th floor.

"Strictly speaking, Kekerkker is our bad friend."

I constantly emphasized to the children that I was not a god, but merely their parent, or more accurately, a friend.

"Apostle Gorke insisted until his death that Kekerkker was not a benevolent transcendental being, but merely a friend who tried to look after us."

"His mouth is foul, his temper petty, not exactly a friend one would want to keep close."

Maybe pretending to be a real god would have been easier.

I protected the Earth Spirit Tribe from the lava flowing from volcanoes. I helped the children escape from the salt caves of the empire. I taught the Earth Spirit Tribe tattoos, created letters for them, and showed them the path to becoming the conquerors of the continent.

There were many opportunities for me to become a god to the Earth Spirit Tribe.

If I had wished, I could have created followers more fanatical than any religion.

"Names referring to Kekerkker are 'Lion with a Foul Mouth', 'One who Enjoys Beating', 'Believer in Violent Education'."

But I didn't.

"Kekerkker."

"Come, daddy."

I couldn't.

Because eventually, I had to tell the children that I was nothing like a god.

-What?

-Oh God of Fire, what do you mean by that?

The Flame Emperor had reigned as an absolute god over the elves.

When the elves slaughtered other races, set the world on fire, and caused all sorts of chaos, the Flame Emperor always used excuses like [God's Command] or [Heaven's Will]. The elves, having witnessed miracles from the very beginning, had no choice but to fall for the Flame Emperor's tricks.

-I'm not a god.

Thus, the betrayal felt even more excruciating.

-What do you mean by that...

-Ah, damn it. What kind of quest is this? I knew it was going to be trouble when they said 'sequential progression.' Tch.

The Flame Emperor revealed the truth to progress the stage.

-Can't you understand? I'm not a god.

-Why those faces? Does it taste bad that I'm not a god?

-You're kidding me. Without me, you would have been destroyed long ago. Thanks to me, you became the most powerful race on the continent. So what if I'm not a god? Does that change the fact that I helped you?

-What about the massacre? Orders?

-That's your fault for being deceived.



-Wow, these bastards are funny. You enjoyed everything and now you make a fuss? I didn't use you; you used me. You also enjoyed killing other races, right? It was so convenient to use 'God's name' as an excuse.

-You should be grateful.

-Ungrateful bastards.

The outcome was, of course, catastrophic.

The elves realized there was no god among them. There was no [God of Fire]. There was no reason for other races to be destroyed.

The history they had built over thousands of years, the massacres, the wars. Everything was just a scam, a deceitful play by [a human just like them] pretending to be a creator.

-Are you glaring at me? Think I'll be scared if you glare?

Thus, the elves fell apart.

-Come at me if you dare.

The priestly class, which had reigned at the top of their race, was the first to be killed, by the very people they had led.

The warrior class split, starting civil wars among themselves. As expected, most warlords turned against the false god, Yoo Soo-Ha.

The enemies we faced from the 40th floor were none other than the elves.

The very race that had revered and worshipped the Flame Emperor as a god suddenly became 'enemies' and 'monsters', obstructing our tower's path.

The few survivors of the races doomed by the Flame Emperor also became enemies. They had resisted even when he claimed to be a god. After it was revealed he was human, their resistance only intensified, never weakening.

A clear case of self-inflicted retribution.

"How can a being that shows its fangs to its children be a

creator or a parent? Once it shows its fangs, it's just a beast. They fight each other, kill, and only the strong survive."

The world before my regression flowed just as Anastasia had described.

Our tower plunged into endless strife with the elves.

"Now."

That was the past I knew.

"What will you do?"

And now, the story that will change.

"If you choose not to reveal the truth here, you can continue to reign as gods, just as you have been. Ah. Even if you fail the quest, the stages you've cleared so far will be preserved. The entire continent from the 31st to the 39th floor will be incorporated into your tower! The races that worship you as gods will come along as a bonus."

The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages grinned widely.

"But if you choose to reveal the secret... everything you've done will be exposed. Yep. All your conversations, actions, everything will become videos directly [broadcast] in the minds of all races."

"It's going to be a huge mess. The Muscle Pig knows what you are, but that's just him. The others don't know anything!"

The Princess looked at each of our faces one by one.

"I'll ask one more time. What will you choose?"

Of course.

My answer is already decided.

# Chapter 262: Idol Destruction (2)

---

"Feel free to show the truth."

I confidently spoke to the princess.

"No, I'm actually pleading you to show the truth. You mean to replay everything I've done for our race in their heads as images? My goodness. How could you be so kind?"

"Kim Gong-Ja.....?"

While my companions hesitated, my answer came out refreshingly swift.

As if I had been waiting for a chance to say this.

"While I can't claim we raised the best race, we certainly did

our utmost in raising them. Ah, I can say this without a single blemish on my heart. Don't you think?"

"....."

"Anastasia, what are you hesitating for? Are you worried that they'll be shocked to see our true faces? That they'll despair and go mad upon realizing that we are just like them?"

Anastasia didn't answer. But her eyes, the black pupils of my comrade, were clearly filled with anxiety.

Her eyes whispered with unease.

『What if they are disappointed in me?』

『What if they complain that I'm a fake god, curse, and insult me?』

『What then?』

It was a deep concern.

I slowly nodded.

“Of course..... It's natural to feel anxious.”

Parents know everything about their children.

That's why they can say they love without a hint of doubt.

But what about the children?

Children know almost nothing about their parents.

Children are born when parents have already grown up. They don't know what their parents did before, where they were born, what kind of people they were in their hometown, how they felt leaving it—all those life events are unknown to them.

And they don't try to know.

Parents only show aspects they want to show their children. Using mature gestures. Smiling. Stroking their foreheads,

becoming great angels towering over these little children.

“Anastasia, please look at my face directly.”

"....."

I stood up to meet Anastasia's eyes at the same level. As she was shorter than me, I had to kneel on one knee to face her.

“The director who raised me..... did a lot to raise us. Imagine how hard it must have been to run an orphanage back then?”

I shared my story.

Deliberately light, as if it was nothing.

“When some public official's grandfather died, the director, unlike herself, would wear black clothes and go to the funeral. It was a person who had nothing to do with us, and she wasn't even close to the director. But she made sure to show her face at every ceremonial event in the city. Always. It's all about making an impression. It's very important in our country.”



"....."

"If there was an event at the district office, she would go right away. Even if there were mountains of work to be done at the orphanage, she would go if called. The district office events were just stalls lined up on the streets, selling colorful pottery, succulent plant pots, handmade wallets, and so on. All supported by the district office. They were trying to revive the local market."

"....."

"When the director went there, she would stick to the district mayor, always buying exactly three gifts. [Such beautiful work.] Though usually she would pinch every penny... she would casually spend 30,000 or 20,000 won."

I closed my eyes.

That day, I had secretly followed the director from a distance. The street event was some kind of festival, selling colorful masks too. I wore a mask and pretended to be a child among the adults, sneaking glances at the director moving around with the mayor.

-No, Mr. Mayor. How did you make such beautiful works?

Wow, only the best artisans have gathered here. It's like Artisan Street. It seems like our district has something to be proud of. The kids would love it too.....

The director's face, voice, tone were completely different from when she dealt with us at the orphanage. If any other child had seen the director's behavior then, it would have been the shock of a lifetime. To us, the director was always somewhat distant, shrouded in a mysterious fog.

-So, all these are handmade products, right? Can we have the people who made these teach at the orphanage?

-Hmm? Teaching at the orphanage...?

-Yes. I'm the director there, and our children are so good. They're good, but they lack things to play with or learn. Even just having one succulent pot-making class a week would be great for their character development..... Wouldn't it be a fulfilling thing for you too, Mr. Mayor? The workshops established with the support of the city and district. Now, they're teaching classes to local children..... It's a beautiful picture, isn't it?

-Hm. Then, about the teaching fees...

-Oh, if the district office could support us, that would be great. Then it would become a project led entirely by the district office. Mr. Secretary, you know, don't you? Our orphanage is very clean. It's one of the cleanest places around here in terms of accounting. It would be easy to work with us.

-...This orphanage is indeed known for being easy to work with. It never had missing or overdue documents.

-Hm.

A middle-aged gentleman, whose name and face I didn't know and probably would never know, nodded.

-Then Mr. Secretary, take charge of this task. I'll direct the guidelines your way... But, focusing on just one director might look odd. Hey, kindergartens. Wouldn't kids love playing with sand and mud? Try looking into pottery or handicraft classes.

-Yes, I understand.

-Thank you! Mr. Mayor! You not only beautify the streets but also people's hearts. I feel so relieved when someone like you comes to work with us.

-Haha. Our director here really has a way with words.

The mayor and his entourage gradually moved away. I should have followed, but I couldn't muster the strength to walk. Seeing the director's true face had struck me with an immense shock.

‘Embarrassing.’

At that time, the director was my parent. Something even above that. She was our teacher, a counselor for difficult times, the wise lord of the closed world of the orphanage.

Every night, she vividly told us stories from thousands of years ago, and we inherited all our legacy from her voice, tone, and expressions. To grow up with continental-scale ambitions. To always be calm. To be rational. Above all, to be angry at injustice...

To us young children, wasn't the director a god?

‘Shameful.’

I had learned what face the director put on in the [outside

world], how she talked. She wasn't our kind and wise god. She was just... from afar, when talking with the mayor or officials... just an aunt.

A normal aunt.

"....."

I opened my eyes.

Perhaps due to the strange silence.

Anastasia was quietly looking at my face without saying anything. The Heretic Inquisitor, the Countess, and the Paladin also looked at me. I nodded once and quietly said to them.

"So what if it's a bit embarrassing?"

"....."

"We're young. We're still young. It's natural for young hearts

to feel immense shame upon realizing their gods are just ordinary humans. Ah. The ones who prophetically spoke to us in majestic voices were just... people who knew a bit about aura. We thought they would watch over and protect us with some great miracles, but actually... they were just people, running around and making efforts in places we couldn't see..."

One day.

A free succulent pot-making class was held at the orphanage.

The children, tired of cross-stitching and caricatures, seemed to find the novelty of playing with clay to shape pottery surprisingly refreshing. Every time a class was held, as many as 15 children flocked to touch the clay.

The pottery teacher was kind, and the children enjoyed themselves.

I did not participate.

Being there felt somehow shameful. It felt like committing a severe disloyalty to the director.

And so, I quietly continued my life at the orphanage without telling anyone what I had seen.

“Seeing our true selves... they might feel quite embarrassed. Probably will.”

Recalling the burns of my childhood, I spoke to my current comrades.

“But that’s it.”

"....."

“With time passing by, when those kids are ready to accept it, they will eventually understand that we strived, worked, and put effort into raising them for what it truly was. They will come to understand that we are humans just like them.”

“Really...? Will they?”

Anastasia hesitated.

"I heard it's tough even in ordinary parent-child relationships. And for us, being like gods to our race..."

"It's okay. We are neither ordinary parents, nor have we raised ordinary children."

On the hologram, a giant monster had shrunk to the size of a big mammoth and was lying defeated.

Around the monster, hundreds of thousands from different races celebrated with a festival of colorful auras. They were overjoyed by the fact that they had endured the disaster without any damage and had achieved perfect success under their own command, irrespective of their race.

'Yes.'

We are not ordinary parents and children.

"Anastasia. We are a group of the finest humans who have entered the tower."

"....."



“And honestly, our children are far superior to the humans of our world. There’s no reason for things to not work out.”

I withdrew my gaze from the hologram.

Then, I spoke crisply to the [Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages].

“Tell all the children.”

“...Really? For real? You don’t need to ponder over it more?”

“What’s there to ponder about? There’s no one better than me to raise them with utmost sincerity. Frankly, whether I am a god, a human, or even an alien monster with a hundred tentacles, those kids will accept me. Just tell the truth to our race now.”

“Wow. As expected of the King of Death. I like that overflowing confidence.”

The princess looked at the other comrades.

“What about the rest of you? Do you agree with the King of Death?”

"....."

“You all started collaborating from the 31st floor. If even one of you disagrees, it puts me in a difficult position. Though, anyone who votes against will be specially barred from accessing floors beyond the 40th...”

“I’ll do it.”

Anastasia opened her mouth.

Her face already showed determination.

“I’ll do it. Whether the children despise me or not, that’s their right. If I was afraid of that, I wouldn’t have chosen a race in the first place. To keep them in the dark forever now would just be... my selfishness. Tell the truth to the Vampiric Tribe too.”

“Ah. I agree as well!”

The Heretic Inquisitor raised his hand.

“I’ve done my best to raise the Mountain Calamity Tribe! Ahahat. My best might be different from others, but compared to parents who don’t even try, aren’t I quite exceptional? The Mountain Calamity Tribe will surely think highly of me. Please reveal the truth to them too!”

“.....Setting aside our innocent psychopath for now.”

Paladin sighed.

“Children have the right to know about their parents. Even more so for grown ones. The tribes living on that continent have reached a mature stage. Reveal the truth to the Gill Fish Tribe.”

“.....Hmm, hmm, hmmm.”

The Countess pondered. Washing her face several times with her cat-like hands, she hummed and groaned. But after five minutes, she made up her mind.

“Well, alright! At least I kept them from starving to death.

Considering how many people in this world die of hunger, I've practically bestowed a great favor upon the Fairy Tribe. Once born into the Fairy Tribe, middle-upper class status is guaranteed, isn't it? Aura and all, this is the biggest scam. I'm proud!"

"You're agreeing too, Countess?"

"Agreeing, indeed. Show the truth to the Fairy Tribe!"

The [Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages] chuckled.

"Really. Such cute kids. I hope I don't end up favoring them too much... Well, it's out of my hands now."

Clap!

The princess clapped her hands.

"Viper and the Sword Saint, still on stage, have agreed to disclose information. All seven participants in the raid voted in favor, so under administrator authority, I'll disclose the information to all races!"

[The Heretic Inquisitor's information will be revealed to all of the Mountain Calamity Tribe!]

At that moment.

A buzzing sound began to emerge from beyond the hologram.

-Lime?

-What is this, Lime...? An illusion?

-No, it can't be a collective hallucination since we are still communicating...

The first to react was the Mountain Calamity Tribe.

With their wrinkled snail shells, now removing the now useless wooden steps and tools, the Mountain Calamity Tribe sensed something strange and raised their antennae.

Just as the [Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages] had

announced, [our raid team's footage] automatically played for them.

-.....Tower? A raid?

-Our Great Puppy God, what is this.....

But the confusion showed no signs of abating.

Rather, it accelerated.

[The Black Dragon Witch's information will be revealed to the entire Vampiric Tribe!]

Bats hanging on palm trees in the jungle tilted their heads, saying 'Ki?' 'Kuu?' The steps built on the monster's body buzzed, and countless leaves in the jungle stirred.

[The Paladin's information will be revealed to the entire Gill Fish Tribe!]

The Gill Fish Tribe, transporting food, drinks, and bedding

for hundreds of thousands on ships, flinched. Their fluttering tails created splashes, and a few boats tilted due to sudden reckless steering.

And it didn't stop there.

-What is this!

-You, are you seeing something flash before your eyes too?

-We are... Is this some curse unleashed by the Ki Dragon as it died?

-No. I clearly heard a voice in my head. This is the truth of the great Red Dolphin. Unless some demon is deceiving us...

-Ugor? What's going on with you guys?

All across the jungle, across the whole world, turmoil began. Everywhere the races had settled, a commotion broke out. Villages. Towns. Cities. Nearly all warriors who had gathered here, even at the very site of the Energy Dragon's tomb.

[The Countess's information will be revealed to the entire Fairy Tribe!]

[The Viper's information will be revealed to the entire Ghost Tribe!]

[The Sword Emperor's information will be revealed to the entire Pure Humans Tribe!]

And then.

[The King of Death's information will be revealed to the entire Earth Spirits Tribe!]

The moment that was bound to come, unfolded right then.



# Chapter 263: Idol Destruction (3)

---

[Quest Complete.]

[All races have learned the secrets of their gods!]

Have you ever seen a sunset in the jungle?

[Stage Clear.]

[The 39th floor has been cleared.]

When the sun falls to the horizon, drawn by its gravity, all the palm trees bend their backs to watch the sunset. The sun doesn't grant them a gaze. Thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions of palm trees, all become blackened by the shadows... allowing only the sky and river to possess 'color', exiting the stage as black pillars.

A world distinctly divided into black and color.

-It's impossible! Our god would never do such a thing!

In the midst of nature's indifferent play of colors, hundreds of thousands of people were clamorously bustling.

-Above all, our god takes the form of a great puppy! But these images keep flowing out of my head... Lime! That's a total pureblood! This makes no sense!

-Kekerkker looks handsome.

-True, calling him a white lion felt a bit too much given how intense the romance in the fire dramas was.

-So, that was a disguise? The gods, they took animal forms to approach us easily. Not just any animals, but ones that looked very special, either white or black. Thanks to that, we revered them like gods. Isn't it all for the best in the end?

-This is deception!

-We are worshippers of the great puppy, not followers of some weird-looking brat!

The Heretic Inquisitor watching the hologram with me tilted his head.

"Do I look strange?"

The Black Dragon Lord answered his question.

"You don't look like a snail."

"Is that so? I thought I resembled a snail quite a bit."

"What are you talking about... No, now's not the time for such discussions."

That's right. It wasn't the atmosphere for joking around.

The chaos in the hologram footage was getting worse.

Being in the waiting room of the eliminated, all we could do was watch for the time being.

'Although the stage clear announcement appeared...'

No one was able to rejoice over the stage clear.

Anastasia, the Countess, the Paladin, everyone was just tensely staring at the hologram.

'It's not over yet.'

Rather, it was just the beginning.

What reaction would the children, now knowing the truth, show?

The success or failure of this raid depended on that.

[Sequential Layer Progression in progress.]

As if to confirm our premonition, the tower immediately presented us with the next challenge.

[Forcibly entering the 40th floor.]

[Since you've entered the 40th floor, the original eliminated participants regain their status as raid participants.]

[Displaying the 40th floor quest!]

The era had not changed.

The body of the Ki Dragon was still freshly molted, and the children were engulfed in confusion and excitement. Truly a sequential layer. Without a moment's break, keeping the current moment alive, we were confronted with a new quest.

+

[Mountain Calamity Tribe's Idol]

Difficulty: B+

Mission Objective: The Heretic Inquisitor has aided the Mountain Calamity Tribe.

Under your dedicated care, the Mountain Calamity Tribe achieved the most successful early civilization! The extent of the Slime Empire is almost the same as the territory now covered by the Mountain Calamity Tribe. The Mountain Calamity Tribe distributed jobs according to their racial characteristics, developed a highly concentrated division of labor, and continuously prospered, turning great cities into trading hubs.

But the brighter the light, the darker the shadow.

In your empire, other races were enslaved. Eventually, the slaves rebelled, destroying your grand empire and the proud cities of the Mountain Calamity Tribe. Thereafter, the Mountain Calamity Tribe became public enemies of the continent, forced to live in foreign lands.

Heretic Inquisitor, you have tasted both the first glory and the first defeat.

Now the Mountain Calamity Tribe has come to know about you. They have realized that you are not a god. They understood that the glory and luxury they enjoyed, the yokes they had to bear, the oppression they endured, all originated from you.

How will the Mountain Calamity Tribe treat you now?

The voting begins.

Option 1: 'I am glad to have been guided by you.'

Option 2: 'I disliked being guided by you.'

You must obtain as many votes for Option 1 as possible. If Option 1 receives more than half the votes, the 40th floor will automatically be cleared. However, you cannot bribe or make promises for votes, and must only sway the hearts of the Mountain Calamity Tribe through [conversation] and [meetings].

\*However, if you lose in the vote, you must exterminate all Mountain Calamity Tribe members living on the continent to move on to the next stage.

+

Everyone sitting in the waiting room was silent.

Anastasia, the Countess, the Paladin, even I, kept our mouths shut.

And slowly, we all turned to look at the lunatic chosen for this quest.

"Ahaha. I understand! Yes, I get it!"

This psychopath, who would definitely be in the top 5 of the 'list of people you should never meet as parents', laughed cheerfully.

"It seems I'm the first batter!"

---

"Ah, ahhhh..."

Anastasia was in despair.

"This is serious..."

"Why? Is it because the Heretic Inquisitor is the first batter?"



"Yes. Ah, I shouldn't have fallen for Kim Gong-Ja's sweet talk. At the very least, I should have prepared a minimum safety net before starting work. We should have created and distributed propaganda about how much we've worked for these kids, stirring up sympathy... Damn, it's my specialty."

"That's not revealing secrets, it's brainwashing."

Anastasia always seemed unflappable, but whenever something seemed like [her failure], she became incredibly flustered.

Perfectionists must be exhausting.

"Don't worry too much. It's okay."

"It's okay? Is it the situation where all the kindness we showed those kids turns into naught and only anger grows? Or..."

Anastasia turned sharply and pointed at the Heretic Inquisitor.

"This situation where we entrust our fates to that 100% pure

psycho!?"

"Ahaha."

"How well will he convince the Mountain Calamity Tribe kids? All I can vividly imagine is him tilting his head in confusion, not understanding what he did wrong!"

The Heretic Inquisitor just kept smiling brightly.

Meanwhile, the situation in the hologram was continuing to worsen.

-Our guiding deity is a beautiful pink-skinned dolphin! Keeek, how can a human without gills or fins pretend to be our god!

-Well, but our god can transform into a cat, right? Then I don't see much of a problem. The cat god polymorphing into a human to wander the world and have fun is a pretty common theme in old blood fire dramas...

-That we built mining cities, burying children in them...

-That we were dragged to the mines and lived like slaves for hundreds of years, it was all because of that Mountain Calamity Tribe's god!

The jungle sunset illuminated each of their faces.

Their faces were half blackened, resembling the shadows of the palm trees, and the other half brightly red, receiving the sunset from the sky.

-Why would you do such a thing!

-Were we just pawns in your little game!

-No, look at the footage carefully. The gods were merely trying to take care of us...

-The problem is they're not gods but humans!

People with open mouths in anger, those enraged, others holding their heads in confusion, some unsure what to do, individuals resting their chins on their hands deep in thought, and occasionally someone realizing something with an 'Ah, so that's why that happened...'

-False gods!

Someone shouted out.

-We must drag the false gods from their sacred thrones!

-They're just humans!

-They always said they were doing this for us, that they loved us, but in the end, it was all for their own agenda! To climb the tower and incorporate stages into their own territories, wasn't it!

Though still a minority...

A faction violently reacting to the fact that we were human and feeling betrayed had emerged. To them, it didn't matter how much we had struggled or what lives we had led.

[They are not gods].

That alone was enough for them to feel betrayed. Their sense

of betrayal turned into curses against the gods who had reigned over them for thousands of years. Their curses soon became calls for our execution.

-Yes! Let's bring down the false gods!

-Let's hold the false gods accountable for the suffering, life, everything our ancestors endured!

-Bring down the false gods! Bring down the false gods!

Still, the absolute majority of the races were either dazed or puzzled. But if left alone, the minority's anger would spread like a plague, swiftly engulfing the jungle.

"...It's not okay. Kim Gong-Ja. This is really, not okay."

Anastasia muttered.

She had lived as the guild master of the Black Dragon. More than anyone, she was deeply involved in public opinion and propaganda campaigns. Being the Black Dragon Witch, she must be feeling most acutely how dire the situation was turning, and how unreliable the Heretic Inquisitor was for this

situation.

"No."

But I continued to cut off Anastasia's worries.

"What I meant by saying it's okay isn't that the current situation is good. Nor am I saying that the Heretic Inquisitor is reliable. It's just..."

I turned to look at the hologram.

"Our children will be alright."

That's when it happened.

Whack!

A whip crack echoed across the jungle. The enraged, the shouting, the contemplating, the anxious, everyone's ears were sharply pierced by the sound of the whip. Hundreds of thousands in the crowd were startled, turning towards the

source of the sound.

-Be quiet, Lime.

The 629th Chairman of the Fire River Council.

The strongest warrior of the Mountain Calamity Tribe, Seimslam.

-Stop talking.

-What? How can we not discuss such a shocking event...

-Let me propose a bill as the Chairman of the Fire River Council. The bill's name: [To speak even a single word about the gods here, one must duel the Chairman of the Fire River Council. For every attack you block or dodge, you will be granted one chance to speak.]

-.....

Let me reiterate, the Fire River Council has a unique custom.

Anyone from any race or origin, if they're around the 2000th strongest in the world, can join the council. Upon joining, they are treated as members and can freely speak or vote in meetings that determine the fate of their race.

However, if they lose a duel, they must yield their opinion.

Consequently, the [strongest fighter] typically becomes the Chairman, and decisions usually go as the Chairman wishes. Isn't it obvious? If there are any dissenters, just challenge and defeat them in a duel.

-.....

-Well then, all members of the Fire River Council present here, raise your hand if you oppose this bill.

Seimslam spoke coolly.

-Though I doubt there will be any opposition. Unanimity has always been a long-standing tradition and pride of our Fire River Council.

-.....



The warriors hesitated.

It was the first time in council history that someone from a race other than the Earth Spirit Tribe became the Chairman. Just this fact alone sufficiently proved that Seimslam was a formidable fighter. Many Earth Spirit Tribesmen, reluctant to accept this proof, led to a boom in the funeral industry at that time.

-Ugor... Chairman.

As all members remained silent, one from the Earth Spirit Tribe raised a hand. Or rather, he should now probably be called an Asura.

Unlike before, the children's skin glowed red. Bulging muscles on the shoulders, chest, and abs were like red flesh faintly oiled. The fangs protruding from the mouth in a crescent moon shape were incredibly sharp, instilling fear in those who saw them.

-I don't necessarily oppose the bill proposed by the Chairman but... Huh?

The formidable Asura adopted a very respectful attitude. Hands placed over the stomach, head bowed at a 45-degree

angle, and not emitting any aura or fighting spirit. What are you guys doing?

-If it's not that. What is it?

-We, we look quite different, don't we? Ugor. Our bodies have grown larger. Just looking at it, it seems the amount of aura itself has risen enormously, doesn't it? And it's not just low-quality aura that seems to be stacked up and ready to blow away. It's the aura of the Ki Dragon, which has been in this world since the beginning. Isn't it amazing?

-What do you want me to do about it?

-Ch-Chairman. We seem to have become stronger, right...? Maybe the Chairman position will move from the 629th to the 630th today, and maybe you will be that person...

-Are you challenging me to a duel?

-Just, once.

No more words were needed.

Seimslam grasped the sword with her remaining tentacle and charged at the challenger. In one step, she closed the significant gap between them.

-Ugor!?

But the challenger was no amateur. A master worthy of swaggering in the Fire River Council. The Asura countered with an axe, and clang! His red palm went numb from the impact.

-Crazy,

-It's either a life-and-death knot or just a life knot, if you don't answer within 1 second, I'll...

-Life knot! Life knot! Life knoooooot!

Boom.

The challenger flung away his axe. Seimslam's sword had already reached right under the challenger's chin. Sweating profusely on his red forehead, the challenger looked at the strongest of his era in disbelief.

-No... we... even evolved....

-Did only you evolve? Lime. I evolved too. While you were gorging on the Ki Dragon's aura, do you think I was just breathing the nice air of the jungle?

-Damn it!

-If the Earth Spirit Tribe and Mountain Calamity Tribe split into two factions and fight, the Earth Spirit Tribe would certainly win a sweeping victory. Your evolution seems to have had much more dramatic effects. But, I'm not just any snail. Lime.

Seimslam shook off his sword.

-I'm the strongest snail in this world.

She looked around at the hundreds of thousands watching her duel and spoke.

-Any opposing opinions?

-.....

-If there are none, I declare the bill I proposed passed. This place has become the temporary chamber of the Fire River Council, and under the authority of the Fire River Council, all of you who have stepped in here must follow our orders. And if you want to blabber about the gods here, at least, block my sword once. Like the council member who just got defeated by me.

Seimslam chuckled, puffing out air.

-This world is too beautiful to waste time on the excuses of the weak.

And then.

In the waiting room of the eliminated, another anomaly began. Whoosh! White light leaked from the sofa where the Heretic Inquisitor sat, slowly enveloping his body.

As we all turned to see what was happening, the Heretic Inquisitor seemed to have realized something.

"Eh? Ah. I see. So persuading through [conversation] and [meetings] means [I have to go there and talk in person]! Ahaha. Of course, it's much more efficient for me to be summoned there than summoning the entire Mountain Calamity Tribe here!"

Whoosh-

The light intensified rapidly. In just a few seconds, it would probably engulf the Heretic Inquisitor and transport him to that world, not here.

I had to warn him before that.

"Heretic Inquisitor!"

"Yes! My master!"

"You are those children's parent! A parent, you understand? Respond and converse with the feelings of a parent... No, damn it. Even if I tell you this, you won't understand!"

The Heretic Inquisitor laughed broadly.

"Yes! I don't understand!"

Damn it!

"Just try your best to think and imagine from others' perspectives! Got it? If it's hard, ask the kids around for help!"

The Heretic Inquisitor laughed, saluting.

"I'll do my best!"

Whoosh!

The white light completely enveloped the Heretic Inquisitor.

# Chapter 264:

## Family Interview (1)

---

The Heretic Inquisitor disappeared without a trace.

In the empty space, only the sofa's center sagged slightly, as if bearing the weight of the Heretic Inquisitor. We looked back and forth between the empty sofa and the hologram.

“Gong-Ja, do you really think he can handle it well...?”

“Hmm. The Heretic Inquisitor has grown a lot compared to before.”

“Even if a psycho changes his heart and becomes less psycho, it's just a reduction of one letter. He's still crazy.”

“Anastasia. Think about it. Isn't it a great progress if we consider it as losing the 'path' in psychopath?”



“Indeed. That’s one way to look at it....”

“Hey. What nonsense are you two exchanging...?”

The Paladin interrupted our idle talk with a look of disbelief.

“Ever since you two became friends, just overhearing your conversations makes my head go blank. The Black Dragon Witch and the King of Death. I never thought such unlikely figures would become friends, but the shock of seeing you two get along so well is even greater... One is the epitome of a clueless thug, and the other was a perfect ice queen.”

“Why? Feeling lonely because we’re besties? I’ve always kept my heart open to you too, Paladin. Hey, hey. Friends. Friendship! Come on!”

“This woman is the second in command of our tower...”

The Paladin sighed behind her helmet, just as something changed in the hologram.

“Ahahaha!”

That familiar laughter, which often resounded in the waiting room, now came from beyond the hologram.

As if instinctively turning our heads away from a foul smell encountered on the street, we looked towards the hologram, where the Heretic Inquisitor appeared.

“Greetings! To the Mountain Calamity Tribe and non-Mountain Calamity Tribe!”

The cutest blonde trash can in the world smiled broadly.

“This is my first time meeting you in this form! When I was in Limepolis, I mainly possessed dogs to communicate with you. Even in your dreams, I insisted on appearing as a dog! So, I believe— the best greeting for this occasion would be this.”

The Heretic Inquisitor floated in the jungle’s void.

“Nice to meet you! Mountain Calamity Tribe!”

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled brightly.

It was as if a dazzling light twinkled in the sky.

“That, that...?”

“Same as him. Exactly like the person we saw in the video!”

“What is this.....”

The Mountain Calamity Tribe gazed up at the void in a daze. Not just them, but many other tribes turned their attention there, especially since the overwhelming duel by Seimslam. The spot where the Heretic Inquisitor was transmitted was right above Seimslam's head, capturing everyone's attention instantly.

“Lime. Truly godlike in appearance, isn't he...?”

“He's beautiful....”

The Mountain Calamity Tribe murmured unconsciously.

Yes.

The leisurely floating figure was already divine in itself. In reality, he was continuously using the ability [Holy Technique-Teleportation], every 0.5 seconds, creating the illusion of floating in the sky. The Mountain Calamity Tribe couldn't possibly know that. They gazed up at their god with rapturous faces.

"....."

At this moment, a flicker of hope passed through the minds of us, his colleagues, watching the hologram in the waiting room.

"Huh? This is..."

"Surprisingly, is it working?"

"Right. The Heretic Inquisitor's original appearance is to die for. Nobody would object if he ranked fourth just based on his looks. Just a few national-treasure-level smiles from him and..."

"He might easily sway them."

Yes. Perhaps we underestimated the Heretic Inquisitor.

His stunning appearance.

Sharing the beauty quotient of our tower with the Black Dragon Witch, his deceptive face, along with his enchanting voice and smile. Even when walking on the ground, he could charm people, let alone floating in the sky. Isn't that practically divine!

“Mountain Calamity Tribe.”

The Heretic Inquisitor clasped his hands in front of his chest. Having been the guild master of the Temple of All Gods for 10 years, his gesture of praying was truly devout.

“I love you all.”

The face of the praying Heretic Inquisitor was as beautifully sculpted as marble. His slightly lowered eyebrows, eyes twinkling between them, lips exquisitely closed as if about to confess a secret....

All his gestures made the Mountain Calamity Tribe gaze up

in a daze.

“You must have seen all the footage and know about me, the Heretic Inquisitor. The one praised as the great dog for you, was isolated for 200 years just for you. I wanted to live with you, to watch over and care for you from the closest distance!”

“Lime...”

“Right. Other gods leave as soon as their work is done, to another world or something. But our god stayed with us... It’s hard for one person to endure even 50 years, but he withstood 200 years... Without revealing his true self to anyone, unable to talk with friends, he endured for 200 years.... That’s.....”

“That’s right.”

The Heretic Inquisitor clasped his hands.

And once again, he smiled brightly.

“It’s because I love you.”

Ooooooh!

The Mountain Calamity Tribe began to get excited. Naturally. The truth that [the one leading you was actually not a god, but a human] is shocking, difficult for each person to accept.

But conversely, the truth that [even though he's human, he still loves and dedicates himself to you], was enough to overturn the shock. What if he's not a god? What is a god anyway? Someone who watches over and takes care of us, isn't that our god?

“An angel!”

A young Mountain Calamity Tribe waved their tentacles.

“He's an angel!”

“Right! An angel who loves our race!”

“Angel! You're so beautiful! Ah, angel! Thank you!”

The name of god simply changed to angel.

“Ahaha. Oh! My lovely snails!”

And the Heretic Inquisitor was an optimal figure for propaganda, spreading falsehoods, deceiving the masses, fabricating stories, MLM business, and producing and distributing fanatics. Attach the most beautiful face in the world, the most enchanting voice, and then equip the most terrible psychopath AI, and you get someone like the Heretic Inquisitor.

“Don’t be surprised that my appearance differs from yours. Compared to the love we share, appearances are truly nothing! Likewise...”

With a snap of his fingers, the Heretic Inquisitor slimmed down. He transformed into an adult form. The Mountain Calamity Tribe, startled, fluttered their tentacles, shouting ‘Lime!’ ‘Lime!’ Seeing this, the Heretic Inquisitor returned to his child form.

“As you see, I can change my appearance at will. Appearance is not important! Love! Only my love for you and your affection for me are truly beautiful!”



“Ooooo, Lime....”

“The great dog, guiding our race....”

Hmm.

Indeed.

Perhaps I underestimated the Heretic Inquisitor’s abilities....

I sat in the waiting room, watching the hologram with incredulous eyes.

“He could just be dropped into any world and he’d start a cult...”

“Yeah. He’s a natural, born with the talent to be a cult leader... Isn’t it too much? Like, such inherent talent shouldn’t be allowed in this world.”

“.....The Heretic Inquisitor has encountered and dealt with all sorts of religions, sects, and heresies that have flooded the

outside world. Those not dealt with were managed. In the realm of religion, it's almost impossible to beat the Heretic Inquisitor."

However.

There are always exceptions.

-It's noisy.

Slap!

A whip crack filled with sound energy echoed throughout the venue. The leaves of the dense palm trees in the jungle shook, and the bark fragments flew off with the wind. The Mountain Calamity Tribe, jolted back to reality, turned their tentacles toward the source of the sound.

-Just now, I submitted a bill to the Fire River Council, yet my foolish kin still fail to realize its gravity.

The strongest of the Mountain Calamity Tribe.

Despite having only one tentacle left, Seimslam still reigned over the Fire River Council with an irritated expression, crinkling her tentacle.

-To talk about gods, one must challenge me to a duel and withstand at least one strike of my sword. That's the law. Clear, concise, and obvious. Despite such clear laws, are you all barking like dogs because Lime forgot the grace period for guidance?

-.....

-Ordinarily, it would be permissible to execute all who broke the law.

The air in the jungle turned ominous in an instant.

-Considering the uniqueness of this matter, I will overlook it this time.

-Huurrrrrghhh...'

-Limeeee....

Sighs echoed throughout the jungle. No one was unaware of how strict Seimslam was as a chairperson, especially among her own Mountain Calamity Tribe. The consensus was that she was stricter with her own race.

-Lime.

As the surroundings quieted down, Seimslam raised her tentacle to look up at the Heretic Inquisitor.

-Heretic Inquisitor, you said.

“Yes! That’s correct!”

-Let me ask first. Is that truly the great Lime's real name?

“If you’re asking if that’s my true name, hmm, it’s a bit difficult to answer.”

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled.

-I have a name that represents my life, and one that

represents my birth. 'Heretic Inquisitor' is the former. It's similar to your title, 'Chairman of the Fire River Council'! It reveals my position, declares my stance, and showcases my duties and abilities.

-I am Seimslam.

Seimslam looked up at the Heretic Inquisitor expressionlessly.

-Seimslam. That's my name. I could be the Chairman of the Fire River Council, I could step down from it, I have a life before becoming the Chairman, and I can forge a new life after not being the Chairman. Thus, your word. Seimslam. Only that is my name.

"....."

-What is your name?

Time passed.

It was still high noon, the sun blazing down. The midday sunlight, bouncing off and blocked by the palm leaves,

scattered fractal-like shadows on the ground. Seimslam stood under a shadow halved by the leaves, and the Heretic Inquisitor, too, had his face covered by shadows split into two or three parts.

“Bambolina.”

-Bambolina?

“Yes.”

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled faintly.

“It means ‘doll.’ It’s a foreign word from your perspective. You can also call me KyKna if you like. It means the same thing. However, I would prefer not to be called Bambolina.”

-Why is that?

“That’s a name my only master sometimes calls me!”

-.....

“If you really must call me by my real name, please call me KyKna.”

-Understood, KyKna.

Waiting Room.

As the conversation unfolded, my colleagues quietly glanced at me.

"....."

"....."

The fact that I became the Heretic Inquisitor's master was, not from anyone else but from the Heretic Inquisitor himself, subtly spread. Anyone like the Black Dragon Witch or the Paladin would have some idea about the special contract we shared.

Only to me.

The Heretic Inquisitor had sworn loyalty to me and now shared his real name with his children. He had revealed it.

“It must be dawning on Bambolina now.”

It was inevitable.

“He must realize that it’s not just a gathering of a cult leader and followers.”

I had to fulfill many conditions to learn the Heretic Inquisitor’s real name. I had to overcome numerous obstacles and prove my qualifications and abilities. That I was more competent than him. That I could use him much more effectively....

However, in the world, there are those to whom you must reveal yourself without such [conditions].

“That place, if I were to make a comparison, is like a meeting between parents and their children.”

Children.



Daughters.

Sons.

“Even as the head of one of the top five guilds in the tower, the Heretic Inquisitor cannot reveal his title as the ‘Master of the Temple of All Gods’ in front of his children. Rank four? He can’t boast about that achievement either.”

Perhaps, if parents and children spend time together, with parents growing older and children maturing, living in the same society—then they might understand and respect the weight of titles like ‘Master of the Temple’ or ‘Rank Four,’ and between understanding and respect, affection might blossom.

But not now.

“As Bambolina said, he is facing the Mountain Calamity Tribe for the [first] time.”

The first encounter between parent and child.

There, the Heretic Inquisitor, not as the Master of the Temple, but only by his real name, could only reveal her true

face.

Unless he intended to exploit her children.

"....."

Across the hologram, the Heretic Inquisitor was still smiling.

Yet, the air surrounding that smile was somewhat cold. The warmth and gentleness that filled her smile when she was the cult leader for everyone, had now transformed into a mere politeness to reassure the other party.

Even though that other party was none other than her children, akin to the Mountain Calamity Tribe.

-Lime.

Seimslam looked at the god-angel-father figure with an expressionless face.

-Our Mountain Calamity Tribe has a unique way of thinking. Only things with utility have value in this world. Only those with utility should survive, and the useless should be ignored and left to naturally fade away.

Seimslam swung her remaining tentacle.

-We strive our whole lives to be useful. Rest is just a preparation for work. Sleep is a rest for daily life. Wake up early to train oneself, and return after finishing work at night. In the meantime, constantly check whether one has been useful enough or if there's been any negligence.

Seimslam continued. Her words, hidden in the shadows of countless palm trees, crept into the darkened ground. Lime. The Mountain Calamity Tribe in the shadows chirped, nodding their tentacles in agreement with Seimslam's words. Lime.

-Useless ones are inherently flawed. We give them blue stones and let them rot in their squalid burrows, among themselves.

Blue stones, glowing sapphire stones, were a drug commonly consumed by the Mountain Calamity Tribe. Due to their addictive nature, even the tribe members avoided them. Listening to this, the surrounding Mountain Calamity Tribe nodded again.

Lime.

Like the sound of cuckoos echoing in a dark forest, the Mountain Calamity Tribe chirped from the shadows.

-No need to kill them. Rather, we keep them alive as much as possible. Seeing them begging for blue stones even at the brink of starvation lets us [normal] Mountain Calamity Tribe members reassure ourselves of our utility. We are still useful beings.

Lime.

-For life's failures, it's not a bad deal. They ruined their lives over their love for blue stones. If they love blue stones more than life, then we're giving them more than life itself. Lime. Eat. Eat more. Eat as much as you want.

Lime. Lime.

-Even as outcasts, they are [useful]. They keep us alert and cautious. Lime. We are a great race. We subjugated six races under our tentacles, built great caves, and reigned from them. Although our thousand-year empire eventually fell to the lowly blades of slaves, in our hearts, in our spirits, the empire still exists, and we strive every day as imperial citizens to be

[useful].

Lime.

-.....All of this.

Lime.

-All of it, I learned from you.

Lime.

"....."

-You taught us what is useful and what is not. As children, we nodded our heads. As adults, we acted with our tentacles. You taught us to have pride, and we built an empire under your guidance, we were shaped by your words.

Lime.

-You gave birth to us.

"....."

-What we feel. The way we disdain others. The way we find joy. What we take pride in. What we strongly feel we shouldn't do. All of it was taught and inherited from you.

"....."

-So, KyKna. Even if you didn't physically give birth to our bodies, you gave birth to our minds, our senses, our lives. You are the parent to all of us. Even look at our language. Originally, you called yourself 'Lime.' Because of that, we say 'Lime' when happy, 'Laimu' when rigid. See? Your name even dictates our happiness and discontent.

Lime, Lime.

Laimu.

Lime.

-But.

Seimslam glanced around.

-Hanging around with these idiotic Earth Spirit Tribe...

Dark red Asuras stood with their arms crossed, listening to Seimslam's words with utmost seriousness.

Was it their seriousness that amused her?

Seimslam laughed, "Pfft."

-I realized how [abnormal] I, our race, am.

"....."

-A person can be useful and then become useless. Or useless and then become useful. Uburka, hailed as the strongest warrior in Earth Spirit Tribe history, was born with albinism, struggling to walk under the sun. A failure as a warrior. But he turned his albinism into a challenge to overcome, overcame it,

and built his life as a series of triumphs.

Seimslam muttered.

-If he were born into our tribe, he would've been addicted to blue stones from childhood, rotting in a filthy burrow. And his [utility] would've been to endure our mockery and scorn.

"....."

-KyKna.

Seimslam looked at the Heretic Inquisitor with an expressionless face.

-Our father.

"Yes."

Gradually, the Heretic Inquisitor's expression had also faded.



A wise child of the Mountain Calamity Tribe asked the parent with no smile.

-Father, why are you such a psycho?

# Chapter 265:

## Family Interview (2)

---

"Hmm."

The Heretic Inquisitor stroked his chin.

"Why I became a psycho..."

-Yes, Lime.

"Hmm. That's a difficult question."

From beyond the hologram, he groaned and pondered deeply. The Heretic Inquisitor's serious face was the same, whether he was facing a complex math problem or this situation.

It was both his strength and weakness.

At least, it wasn't the face his children wanted from a parent.

-Why are you so obsessed with success?

Thus, Seimslam continued her offensive.

-Why do you pour all your energy into distinguishing [what's useful] and [what's not]? It would be fine if it were just distinguishing, but why are you so eager to categorize everything [quickly]?

In the presence of all Mountain Calamity Tribe members.

No, even other races watched as Seimslam interrogated their god---a deity who once ruled the continent with absolute faith in an ancient empire.

-We are not omniscient. We don't know many things. It's impossible to instantly discern what potential a child in front of us might have. Therefore, we become humble and patient, giving the child time to develop their abilities. This should be called education. Laimu. But why, KyKna, are you so quick to sort everything into [useful] and [useless]?

She questioned the parent.

-Father, why do you live like that?

"....."

-Can't you live differently? Really?

Night began to fall in the jungle.

The last rays of sunset slipped away from the damp palm leaves. Flutter! The Fairy Tribe hurriedly placed torches around. Whoosh! Then, the races that were hidden in the forest shadows, including the Mountain Calamity Tribe, became visible in the dim light.

-.....

-.....

Hundreds of thousands of Mountain Calamity Tribe members.

A race that could crawl on the ground and climb walls, capable of going anywhere but—living their entire lives carrying their homes on their backs, like snails. These races, destined for freedom and bondage, were now silently listening to the conversation between Seimslam and the Heretic Inquisitor.

-Lime...

-Laimu.

It wasn't because they were overwhelmed by Seimslam's power.

Nor were they overawed by the Heretic Inquisitor's divinity.

Simply, Seimslam was speaking on behalf of the entire Mountain Calamity Tribe—voicing questions, grievances, and accusations they wanted to ask and blame their parent for, all gathered into a form of inquiry.

Effectively, Seimslam became the spokesperson for their race, or more precisely, the elder sister. As the elder sister pointed out the parents' faults, the other Mountain Calamity Tribe members sat quietly around like younger siblings.

It was just on a massive scale.

Literally, a parent-teacher meeting.

"Hmm."

Thud.

The Heretic Inquisitor slowly descended from the air and sat opposite Seimslam. He had cut off the [Holy Technique-Teleportation]. Now, nothing separated the parent and child—not a difference in eye-level, not heaven and earth.

Only the torches someone had lit flickered quietly.

“Seimslam. I can apologize to all of you anytime. It’s my fault that the empire fell. The privileges you enjoyed vanished, and since then, the Mountain Calamity Tribe’s life has been reduced to a mere barony, mining salt on the outskirts and supplying it to the Earth Spirit Tribe. It’s my failure. Regarding that, I have nothing to say even if I had ten mouths, so I apologize...”

-No, that’s not it.

Seimslam stroked her face with her tentacle.

She seemed to massage her forehead with her tentacle due to the stress.

-The first empire, the glory of childhood, the failure of youth, and the return to a mere laborer now... I'm not blaming such changes. No. On the contrary, father did really well.

“Huh?”

-In this world, which race has ever been the conqueror of a continent, even just once? Mountain Calamity Tribe. Earth Spirit Tribe. Aren't those the only two? Father reached a height only two beings have ever achieved in this world. Even though you fell later, Lime. We respect your abilities.

"....."

-We're not questioning your success or failure. Look at us.

Seimslam approached closer.

-Look at us. KyKna.

Her one remaining, battle-scarred tentacle gently covered the Heretic Inquisitor's hand.

"....."

The Heretic Inquisitor looked.

-Look at us, Father.

And then.

Seimslam wore a smile exactly like the one the Heretic Inquisitor had made.

Faced with that smile, the Heretic Inquisitor was paralyzed for a moment.

-We throw useless children into blue stone caves and laugh, saying, 'Lime, it can't be helped.' It might be our wickedness. It might be laughter born from cruelty. But it's different,



Father.

"....."

-It's the innocent laughter you implanted in us.

『Ah! Unfortunately, this is useless!』

『Shall we throw it away?』

『Ahaha..』

-We might look a little different, with more or fewer arms than you, Father.

Seimslam playfully wiggled her one remaining tentacle.

-But still, we've inherited almost everything from you. What you intended and what you didn't. Your laughter, gestures, the weight you chose to carry in this world... everything.

"....."

-So, Father, you don't need to thank us for establishing the first empire, nor apologize for our fall from it. Those are trivial matters. I, we, want to know.

-Why did you become such a psycho.

Because.

-So we can understand why we are psychos like this.

All the Mountain Calamity Tribe's tentacles turned towards the Heretic Inquisitor.

-Speak, Father.

"....."

-We want to know ourselves.

Silence followed.

In the sticky stillness, the Heretic Inquisitor opened his lips.

“I am.”

“.....

“I am.....”

[The 40th floor quest is currently in progress.]

And then.

---

-No, why are you so obsessed with making money?

The Fairy Tribe surrounded the Countess.

The air in the jungle was noisy, like a hearing, and the

Fairies, despite their beautiful faces, scowled viciously, launching a relentless assault on their [god].

-It's always about money. Doing or not doing, it's always money. The world is all about money, seriously.

“So, does that make you feel bad?”

The Countess puffed on a water pipe, exhaling smoke. It was a product developed by the Fairy Tribe, but he had just bought it for an extra sum. Although it was a product developed by his children and bought by a parent, the mood didn't seem too pleasant.

“Earning money should feel good, right? Isn't it?”

-Well, it feels good to handle money, but... can't you teach us something other than money? Like music? Songs? Art? Exaggerated self-promotion like the world is so beautiful I could die? Or ways to screw over others by saying I'm too beautiful for this world?

"....."

“You don’t understand. I can’t teach anything other than making money.”

-Why is that?

“I was born a nobody’s kid.”

Through the smoke of the water pipe, the Countess smirked.

“My house was so poor, actually, we didn’t even have a house. Ever heard of a garbage city? Maybe not. The world I was born in was much larger than your continent and had far more people. So much so that the garbage discarded by people could build mountains.”

-Ah....

“But among the garbage, there were sometimes recyclables. Stuff that could make money. Naturally, traders get attracted. Garbage left by others eating, wiping, playing, or even making love... sifting through all kinds of garbage, trying to find the ones that could make money.”

-Oh...

The Fairy Tribe all had bright expectations. They quickly ran calculations in their heads.

-Is that a profitable business? The profit margin seems too slim.

"Heh heh."

The Countess chuckled, seemingly in a good mood.

"It won't make money, right? It's lousy, isn't it?"

-Yes.

"Right. Spot on. That's why our daily wage was even less than a kid's booger."

-.....

"At least if the adults extort from you, there's nothing left in your hand. What can you do? You have to sneak out while the adults are sleeping, secretly rummaging through the garbage

piles. If you get caught, you're done for. You have to sleep in short spurts throughout the day and act like nothing's wrong. That's the only way to gather the most valuable trash."

-.....

"Listen well, my children. At least, those who are like my children."

The Countess slowly put down her water pipe.

Then, bending her waist, she whispered to the Fairy Tribe—tens of thousands of them looking at her.

In a dark voice. Using telepathy.

"Don't whine about why I didn't teach you anything else. The moment you whine about such things, you're already proving that you're nothing more than a brat."

-.....

“Making money is hard. The act of making money itself is a stroke of luck.”

The Countess’s eyes brimmed with demonic energy.

“A moneyless child. Say, a little kid living in the heart of a garbage city like me, suddenly wishes one day to [learn the piano] intensely. That’s a delusion, isn’t it? It only looks beautiful in dreams. If that child really wants to learn the piano, they’d have to luckily find a used piano in a trash heap, luckily find an old man nearby who knows how to tune pianos, and, furthermore, luckily gather readable sheet music from the trash, and, finally, be lucky enough to have musical talent.”

-.....

“For someone without money, the mere wish to learn something, to want to do something, is a lifetime gamble. It’s betting all your time, luck, life, everything, on a gamble that might just be within reach.”

-.....

“What about you?”



The Countess scanned the audience.

As some of the Fairy Tribe met her gaze, their shoulders twitched. Among them were certainly fairies who had lived longer than the Countess, but the pressure emanating from the 5th ranked being of the tower was too much to handle.

“What do you think?”

It's easy to overlook this fact when she sometimes transforms into a cat and leisurely taps on dog grass.

The Countess, born a commoner in some trash village, had risen to the position of a tycoon, holding all the trade in the tower.

There were few humans on this continent, in our tower, or even in the outside world who could withstand the venom in the Countess's breath.

“Want to learn music? Pay up. Use money to find a teacher. Buy music sheets. Buy an instrument. Yes, picking an instrument might be a bit troubling. It's quite expensive. Choose your instrument while alternating between considering your passion for music and your family's financial leeway. Carefully... Yes, carefully.”

The Countess laughed.

It was a laugh refined from long-aged poison.

“Money allows you to worry.”

-.....

“Money gives you countless possibilities. Music? If you try and don’t like it, quit. It might cost some money, but you have enough, don’t you? Many people mistake this, but money is not a goal or result. It’s a [starting point]. I, as your parent, have simply gifted you with a starting point.”

The Countess pulled out a fan from her bosom.

“So, [why did our parents only teach us how to make money]? Is that your worry? Good. Very good. Go ahead and worry. Even if you waste time worrying, you won’t starve to death because you didn’t earn your daily wage, right? Waste it cheerfully.”

-.....

“Worry, thought, contemplation. All of these are [pleasant] luxuries. Every time you immerse in worry, every time you dive into contemplation, you subconsciously realize how lavishly you’re living your life. See? These subtle luxuries are what make you great. Or at least, they plant the illusion that you’ve become great.”

The Countess smiled.

Then she opened her fan and covered her lower face with it.

“To think when you want, to live where you desire, to do what you wish. I call this freedom. Money frees you. Only money does.”

-.....

“Let me ask once more. My children. Or at least, those who are like my children.”

The Countess, with cat-like eyes, surveyed the tens of thousands of Fairy Tribe members.

“Were you unhappy to be born as my child?”

“Or did you [think] you were unhappy?”

“If so, how did you feel at the moment you thought, [I was unhappy because I was born as that person’s child]? Did it feel bad? Or maybe...”

The Countess chuckled.

“Did you start feeling a bit prouder of yourself for even having such thoughts, a bit more proud, or did it make you a little happy?”

-.....

“As I said, thoughts and worries, contemplation, are all pleasant luxuries.”

It was a smile like a dark crescent moon.

That crescent moon chuckled out loud, "Aha."

“In my view, your lives seem quite pleasant?”

And then.

[The 41st floor quest is currently in progress.

---

-Why did you choose us?

The Gill Fish Race asked the Paladin.

-We are beings who live in water. In contrast, the great dolphin... You seem to be a being who lives on land. Our worlds are too different.

The Gill Fish Race resembled mermaids.

With wave-like tattoos all over their bodies, when the Gill Fishes swam together, it looked like beautiful waves washing the shore. They were a water tribe.

-Kekerkker chose the Earth Spirit Tribe. Lime chose the Mountain Calamity Tribe. While they look very different, both were born and live on land. They have more similarities than differences. But, why did you choose us?

The Gill Fishes were still gathered in the river.

-Why us?

The Paladin sat on a huge rock that had emerged above the river, surrounded by thousands of Gill Fishes--- perhaps tens of thousands, including children swimming underwater.

" ....."

The Paladin gazed down at the river.

# Chapter 266:

## Family Interview (3)

---

“I'm sorry.”

Slowly.

The Heretic Inquisitor knelt.

“I was wrong, everyone.”

The Mountain Calamity Tribe, watching the Heretic Inquisitor from a distance, gasped. 'Huh,' 'Hup!' 'Hoo!' Even though the truth had been revealed, the Heretic Inquisitor was a god they had worshipped for thousands of years. A transcendent being who had bestowed care since the beginning of time and a father who had shown them both the glory and downfall of their tribe.

This divine being knelt before them.

“I am aware that I am by no means normal. I think I am normal, but others... especially the King of Death said otherwise, so, hmm. Probably not. Then, as you said, the term [psycho] might suit me too!”

-Why.

Seimslam, representing the entire Mountain Calamity Tribe, spoke up.

-Why did you become a psycho...?

“It’s not such a rare story. I was kidnapped by the mafia around the age of three. Whether it was because my parents couldn’t pay or because they chose a useful kid from the orphanage, I can’t say. Those who could have told me are all dead now.”

-.....

“I was trained in ways to kill people, to keep them alive without killing, to cut strong people into hundreds of pieces of scrap metal and then make them my subordinates, and techniques to enchant people. Overheard from others, I learned how organizations collapse internally and externally. I am a person who knows nothing but this. It can’t be helped...”



The Heretic Inquisitor sighed.

Then, brightening his expression, he looked at Seimslam.

“I thought I should not teach you [these things]!”

-Why is that?

“Well. They are what I do best and excel at. But even so, I wished you wouldn’t live a life like mine. If people like me increased in the tower, it would be troublesome! One of me is enough.”

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled brightly.

“Of course... I couldn’t just teach you nothing. Mountain Calamity Tribe, this world... this world is not an easy place. It’s truly terrifying. If you just sit still, eventually you’ll be attacked, maybe even kidnapped like me.”

-.....

“I had to make you strong.”

The Heretic Inquisitor.

He mobilized all her knowledge to advance the civilization of the Mountain Calamity Tribe.

“There is no one you can fully trust in this world. If there is, it’s just one person. A once-in-a-lifetime miracle, purely dependent on the luck of your life. So ignore it. Ignore it and control others before they betray you.”

He enslaved all the other tribes.

He confined them in caves so they couldn't betray him, divided the cave into hundreds of sections for isolation, and always had watchtowers observing the slaves.

“Then, you won’t have to fear this world.”

-.....

“I'm sorry for being a psycho. For being a psycho father.”

A dark silence filled the jungle.

Seimslam slowly raised her head and looked up at the Heretic Inquisitor.

-Father KyKna.

“Yes.”

-You might be a psycho. But you tried to teach us only the most moderate, the most sensible, the most valuable things in your mind.

“That's correct.”

-Even if it's a house made of planks with a hammock for a roof, prone to light collapse and ruin, but still, you tried to build us the best house possible. Right?

“That was the case.”

-Then, it's settled.

Seimslam released his tentacles.

She grabbed the hilt of a greatsword embedded in the ground.

-You tried to teach us your best. You hid your worst from us, never asking for understanding. You just...

『Wished.』

『Hoped we would at least be better people than you.』

-You truly did your best to care for us.

-I don't want to curse you, Father, for giving birth to us and raising us, despite your many shortcomings.

Chuk.

Seimslam pulled the greatsword out of the ground and slung it over her shoulder, on her shell.

-I'm glad you're my father.

"....."

-Maybe.

Seimslam smiled.

Always expressionless, only scoffing when smiling, the Mountain Calamity Tribe, who had reigned as the Chairman of the Fire River Council for decades, lifted their lips in a bright smile for the first time.

-Perhaps, just at this moment, I might feel a bit happy.

"....."

-Thank you for saying you're sorry to us. To me.

And then.

-Thank you, really. Father.

[Quest Progress.]

[Mountain Calamity Tribe voting begins.]

[Option 1. I am glad to have been guided by you.]

[Option 2. I disliked being guided by you.]

Swish.

Fireflies began to rise from the jungle.

Or so it seemed at first glance. It wasn't fireflies.

Mountain Calamity Tribe members crouched at the base of palm trees, stuck to tree trunks, sprawled on tree branches,

hiding in the dark recesses of the jungle, all had been listening to the conversation between Seimslam and the Heretic Inquisitor.

[Vote counting in progress.]

Blue lights emitted from the bodies of the Mountain Calamity Tribe, detached, and floated towards the sky. From afar, they resembled fireflies.

Hundreds. Thousands. Tens of thousands. Hundreds of thousands of fireflies rose, twirling around palm trees and the jungle, ascending to the dark night sky. The countless twinkling lights gave the illusion that the jungle was floating in the Milky Way.

[Vote counting complete.]

A voice echoed through the forest of the Milky Way.

Like a small bell.

[Option 2 votes: 22.5%]

[Option 1 votes: 77.5%]

[Majority for Option 1 confirmed.]

"....."

The Heretic Inquisitor looked up at the night sky, bewildered.

In the dark sky, the Milky Way swirled in blue and green.

Mesmerized by the stunning dance of fireflies and falling starlight, the Heretic Inquisitor was captivated.

『I'm glad you're my father.』

Perhaps it was Seimslam's last words that had stolen everything from him.

But....



As long as I live with the Heretic Inquisitor, I will come to know it someday.

[Stage Clear.]

[The 40th floor has been cleared!]

---

-Right. Money is the best.

A member of the Fairy Tribe shrugged her shoulders.

Apart from her, numerous other Fairy Tribe members passionately agreed, saying, "That's true," "Life without money is horrible," "We may lack pride, but do we lack money?" Before my return, the elves were fanatic followers of the Flame Emperor, but on this continent, the elves were apostles and preachers of a materialistic worldview.

Hmm.

I'm seriously doubting the nature of the elf race...

-Mother's words are so profound, they're indisputable. Honestly, we were just curious. Wondering if you raised us Fairy Tribe as misers, who know nothing but money.

"I'm relieved to have fully satisfied your curiosity."

The Countess chuckled.

"If you knew how much it costs to talk to me, you'd naturally develop filial piety. After all, every minute and second is precious for a merchant like me. Well, since I watched over you like a parent, consider this a parental discount service."

-A discount service is great. We gratefully accept.

The Fairy Tribe gracefully bowed her head.

-Then, taking advantage of the service, may I ask one more thing?

"You're thrifty, I see. Go ahead, ask away."

-Why are you still so desperate to earn money?

“Hmm.”

The Countess blinked her eyes.

The Fairy Tribe members also blinked in unison.

“What do you mean?”

-Didn't you say that money makes many things easy? It allows you to learn music if you want to. Do other things if you desire. Even comfortably contemplate your own life. We completely agree.

“And then?”

-How long will you keep earning?

The Fairy Tribe tilted her head.

-Mother, you seem to have enormous wealth. Can't you already do whatever you want, choose any life you wish, without needing to earn more money?

"....."

-Why earn more?

The Fairy Tribe spoke up.

-What do you plan to do?

-What do you want to do?

-What are you contemplating?

-Why?

The jungle was dark.

Thus, the murmurs of the Fairy Tribe sounded like whispers flowing simultaneously from the forest, branches, and leaves.

-What are you doing?

-Is there really something you want to do?

-Are you contemplating something?

-Now?

"....."

The Countess gripped her fan.

Squeeze.

As the fan closed, the Countess's expression was revealed. The 5th ranked hunter, with an expressionless face, looked ahead quietly, with a fury that was too old and chewed over too often, leaving nothing but dregs.

“Trash...”

The remnants of her anger first emitted a foul smell, then,

“I’ll change the world.”

The sentence was refined after being filtered through the air.

“There’s too much garbage in the world.”

-.....

Even after refinement, the Countess's voice was too sinister for the Fairy Tribe to handle. Aura rippled over her shoulder. Even the Countess, who initially struggled to skillfully handle aura, had become somewhat accustomed to it after passing through the previous stages.

With this accustomed aura, the Countess was revealing the color of her heart.

“Listen. I realized one thing after being born on a garbage

heap, growing up in a garbage village, and moving to a garbage city. The only real epiphany, which makes me regard being born from a trash can as some kind of luck.”

-...What is it?

“Garbage washed up from the sea, garbage fallen from the sky, garbage buried underground, garbage discarded anywhere... All of them are less filthy than [humans].”

The Countess laughed strangely.

It was a mocking laugh.

“Yet there’s no specialist in cleaning only humans. So I thought, if the market is such a blue ocean, shouldn’t I be the first to seize it?”

-.....

“Humans like garbage, I will clean up with money.”

The Countess laughed with her arms crossed.

“Of course, I don’t think all humans are garbage. Not at all! Quite the opposite. I believe many people shine brighter than stars. The distance between stars is so vast, making it that hard for beautiful people to meet... but it’s only hard. If you look from afar, so many stars embroider the night sky.”

Perhaps she was recalling someone.

The Countess tilted the corner of her lips in a pleasant manner.

“They need a cleaner like me.”

-How do you plan to do that?

A Fairy Tribe member asked.

-Do you save the shining ones with money?

-Do you drive away the bad ones with money?



-How?

To the Fairy Tribe's questions, the Countess burst into laughter.

“Is there a need for that!”

Her laughter was hearty.

“No need to play the hero. No need to flap around in bat wings, barely flying between legal and illegal, saving poor victims from webs between crimes, holding a giant shield to protect them.”

The Countess's voice was firm.

“Just spend money!”

And simple.

"Just make them earn money!"

Establishing a proper economy.

“Good companies and bad companies. Good organizations and bad organizations. Good businesses and bad businesses. Good humans and bad humans... Yes. Many struggle to distinguish them, wondering when and how to see [human nature]. Most of them who harbor such curiosity create artificial environments for ‘extreme situations’, but it’s nonsense. Listen well.”

And a celebration of uncorrupted circulation.

“Human nature is such a thing.”

Creating good money out of bad.

“Not [when you have nothing], but [when you have everything], you can truly see it.”

Perhaps.

Believing in people more than anyone.

“I scatter money, the good ones reveal their good nature, but the trash start to stink. Still, my job doesn’t change! I give money. I make them earn! I fatten them up, nurture their meat to become fragrant. Until they rot on their own, until they commit crimes on their own, I will invest my money in them.”

Perhaps it’s this woman smiling on a rock in the middle of the jungle.

“Then, if any human or company turns out to be rotten trash... well.”

Suddenly, such a thought crossed my mind.

“My generously sponsored heroes will take care of it.”

“For that, I keep earning money relentlessly, as you all say, desperately. Sometimes, well, unavoidable things happen in life. A little illegal activity, that is.”

The Countess of Sang-Ryun, grinned slightly.

“This is why I make money.”

Before long.

The Fairy Tribe was gazing up at the Countess blankly.

Their gaze was a bit more dazed than when they worshiped the Countess as a god. Originally, the Fairy Tribe wasn't very devout. They were loyal to the command of the god of money, not the god itself. Among all races, the Fairy Tribe was the most relaxed about faith.

“And.”

But.

“This is also why I raised you.”

Today was different.

In the eyes of the Fairy Tribe looking up at the Countess, there was definitely something akin to faith.

Admiration for those above them. Respect for those who

walked before them. Reverence for those pointing to distant places.

“You all are far more capable than most merchants working in my tower. Naturally. They just live life and make money, but you live life while making money. Understand that you were born merchants.”

-.....

“I have been eagerly, sincerely, eagerly waiting for people like you to come to my tower.”

The Countess stood up.

The Fairy Tribe flinched.

Unconcerned, the Countess descended from her place and walked towards the Fairy Tribe surrounding her.

“Those who know how to make money.”

One by one.

“Those who see the flow of funds and materials.”

One by one.

As the Countess strolled in front of the Fairy Tribe, she raised her fan, gently supporting the chin of each elf with the tip. She made eye contact with each fairy before her. The Fairy Tribe, mesmerized by her gaze, could not escape her eyes.

“Those who find joy in making money but also seek other pleasures. Those who contemplate what this money is for. Those who find joy in such contemplation. In short...”

The Countess did this to each one, lifting the chins of dozens, gazing into the eyes of hundreds, and speaking to the ears of thousands.

“People like me.”

The jungle was dark.

So the Countess's whisper sounded like it was simultaneously flowing from the forest, branches, and leaves.

“My children.”

The Countess said.

“Follow me.”

The breath of the Fairy Tribe slowed down.

“This continent is small. It’s just a corner in the universe. Even if you monopolize the logistics and goods of this corner, what meaning does it have? Follow me. Climb the tower, seize all the money streams flowing in the myriad things, trample and rip apart the wealth piled up in the universe, make everything flow smoothly, from a coin wandering the world to a piece of wire thrown in a trash can.”

“You are needed.”

Already, the eyes of the Fairy Tribe were hazy.

“You will come to love it.”

Their breath was warmer than their body temperature.

“I am the lord of all merchants, the master of Sang-Ryun. You will become my children and join me in flushing the world’s toilet.”

The Fairy Tribe looked dazedly at the woman who once was their god.

And now, had become their mother.

“Will you follow me?”

It didn’t take long for the Fairy Tribe's lips to part.

-Yes....

In the dark jungle.



The palm trees, branches, and wide leaves all murmured simultaneously.

-Yes. Mother.

[Quest Progress.]

[Fairy Tribe voting begins.]

[Vote counting complete.]

The Countess smiled like a moonlit night.

[Option 2 votes: 11.60%]

[Option 1 votes: 88.40%]

[Majority for Option 1 confirmed.]

Swish.

As she opened her fan to cover her lower face, the smile embedded with the moon split in half.

“Thank you all.”

The Countess held the half-moon at the corner of her lips.

“Let’s flush the world's toilet together.”

And then.

[Stage Clear.]

[The 41st floor has been cleared!]

# Chapter 267: Family Interview (4)

---

-Mother?

A member of the Gill Fish Race addressed the Paladin.

The Paladin was gazing somewhere. The Gill Fishes too, with their webbed feet on the rock, flicking their tails and splashing water, looked in the same direction.

-Mother, why are you interested in the place where the Fairy Tribe is...?

“No. It’s just unbelievable. After talking about parents and children for so long, that person is really hopeless.”

-.....

A bitter smile hung on the Paladin's lips. It seemed to have stirred unease among the Gill Fishes.

-We know a lot about you, Mother, but not much about that person. Is she a good person?

“She’s a sad person.”

The Paladin simply defined the Countess that way.

“And a clear one.”

The Paladin then fell into thought, seemingly recalling her own past.

It wasn't for long.

"Hmm."

The Paladin picked up her helmet that was left beside the rock. Clank. Silently, she put the helmet back on.

Inside the helmet, the chattering of the world was filtered out. The distracting colors from the world narrowed down. The filtered and narrowed view was just enough to remind her of her duties.

“Gill Fishes.”

The Paladin stood up and looked around.

In the river where the islet had sunk, all the Gill Fishes were swimming or floating motionlessly, gazing up at the mermaid. In an instant, the number of Gill Fishes looking up at her amounted to tens of thousands.

“Thank you for comforting me in my foolishness, for praising my mistakes as lovely. I will keep the stories you told tonight, the scenes of you crossing the dark water, in my heart for a lifetime.”

-Are you leaving, Mother?

“I'll visit sometimes.”

The Paladin nodded.

"I have a lot to do. It can't be helped."

-.....

Silence followed.

The river and sea water where the Gill Fishes lived always rippled irregularly. The Gill Fishes had developed a habit of whispering softly, gripping each other's shoulders. This time, too, they gently grabbed the shoulder of a fellow tribe member, one whispering to another, then one to ten, the whisper spreading like contagion. Gill Fish

-Mother.

After the whispers ended.

A mermaid representing the Gill Fishes spoke.

-Won't you take us with you?

"....."

-You mentioned a place called the tower. You said it would soon be visible to us. If that place is your homeland, Mother, wouldn't it be okay for us to follow you there?

-We love the water. But we love the land we can't swim in even more. If that place is where Mother lives, we will come to love it even more.

-Please take us with you.

The Paladin remained silent.

She simply fiddled with her sword hilt.

“There are many vile people in the tower. I don't want you to be hurt by such people.”

-What kind of vile people?

“They will call you fish just because you have tails. Not because they think it's a funny joke, but simply because they want to upset you.”

-.....

“There are many, many people who live with the mentality that as long as they can spoil someone else's mood, nothing else matters. So...”

-Mother.

The Gill Fishes looked at each other, then back at the Paladin.

-There are many ordinary people like that here too.

The Paladin closed her mouth.

-Among us as well.

-Weak people.

-Sick people.



-Those who torment others because they themselves are tormented. Such people are everywhere in the world.

-Such people will always exist, anywhere and in the future.

-Not beyond them.

-But among us.

The Gill Fishes spoke in unison.

-So that can't be a reason why we shouldn't see your world, Mother.

“I am.....”

As the Paladin hesitated.

“Wait a moment.”

Someone grasped the Paladin's shoulder.

It was a gentle yet considerate hand, laden with firm determination.

The Paladin knew only one person who would grab her shoulder this way.

[The King of Death descends.

---

“There’s no need to be so scared, senior.”

“.....King of Death.”

The Paladin turned her head to look at me.

“What do you mean, I’m scared?”

I didn’t respond.

I didn't say anything like she was afraid that the Gill Fishes would one day realize she's just another 'ordinary' person.

I simply spoke cheerfully.

"How about this?"

"What's that?"

"Instead of inviting the Gill Fishes children directly to our tower, let's send them for study abroad to the Aegim Empire starting from the 11th floor. There are mermaids living there too."

"Ah."

The Paladin's eyes widened.

I nodded.

'She wouldn't have thought of it. The Paladin didn't participate in the conquest at that time.'

There was such an incident.

At that time, as a hero, I collected Preta. However, the Aegim Empire was still unaware of this. They came after me, forming a multi-racial alliance to capture the witch, among whom was this character.

『In my view, the current issue boils down to something simple. Whether this...』

『Young man is truly the Emissary of the Founder. Whether that woman is really a witch. Just confirming these matters would resolve everything.』

『This is the Soul Orb bestowed by the current king of the mermaids.』

『If you drop a drop of blood on it, it reveals whether the owner of the blood possesses a [good soul] or an [evil soul]!』

As everyone knows, I coolly splashed my blood on the orb.

『Ah? Uh, what...?』

『How... how can a soul be so... how many lives must have been saved for it to be this white, this is... this is truly...!』

『This person is... the Light...!』

Radiant Sir.

That was the moment I ascended to that title.

“There are mermaids living on the 15th floor who are extremely friendly to me. They think I'm a real apostle of the god. Well, the god there is the [Goddess of Protection], and this Goddess of Protection is Shiny, hanging at my waist, so it's not entirely a wrong analysis...”

The sheath at my waist rustled. It seemed like a protest, asking for more attention.

I have so much to do, meeting with the tower owner, raising children, mediating among comrades, joking around with the Guardian Spirit. Hang in there, Shiny. Just a bit longer. Maybe one day there will be a spin-off like 'Shiny, the Goddess of the Tower's 1st Floor Dining Diary' starring you on a gourmet journey.

Anyway.

“The point is, there are mermaids in another world who are very friendly towards me.”

"....."

“A kind of tutorial. Wouldn't it be a suitable place for study abroad for the Gill Fishes?”

The Paladin looked into my eyes.

“Can you build a bridge?”

“Of course. What's the point of having connections if not for times like this?”

-Kim Gong-Ja?

The Paladin's expression changed.

Given her usual stoicism, even I could only read her expressions as either [she's in a good mood] or [she's feeling stiff]. But this time, her expression was too transparently

readable.

“Let me express my thanks.”

“No, no. There's no need to thank me. I'm just doing what's natural.”

“Kim Gong-Ja. No, Radiant Sir Gong-Ja. You truly are a kind soul.”

“Ahaha... Well, I am a bit kind. Um, anyway---”

“Kind and handsome too. They say life reflects in one's face, maybe that's true.”

“No... I mean, I happen to be a bit handsome, but there's no need to—”

“And even your voice is beautiful. You could be a singer right now. Is this what they call a natural-born singer? Singing Sir Gong-Ja.”

“Singing Sir Gong-Ja? Um... uh... Senior? Excuse me?”

“Kind, handsome, and a good singer – you'd probably be great at dodging military service too. There's mandatory military service in Korea, right? Are you a veteran? Military Sir Gong-Ja.”

“No, it changed to a volunteer system when I was young! The thing about celebrities avoiding military service is a really old story. More importantly, I'm a tower ranker, so even if there was military service, I probably would have been exempt for some national merit reason...”

“Indeed, that makes sense. A national hero.”

“Yes, a national hero... No, wait, Senior! You're teasing me, right!? Just like when we first created the Blood Flower Drama!?”

“I have no idea what you're talking about.”

The Paladin feigned ignorance.

I sighed. The Paladin then smiled slightly at me and grabbed



my shoulder.

She pulled.

"Uh!"

Instinctively, I bent over.

Wrapping her arm around my neck, the Paladin showed my face to the Gill Fishes.

"This is the King of Death. The god of the Earth Spirit Tribe, a ranker of our tower. As you can see, he's my junior and also a friend."

The Gill Fishes murmured.

-The King of Death!

-The god of the Earth Spirit Tribe!

-The mother's junior!

-The mother's friend!

-A national hero!

Damn, I feel like my face is on fire.....

“So, King of Death.”

The Paladin released her arm from my neck. A soft smile lingered on her lips.

“Thank you for the wonderful suggestion. Hmm. Let's plan it according to the King of Death's idea.”

Then the Paladin quickly formulated a plan.

Selecting some students for exchange to the [Mermaid Falls of the Aegim Empire].

After observing the problems and conflicts that arise there, they would develop solutions and gradually increase the number of exchange students.

Eventually expanding the exchange destinations and finally inviting the Gill Fishes to the 1st floor city of our tower, [Babylon].

“Hehe.”

The Paladin chuckled lightly. The Gill Fishes, convinced by this proposal, unanimously agreed to follow her words. They excitedly discussed, “What do mermaids from another world look like?” “They live not in the sea, but in a huge lake!” “Is there really such a big lake?”

Like children who had just been promised a school trip.

“Life really is unpredictable.”

“Hmm?”

“Although it's just a metaphor, I've become a parent raising children, reconciled with the Black Dragon Witch to become

friends again. Even my relationships with other guild leaders...”

The Paladin looked at me with a smile, but her gaze was directed elsewhere.

“Really. Such things have happened.”

Her voice suddenly sounded distant.

Was she reminiscing about the past?

"....."

I remained silent again.

Before reaching the 15th floor of the tower with the mermaids' lake. When I first ascended to the 13th floor of the tower, we faced an internal betrayer and were divided.

We had been divided.

"....."

I had a suspicion about who the betrayer was. But instead of revealing their identity, I deeply buried it by changing the stage itself so that such an incident would not occur.

I often questioned whether not pursuing the identity of the betrayer was the right decision. But at this moment, looking at the side profile of the Paladin, I could think without any hesitation.

‘Yes.’

It was the right decision.

‘That's enough.’

Dawn mist was slowly rising in the jungle. Under the palm trees, the Heretic Inquisitor was still talking with the Mountain Calamity Tribe. The Heretic Inquisitor's expression was serious, but occasionally he laughed like he used to, "Ahaha."

Elsewhere, the Countess was patting the heads of the Fairy

Tribe. Was it some kind of oath of allegiance? Or the first expression of affection from a parent to a child? Probably both, but the Countess was smiling, and the fairies seemed happy.

“Thank you.”

The Paladin spoke.

Then she looked at me.

“You're a good friend, Kim Gong-Ja.”

"....."

“Patricia.”

Silence fell.

“That's my real name. Patricia. You can call me Patricia when no one else is around. If the Vigilante Corps members hear, it might cause favoritism controversies.”

"....."

"You've raised children who will surely understand you, mi amigo."

The Paladin walked to the creek where the Gill Fishes were splashing. She then discarded her heavy armor, helmet, and gloves, and dived into the water among the mermaids. [Quest Progress.]

[Gill Fishes voting begins.]

Splash!

[Vote counting complete.]

[Option 2 votes: 01.32%]

[Option 1 votes: 98.68%]

[Majority for Option 1 confirmed.]

From a distance, I could hear the Gill Fishes laughing.

There were stories of gods who walked with them, gods who carried them on their backs, even gods who danced with them...

But a god who swam with them was a happiness granted only to the Gill Fishes.

[Stage Clear.]

[The 42nd floor has been cleared!]

From the jungle's palm-laden river, I watched for a long time the scene of gods and tribes, parents and children swimming together.

And then.

“Ugor.”

A familiar voice of a familiar child called from behind me.



“Daddy.”

It was Uburka.

I nodded.

‘Yes.’

Now that the Heretic Inquisitor, the Countess, and the Paladin had cleared their stages in turn, it was time for the Black Dragon Witch and me.

The Black Dragon Witch had made me promise not to peek when she came out of the waiting room, just like when we first created the Blood Flower Drama.

"I won't watch, Anastasia!"

But unlike Anastasia, I wasn't embarrassed at all. How close am I with my children? I wish everyone could see how amicably I converse with my children, how strong our parent-child relationship is. I would appreciate their envy.

“Okay, Uburka---”

Slowly, I turned around and spread my arms to embrace Uburka.

The Heretic Inquisitor showed spiritual growth by expressing regret to his children, the Countess flaunted her capitalistic virtue by personally offering employment to her children, and the Paladin always showcased a heart that prioritized her children's feelings.

And I, Kim Gong-Ja, was literally the sky.

Speaking metaphorically, the sky.

Confident in showing spiritual growth, capitalistic virtue, and even heart.

Naturally.

Unlike other parents, I was always aware that my true nature would eventually be exposed to my children.

Knowing yourself and your enemy ensures victory in every battle.

In a way, your greatest enemy in life is your own children. In that sense, the Earth Spirit Tribe children were never a match for me, already having insight into everything.

‘Ugor! Even when comrades ridiculed us for choosing goblins, did father steadfastly choose us, the Earth Spirit Tribe.....!’

Or...

‘I knew from legends that daddy taught us all about letters and tattoos, but seeing it in my mind's eye, I'm deeply moved! Ugor! How did daddy manage to take care of everything for us from one to ten!’

Or...

‘Daddy's kindness is like the sky, impossible to repay... If it weren't for daddy, we would have been far more miserable and vicious. Daddy is a true friend.’

In my ears, I could already hear hundreds of thousands of Earth Spirit Tribe members singing praises of ‘Daddy! Daddy!’

Of course, in response to such praise, I was prepared to humbly respond,

‘Oh, come on. It’s all because of your greatness.’

‘Seeing you grow up well is enough for this daddy...’

‘I love you, my children...!’

Perfect.

Now, I am not just the light. I am the sky that holds the light.

Not Radiant, but Sky.

I am about to be reborn as the dignified Sky Sir Gong-Ja.

With a business smile honed by the Black Dragon Witch, I turned around, expecting my child's warm embrace.

"Come, embrace me---."

"Daddy."

There was indeed something enthusiastic.

"A completely exposed back."

A massive axe eagerly aimed at my chest flew towards me.

"---Damn it!?"

Whish!

I narrowly dodged the attack, purely thanks to my elevated skills. Perhaps it was also thanks to the Guardian Spirit, who had been watching me with an exasperated expression, but even so, without my extraordinary stepping techniques, I would not have been able to evade.

“Ugor.”

Uburka grimaced as he swung the axe.

Then spat on the ground.

“Daddy's movements are like a squirrel frolicking in the forest. I thought the attack would land perfectly.”

“What, what is this! Uburka!”

I panicked and glanced over Uburka's shoulder. Following him, other children, the Earth Spirit Tribe, flushed with anger, were gathered.

If my eyes weren't severely damaged, they too were holding weapons.

Highly inappropriate items for a heartwarming reunion.

“Where's the touching reunion!? Didn't you watch the video of me caring for you for thousands of years!?”

“We did.”

“Then why swing an axe at me!”

“I don't understand.”

Uburka bared his fangs.

“I've known for a long time that daddy cares for us, so watching the video now doesn't move me.”

“Wh-What?”

“Think about it, Ugor. We go to the theatre when bored. The Blood Flower Drama always focuses on daddy's love, trials, and friendship stories. I can recite every play where daddy is the protagonist, even with my eyes closed.”

"....."

“Seems you forgot that people have a threshold for tolerance, daddy.”

How can this be?

Is this what happens when you shower too much love, making them take the parent's affection for granted?

“That’s absurd!”

“It's not.”

Vroooooom!

Uburka swung his axe again, this time meticulously wrapping it in aura. Absorbing the energy of the Ki Dragon had advanced his aura skills, and the already formidable attack was further enhanced.

“Eeek!? Save me!”

“Ah, the day has come when I’ve been longing to show daddy!”

Uburka's biceps throbbed.



“I was embarrassingly defeated by daddy the first time we met! Even after ascending to the Constellation, I was thrashed by daddy! But today! Finally, on this day, I will show daddy!”

“You crazy! If you lost twice, let it go! Why hold such petty grudges!?”

“Ugor. What do you take me for, daddy?”

[The Muscle Pig Dreaming of Parricide roars.]

“Here stands the Chairman of the Fire River Council, the Chief Warrior of the King of Death Family, your child, Uburka!”

What’s with this guy's nicknames?

# Chapter 268: White Lion Faith (1)

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-Baraya, Baraya!

“My heart is a torch!”

-Agabaraya!

“I shall achieve parricide!”

The Earth Spirit Tribe sang the song of the Blood Fire Drama with gusto, while I barely, just barely, evaded Uburka's axe swings in front of them.

But my heart churned with unease.

I shrieked while dodging the sixth blow.

“Hey! Don’t sing Baraya here, you maniacs!”

“What’s wrong with singing it?”

“Don’t sing if I tell you not to!”

The doctrine of the Demonic Cult is widely spread among the Earth Spirit Tribe.

Through the cultural project of the Blood Fire Drama. Also, through the military tactics of the Demonic Heavenly Art, the Earth Spirit Tribe consciously or unconsciously lived by the doctrine of the Demonic Cult. ‘Agabaraya’ was a kind of chorus that boosted the morale of the Earth Spirit Tribe. It was their freedom to sing it as much as they wanted, but...

“To catch just me, you’re singing Baraya Baraya! What!? Even when capturing the Ki Dragon, you didn’t use Demonic Heavenly Art, just performed ki meditation, why are you exerting full power to hunt me!?”

“Ugor.”

Hearing my words, Uburka sneered.

“Don’t you really understand, daddy?”

Swoosh!

Uburka swung his axe widely, destroying everything within its radius. Just the wind pressure alone shredded the palm trees, rocks, and all life forms in between. “Damn!” If I hadn’t quickly retreated, at least a heel would have been crushed.

“To us, daddy is everything.”

“What?”

“Everything, I say.”

Thud.

Uburka approached with red light in his eyes, his gaze so intense that it made my heart skip a beat.

‘What?’

I wondered if he had been overwhelmed by the spirit and fell into a frenzied state. But that couldn't be. Uburka wasn't so lowly skilled to fall into such a state, and in our Demonic Cult, succumbing to one's own emotions is considered a disgrace.

Just...

"You still don't fully realize how significant daddy is to us. You haven't truly felt it."

Uburka was raising aura throughout his body, to the extent that I mistook it for a frenzy.

"What are you saying? Of course, I am your closest friend..."

"That's what I'm saying. Ugor. Daddy, you really don't know yourself."

Uburka chuckled lightly.

Then, as if his previous words were a joke, he opened up.

“Daddy said it himself, you gave us letters. Seeing daddy meticulously creating characters for our tribe, even though I knew it intellectually, it felt differently.”

-Ugor! It was worth seeing.

The blushing Earth Spirit Tribe, the Asuras, chimed in from behind. “Ugor!” “Ugor!” Their chorus added momentum to Uburka’s words, like a red wave turning into a giant tidal wave approaching me.

“Do you remember the first day daddy taught us letters? The day you taught us how to make sounds?”

"....."

I clenched the hilt of my sword.

From the red wave, an ominous aura was surging.

It was like the sensation I had when Constellation Killer approached to kill me on the 50th floor. Something bigger, stronger, and perhaps more desperate than me. The chilling murderous intent I felt when that thing pointed its sword at

me, was now palpably present in this red wave of children.

I estimated the distance and spoke.

“I remember. As vividly as if it happened yesterday.”

“Daddy taught letters to immature children. While teaching, you created characters for things they loved, played with, and were happy with.”

"....."

“Gently.”

Mud is ■.

Sky is O.

Sun is ☆.

Moon is ★.

Water is ~.

In the soft mud, carving out with the claws of a lion, teaching the little goblins letters, those days are still brilliantly preserved in my mind.

As a warm memory.

“Daddy could have known many languages. But you knew we only needed about seven words in our life. Thus, you could have reproached us.”

Why see the world so narrowly?

This is a tree, and that is a mountain.

Learn more, know more.

“But you didn’t reproach.”



"....."

“Instead of reproaching, you wanted us to fully explore this small world we had. You didn’t teach us that [the rain will stop soon, so don’t worry]. Instead, when we were scared and trembling in primitive fear because the rain was hitting the earth in anger, you were the first to cry out.”

-Keeeee!

Using the goblin word for rain, [Ke].

If translated into modern language...

Water is coming.

-Kerererer! Keeeeee!

On the earth, on the land, water is coming.

Huddled in the hut while the torrential rain poured outside, the little goblins shrank their shoulders. To the primitive

Earth Spirit Tribe, the torrential rain was a kind of deity. The deity was angry, raining down.

‘Maybe we’ve wronged the deity.’

In a tribal society where language hadn’t evolved, it was difficult to even form such a clear sentence. In reality, it was more like broken words [We, sky, wrong?].

Unable to articulate even their own fears, it was that kind of era. Such was their tribe. A time when the color of the sky wasn't fixed, the reason for the sun and moon's orbit was a mystery, and every born life trembled in fear of what attacked from outside and the unknown inside.

-Kerererer! Keeeeee!

Then someone cried out.

-Kere! Kee! Kerere, Kee!

Water is coming.

Water is coming to the land.

Just that mere cry.

Amid the rainforest and torrential rain, it felt as if the entire world would be swept away by the flood at any moment, but the white lion roared defiantly. Water is coming. Water is coming. Water is coming...

-Kere...

-Kererk...

It was a spell.

More lucid than any mystical fortune-teller.

-Kerer...

-Kee... Keeeeee!

Several goblins left the hut and approached the White Lion. Already half the hut was submerged by the heavy rain, so there was no hesitation in their steps. They climbed the high rock, the slippery rock wet with rain, missing several times. They kept crying out while climbing.

-Keeee!

-Kere, Kee! Kere, Kee!

Water is coming.

Water is coming to the land.

As the goblins struggled to reach the top, the White Lion stood there, looking up at the dark sky with a straight jaw.

-Kii...

The goblins gasped for breath, engulfed in fear.

They were afraid. The dark clouds seemed to boil over with

the deity's wrath, ready to unleash at any moment. Lightning, thunder, storm. To the goblins, who knew so little, all these were divine powers.

Incomprehensible, unattainable, unavoidable. Only to be obeyed... The deities, favoring us, pitying us, allowed us to survive today...

-Keeeeee!

Still, the White Lion roared.

The world was entwined with grey giants, everything dreary and confused, swirling in the swift winds. Even at a moment when the world seemed on the brink of destruction, the White Lion merely raised its head and roared.

-Keeeeee!

Water is coming.

-Keeeeeeeee!

Water is coming.

-.....Keee, rrr. Kerrr...

-Keeeee.....

-Kerrrr....

The little goblins began to cling to the White Lion's body. They clung to its paws, tail, torso, and mane, trembling fearfully.

They couldn't understand why the White Lion was roaring, why they were drawn here by that cry, or why they felt the need to echo the White Lion's wails, but...

-Keeeeeeeeee!

-Kee, keeeeeeee!

-Kerrr! Kee!

The goblins shouted with all their might.

Water is coming, they said.

Water is coming.

Water is coming.

.

.

.

.

.

.

Thud.

The all-night downpour had now eased. The goblins perched on a distant rock first noticed this. Thud – the raindrops on their beak-like noses felt lighter. Thud – the raindrops on their crinkled green foreheads were gentler.

-Kee.....

What was happening?

-Kerrr...?

What miracle was unfolding?

-Keeeee.

The goblins all looked up at the White Lion. Drenched in the night's rain, its mane hung long, but the White Lion's eyes shone brighter than the morning sun just beginning to rise.

The water, the water that seemed like it would destroy the



world, had receded.

-Kekerkker.

The White Lion growled contentedly.

With the harsh rain gone, leaving only gentle raindrops to moisten the plains, the White Lion pointed towards the droplets falling from the sky to the earth and declared.

-Kekerkker.

The goblins tilted their heads, engulfed in a strange feeling. They echoed the White Lion's words.

-Kekerkker?

-Kekerkker.

Rain.

-Kekerkker.

Rain.

-.....

Rain.

-Kekerkker.

And that day, the Earth Spirit Tribe realized something.

The White Lion might have simply intended to teach them the word "rain." But it was more than that. The impact the White Lion had on the Earth Spirit Tribe, the legacy it left, was far too immense to be contained in a mere word.

-Kekerkker!

The Earth Spirit Tribe triumphed over fear.

They could have huddled in their safe huts, trembling, hoping the deities would spare them, praying and muttering prayers. They could have prepared altars and sacrifices to appease the deities' wrath, offering a goblin every rainy season, thus wasting a thousand years.

They might have called out "rain" in fear. Rain, not as water flowing on the land, but as water pouring from the sky. Water unleashed in the deity's anger. And thus, "rain" would have become a deity, its name becoming something like "The One Who Sweeps the World Away" or "The Ruler of Autumn's Terror," much longer and more terrifying.

“But.”

Uburka.

The living witness of the Earth Spirit Tribe held his axe aloft.

“It didn't happen that way.”

"....."

“Daddy didn't just teach us letters. No, he did, but he taught us something far greater. Daddy taught us victory!”

It was a victory over fear.

The world was covered in the unknown, where one had to burrow into the earth, crouching under small huts, mere refuges from the world.

“Thanks to daddy, we conquered water.”

-Ugor! Ugor!

“Thanks to daddy, we conquered fire.”

-Ugor! Ugor!

“Thanks to daddy, we conquered thunderstorms, rivers, the sea! We even conquered the salt hell beneath the earth!”

-Ugor! Ugor!

“Kekekekekeke!”

Uburka spread his arms wide and shouted.

“It's not the name of a terrifying deity, but simply rain! Just rain! Something we triumphed over, something we shook off our fear of! To us, kekekeke is not just a letter, but the name of a war we won, thus our proud trophy!”

-Kekeruk!

“Sky! It's not a punishing deity. We stripped the sky of its divine status. Sky! Just the sky! We admire the purple silk it drapes at dawn, shed tears at its lazy evening blush, but it's no different from pity for a defeated foe! Sky! It too is a name we plundered.”

-Ugor! Ugor!

“There are two ways to write letters. To carve fears into characters. While other tribes developed the character for fire out of fear, needing to escape it, hoping it wouldn't come, we etched fire into our letters to celebrate our victory! It's a prey we successfully hunted and captured! We carved the character for fire in our damp caves and laughed over it!”

-Gor!

“Gor!”

-Gor!

“Gor!”

In the pre-dawn jungle, not the sky, but a fire ignited on the low ground.

“That's the name our fire bears!”

The multitude of Asuras ignited their aura.

“When they feared fire, dreaded it, tried to escape it, tried to control it, we just shouted at the fiery red Gor.”

-Ugor!

“Good!”

The flames intensified.

“Fire, beautiful! Beautiful!”

-Ugor! Ugor! Ugor!

They were all elite members of the Fire River Council. They started their martial journey with the Demonic Heavenly God Art during their trainee days, mastered the Demonic Formations Art one by one as warriors, and eventually reached the pinnacle, securing a position in the Fire River Council, the elite of the elite.

“Daddy!”

At the forefront, Uburka stood with open arms, laughing.

-Kekerkker! Kekerkker!

Behind him, excited Asuras shook their spears, swords, axes,

and fists.

"Daddy didn't just teach us letters! Nor did he teach us the world! Nor did he merely teach us how to win! He didn't just teach us to face the fears ingrained in every living thing, to confront them, to coexist, and overcome together! What did daddy give us? What is daddy to us? Is daddy just a teacher who taught us many things?"

-Ugor! Ugor! Ugor!

"No! Then what is he? Is he a god? The creator who gave us the earth and the sky, allowing us to breathe? Is daddy merely a god to us?"

-Ugor! Ugor! Ugor!

"No, he is not!"

[The Muscle Pig Dreaming of Parricide roars.]

"Then what is daddy to us! My beloved brethren! Those of you who love the damp waters, are enchanted by the rain, tremble at the sky's quivering, and whose hearts pound at the



sight of soaring flames! What is daddy to us!”

-Kekerkker! Kekerkker!

“That's right!”

Uburka laughed heartily.

“Daddy is, our world!”

Ah.

“Daddy is everything to us!”

I am.

“In this world, we have conquered everything! I, Uburka, have even conquered death. Hence, we can joyfully sing every word. Every sentence is a trace of overcoming fear! Every conversation is a continuous celebration of our victorious battles! We are brave, we shed tears, we respect everything in the world that fought us, yet we laugh because we have won

and will continue to win!”

-Kekerkker! Kekerkker!

“Except for one thing.”

Uburka pointed his axe at me.

“Daddy.”

"....."

“Kekerkker!”

"....."

A white creature descended from the sky.

In the language of the Earth Spirit Tribe, it signifies.

Not a demon, nor a god, but...

“Our world!”

The world.

“Born in your world, opened our eyes in your world, smelled in your world, stepped in your world, we were happy! Ugor! With all sincerity, I cry out, Kekerker! We love this world!”

The entire jungle.

In the shade of the palm trees and bushes, untouched by dawn's light, a bonfire was raised. The Asuras who ruled this continent's land, created by a certain turtle, ignited a beacon.

Demonic Formations Art.

Hundreds of thousands of Asuras ignited their Baraya together.

“Now, it's time to put the final mark on the last thing we

haven't conquered!"

-Kekerkker! Kekerkker!

To them, I was a much greater entity than I thought.

I had become such an entity to them.

"....."

I closed my eyes.

The sensation of the world's flames engulfing me.

Strangely, these flames, brimming with love and affection for me, were not hot. Only the joy of trying to defeat me heated my heart.

There couldn't be a softer flame to stoke the heart.

‘So, it is.’

I recalled the scene of my Master slicing through the snowy mountains.

What the Master had in mind at that time was not the towering peaks.

‘Can a person also become a world to someone?’

The Master had surely sliced through the seasons at that time.

He had cut through the time that froze all life.

He had sliced the world.

‘Yes.’

I gripped my sword handle.

“Those who wish to become gods to someone must be prepared to be parents.”

I drew my sword with a long, scraping sound.

“And those who wish to be parents must also be prepared to become the world.”

White.

The holy sword that had been with me for a long time now shone brilliantly.

Giving life, journey, and world to the fire, in response to my sense of responsibility, the sword that was once a goddess gleamed brightly.

“You are fire, suitable to burn the world.”

I took out a pair of gloves from my pocket.

Thud.

I threw the white gloves, scented with Raviel, towards the lush foliage.

“Before a duel, it's a martial realm's law to reveal oneself. Our Demonic Cult, originated from the martial realm, must also uphold the respect for our ancestors.”

While being ready to summon the army of the King of Death Family at any moment.

“I am the second-ranked hunter of the City of Ascension, the emissary of the Aegim Empire, the direct disciple of the late peony in the snowy plains, the Vice-lord of the Demonic Cult, the only Moon of the Ivansia Ducal Family, the family head of the King of Death Family, and your---.”

Towards the children who have continually triumphed for thousands of years.

I spoke of my history, which had been victorious for even longer.

“Kekerkker.”

I brandished my sword.

That moment.

[World Naming.]

['Unnamed World -30-1316782' is officially registered.]

[The name of this world is 'The World of the Lone Child'\*.]

\*The Korean term "사자세계" (sajasegye) is a transliteration of the Chinese phrase "獨子世界" (dúzǐ shìjiè). It has the same meaning as in Chinese, referring to the concept of an "only child's world." Just like in Chinese, it describes the unique perspective, experiences, and challenges of being an only child in a family in the context of Korean culture. It emphasizes how growing up without siblings can shape one's worldview and experiences in distinct ways.

Thud.

Something fell onto my sword.



[May luck accompany the World of the Lone Child.]

A droplet of water.

A speck of rainwater splashed on my sword blade.

# Chapter 269: White Lion Faith (2)

---

‘Rain.’

I observed the water droplet on my sword blade.

‘It's raining.’

Every movement of the slowly sliding droplet was clear to me, moment by moment. Due to the heightened concentration from drawing up aura throughout my body, my heart rate and senses were far beyond that of an ordinary person at this moment.

Thud!

I channeled aura into my sword blade and flicked the water droplet away. My red aura instantly enveloped the droplet. Should I call it coating? The droplet, now plated with my aura, I sent it flying directly towards Uburka.

Thwack!

The reddened droplet hit Uburka's cheek.

It burst.

Like a child playfully throwing a water balloon. Red paint smeared and ran down one side of Uburka's face. He could easily dodge my strike, yet he jovially received it as a playful jest.

“At this point, showing off the mastery of your aura is uninspiring.”

Uburka grinned.

“The sorrow and resentment mixed in the droplet from your blade, that aura-infused tear becomes more than just one of many raindrops to be washed away, but rather a single drop that feels dirty, gloomy, and as if it needs to help someone. Remarkable. A fascinating intricacy of aura.”

“Uburka.”

In the midst of this small exchange, where we gave and took mutual respect, I fully composed myself. The habit of Kim Gong-Ja, who awkwardly inserts himself into conversations or tries to draw favor from strangers he meets for the first time.

I shed all the shells that made me who I am, one by one, focusing my mind solely on the [believer].

At this moment, the one wielding the sword is the Vice-lord of Demonic Cult.

“Do you believe I created that?”

“What?”

“A raindrop is nothing more than moisture clumping together, falling when it can no longer hold its own weight. There's no reason beyond physical action. Just water, just force, just gravity. That's why there are raindrops.”

Master.

I conveyed the teachings I received from the lord of the Demonic Cult, about snowflakes, to my believer.

“I infused human desires and resentments into the droplet with my aura, turning a simple droplet into a projectile. Adding something that wasn't originally there makes it unnatural. That's how the Demonic Cult manipulates aura, right?”

"....."

“But son, you are mistaken.”

To the orthodox, land is just land. Emulating the land means a martial artist themselves become a speck of dirt.

But to the Demonic Cult, what is land? It's the enemy that must be dug with broken fingernails to bury a sister's corpse. It's the enemy that was so peaceful on that day that it caught the lord's eye. Despite all their hard work, it's the bastard that never becomes theirs, forever hiding in the landowner's ledger, mocking their miserable lives.

Sword Emperor.

I shared the explanation I heard from another master with my offspring.

“I didn’t mix my own emotions into it.”

“Then whose did you mix?”

“People’s.”

All the grievances and resentments of people living in the world gather to form the sky, which we call Demonic Heaven.

“I am the Vice-lord of Demonic Cult, its representative.”

Therefore, the emotions mingled there are not mine. I dare not call them mine.

They belong to someone who once existed, someone who will exist someday. They are resentment, grief, hatred.

“This is the sword of the Demonic Heaven!”

I swung my sword.

Thousands of red raindrops flew horizontally at once. My responsibility. My charge. My representation. Precious things shot out, striking Uburka sideways with an unbelievable loud boom! With a cry that seemed more of a wail, Uburka was swept away, and the jungle shook violently.

---

In the drenched forest, birds could not fly. Instead, water droplets hanging from tree branches flew all at once.

“Indeed.”

In the middle of it all, from a meteor crater carved in the heart of the jungle, Uburka spoke.

“Indeed. So it was.”

Uburka boldly laughed, then clapped his fists together with a thud!

“In that case.”

Uburka stood up.

Covered in rainwater, his figure flickering in and out of visibility, the white giant laughed, revealing gleaming white teeth.

“This time, let us show you our world.”

Meanwhile, the rain kept increasing.

This place, being the wettest jungle on the continent, made rain a daily occurrence this season. Drizzle, monsoon, misty and heavy rain. Nearby, a school of piranhas thrashed in the river, and river eels swiftly devoured them.

The jungle was engulfed in heavy rain.

-Uu...

In an instant, the jungle was wrapped in low-lying fog. Unable to see even a few inches ahead, the river flowed beneath the fog, where piranhas leapt up from the water only to vanish again. Below, the sound of flesh being torn echoed.

-Uu...



The base of the palm trees was submerged in fog. Trees with obscured bases appeared to be hanging in mid-air, as if tethered to the sky rather than the ground. Perhaps like pillars of a temple carved from wood in worship of some deity. Millions of trees were enveloped in fog, transforming the entire area into a damp, misty temple.

And from beneath the fog,

Half-concealed by the palm trees turned into temple pillars,

Centered around me, forming an impenetrable surround,

The Asuras were deeply burping in chorus.

‘Indeed.’

I looked up at the sky.

Realizing that the dark clouds were not just sea-breeze-driven rain clouds.

Krrrrumble... Lightning streaked between the clouds, thunderbolically swallowing each other. The dark clouds churned, threatening to unleash their fury.

‘I wondered why Uburka didn’t call for a one-on-one duel and instead attacked with a pack... It wasn’t Demonic Heavenly God Art he was using, but Demonic Formations Art for a showdown.’

The moment I realized this, the entire jungle was already resonating with the sounds of summoning rain.

-Uu! Uu! Uu! Uu! Ugohr! Ugohr! Ugohr! Ugohr!

-Kerukke, Uu! Kerukke, Uu! Kerukke, Uu!

-Ugohr!

-Kerukke, Uu! Kerukke, Uu! Kerukke, Uu!

-Ugohr!

The Earth Spirit Tribe pounded their weapons on the ground, beat palm trees with their fists, and struck rocks with their feet, awakening the dormant sounds of the forest. It was a wild rhythm.

Having evolved, they became Asuras, and their auras burned red without exception. “Kerukke! Uu!” When one Earth Spirit struck a wooden drum, the aura mercilessly vibrated the wood’s core. The palm tree became a giant instrument, roaring noisily. Koooom! Koom!

‘Impressive.’

The fog acted as an invisible, intangible wall separating this world from the other.

Thus, the river beneath the fog became the banks of hell, and the land that emerged from the fog became earth.

But with even the land obscured by fog, what is there to rely on in this world?

‘Excellent.’

The leaning palm trees.

Palm trees stretching lazily into the sky, piercing through the fog, were the only refuge from the shores of hell, making them pillars of a temple singing the grace and glory of gods. Small animals, snakes, squirrels, and spiders in the jungle all took refuge in the palm trees.

Demonic Formations Art.

Special Method.

Ashen Cloud Blood Dew.

Not yet perfected.

Despite merely bringing rain and thick fog.

The Earth Spirit Tribe transformed this space into a [strange stage].

“Truly a remarkable sight.”

I admired the spectacle of the Asura's Demonic Formations Art unfolding.

“It's beautiful.”

Heaven above.

The ash-colored sky spreads low with dark clouds. From one side of the cloud, a lightning bolt tries to strike, only to be swallowed by the neighboring cloud, and on the other side, a thunderstorm roars down.

And Earth below.

Endless fog covers the jungle. Flowing rivers, rocks in the river, rugged shrubs, insects chirping beneath the bushes. All hidden by fog. Now, they secretly whisper. Insects, birds, beasts – none can be seen beyond the fog, only occasionally passing as ominous shadows.

Zirrrrrr... Krur, ...Kiiikiiki...Kii...Krrrrrrrrrr...Grrr...Pii...

Incomprehensible noises.

Discordant cacophony made by the shadows.

"....."

My vision encompassed only the dark cloud-filled sky and the land covered in dark fog.

Between the half-lowered sky and half-raised earth, rows of palm trees, bent over, seemed to be hanging onto something desperately.

"Haha."

I lightly swung my sword to cut through the fog. The density of the fog remained unchanged. Instead, more dense grayness gathered, forming a river of fog.

‘This isn’t ordinary fog. It’s made of aura.’

Further disrupting it, the fog began to take on a bloody hue. The color of the Earth Spirit Tribe’s aura was starkly revealed.

“To cover this entire area with fog... Consuming the Ki Dragon was worthwhile.”

Blood-red mist oozed from the fog cut by my sword. It flowed like a stream through the gray fog, eventually turning all the fog on the ground a bright red.

In an instant, I was transported into a different world.

“Is this my hell?”

“No, daddy.”

Splashing.

Stepping on the fog-covered river, making a sound more akin to a bell than water, Uburka approached me.

“This is our origin.”

“Origin?”

“Ugor. When we first opened our eyes and gazed at the world with tender sight, the world reflected to us was merely like this.”

Uburka looked around.

“The sky wasn’t blue. There was no reason to look up at the blue sky. For us to pay attention to the sky, it first had to rain, and a rainy sky was always ash-colored. Hence, to us, the sky was always a bizarre lump of clouds, rumbling with indigestion, spewing lightning.”

“The earth? The earth was terrifying. Any beast could harm us. Even a tiny insect seemed powerful enough to poison our children. A place where big and small demons roamed... Unidentifiable beasts howled in the distance, and adults who said they’d return by night never did. Why? We didn’t know. We knew nothing. Beasts howled, adults didn’t return, the world was unknown, shrouded in dense fog.”

"....."

"Only occasionally."

Uburka envisioned the world of the beginning.



A gray world infinitely stretching with ash-colored sky and earth.

“Like these palm trees, we only had something to cling to, a place to escape to. Whatever saved me and became a home for my family was a god. We wandered between hell and refuge, looking for gods to cling to.”

I smiled slowly.

“Raising you in this place wasn’t easy. The only words I knew were water, sky, earth...”

“Ugor. In a world that appears to us like this, why would we need many words?”

Rain fell.

Although the rain clouds were summoned by the Asura’s aura, the raindrops from the clouds seemed gentle. It was just rain. I opened my mouth wide and caught a few drops. It was refreshing. The rain, far cleaner than the old aura, soaked my entire body.

“Nothing happens if you dwell here.”

Uburka said.

“Daddy. You love us. There is no one among the Earth Spirit Tribe who doubts that love. But wasn’t it hard?”

“Hard? Well, facing this imminent collective parricide is difficult, but...”

“After you led us out of this primeval forest, there were many events. Progress, conquest, defeat, enslavement of all races. I can’t imagine there were no deaths.”

"....."

“Those tortured to death, accidentally killed, died of bad luck, speared resisting the Mountain Calamity Tribe, mocked to death as gladiators for mere audience amusement, killed while escaping, died failing to escape...”

Silence lingered.

“Do you feel all this is your responsibility, daddy?”

Long silence flowed.

# Chapter 270: White Lion Faith (3)

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## Translator's Note:

Hello everyone, considering this is the first chapter where I've been ahead of the old translator, I imagine a lot more of you guys are joining me on this journey from this chapter. Before you begin reading the chapter, I wish to let out some thoughts and context beforehand.

For the new readers, my terminologies are very different from the old translators. I've followed and amended the terms used by the manhwa translators and modified a lot of things. From my comparison, I also seem to be translating a newer version of the novel, which has some things modified by the author/publisher, hence the terms are vastly different, especially in the latest 'Race Wars' and 'Race Wars Part II' arcs. So, at the very least, I would recommend everyone to re-read the 'Race Wars' arcs. I understand that not everyone would like my term changes and my methods, and I respect that. I am not a perfect translator, I doubt anyone is. Especially with a novel like this one, where the interpretations are so poetic and it's really up to the reader how they want to interpret a lot of things. This is simply 'my version' of the novel. It's my way of showing love to the series.

Now, time for some context, as some of you might have been wondering how this release rate was possible. I've basically been grinding translations for this novel at a, quite frankly, concerning rate during my uni semester break. I had initially decided to catch up within a couple months, but well, I ended up getting hyper-obsessed and did 10-15 chapters a day until today, when I'm caught up to the old translators. I plan to reduce my release rate soon, since I don't want to spend my entire 1-month semester break on my desk, typing while looking at a laptop screen, but I promise that I plan to consistently keep translating this novel until its end.

I hope you all will continue enjoying this hyper-obsessed fan's translations. Please do not hesitate to report any possible change suggestions or fixes by reaching out in our discord server.

For the ones who are still too lazy to re-read, here are some terms which will help you in this chapter, as well as coming chapters:

- Pure Humans Tribe: Humans - Sword Saint's race
- Ghost Tribe: Dokkaebi - Viper's race
- Mountain Calamity Tribe: Snails - Heretic Inquisitor's race

- Gill Fish Tribe: Mermaids - Paladin's race
- Vampiric Tribe: Vampires + Dream Demons - Black Dragon Witch's race
- Fairy Tribe: Elves - Countess's race
- Earth Spirit Tribe: Goblins/Hobgoblins/Asuras - King of Death's race

Thank you and enjoy reading!

---

I turned my gaze away from the beautiful ash-gray refuge and looked at Uburka.

“I know such a person.”

“What?”

“I know of such a person.”

Tower Master.

I recalled someone who felt everything was their responsibility, someone who went beyond that, turning everything into their own responsibility.

“But, I am not that person.”

Kieeeeeeeee-

Distant rocky mountains.

Through the mist, a white beast climbed a soaring rock and howled. Small green creatures that feared such a beast were also sporadically visible. Gororor... They seemed to be deliberating whether to climb up to where the white beast was, clinging to the bottom of the rock.

“I chose a different path,”

I held my sword upright.

“You can blame me, of course. The mistakes you make, the curses you'll hear from others, it all might feel like it's my fault for carelessly choosing you as my tribe and exposing you to the world. For bringing you into existence. For raising you. So you can blame me, but---”

"....."

“Come to me when you are stronger than me.”

I smiled slyly.

“Come to me if you can make them happier than I can!”

I swung the Holy Sword.

Shiny, the Goddess of Protection, shone brightly as its name suggested, cleaving the ash-stained dark clouds in two.

Through the gap created by the cleavage, a glimpse of blue sky appeared.



“Make them more lovable than I do! More splendid! Smarter! More beautiful! If such a person comes and complains--- I will gladly admit my failure in parenting!”

Until then.

“I am the mightiest father there is!”

I clenched my right hand.

“Ester!”

“Yes, family head.”

Suddenly.

Without any warning, Ester knelt on one knee beside me. She must have been waiting somewhere else than our hunters' waiting room, ready to appear at any moment when called.

“Ester, the advisor to the family head, is here.”

“The rain looks pretty pathetic, doesn’t it!”

"....."

Ester glanced upward. Despite the rain reminiscent of the jungle's rainy season pouring down, Ester appeared indifferent, as if looking at a drizzle on a neighborhood street.

“Yes. It seems trivial.”

“Clear it away!”

I laughed and extended my right hand.

Ester also smiled and firmly grabbed my hand.

“Okay, family head. I will clear it.”

Our auras resonated through the clasped hands. It wasn't just the mingling of red and black aura becoming stronger. We circulated a single vision, a single drop of aura. A downpour of blood-red rain on some continent,

Demonic Formations Art.

Special Method.

Graceful Rain of Lamenting Heavens.

Rain falls.

“The primordial fear was terrible, wasn’t it, Earth Spirit Tribe?”

Rain falls.

“The sky of those ignorant times was merely gloomy, only causing unsettling premonitions and disquiet in your hearts, so profound that they could hardly surface.”

Rain falls.

“Those are no longer the rains we fear!”

Rain falls.

The resentment of villagers unjustly burned alive, the screams of countless deaths faced in the empire, all contained in the crimson raindrops, fall in the [Demonic Formations Art] spread by the Asuras.

Thud!

Thick fog is penetrated by the blood droplets reaching the ground in an instant. Thud! Before the fog could recover, another drop of blood falls, mercilessly eroding the base of the fog. Thud! Thudududu! Thudududu! Thud! Thudududu.....

“The fears you will face from now on are even more terrible!”

The fog couldn't withstand the carpet bombing of blood droplets. It burst, dwindled, was crushed, and was torn to pieces by the raindrops.

What Demonic Formations Art revealed was the bare ground of the jungle.

A land not mystified or enchanted, simply existing.

-Our meticulously executed formation...

-Impossible, Ugor. We're overpowering him in terms of aura...

The Earth Spirit Tribe came into view as the ground was exposed.

They were in a state of confusion. They had planned to conceal themselves in the fog, attacking me with unseen swords and axes. The strategy failed before it even began.

I bared my chest and spoke.

“The place we live, this tower... From the 50th floor upward, it's filled with masters from all sorts of worlds. Surely you don't think all parents are like us, do you?”

-.....

“We conversed with you, we understood each other. You fighting me now is not out of dissatisfaction, but merely to achieve a dignified end.”

Ester’s Autumn Rain had melted all the fog away.

All the gathered tribes in the jungle were now looking at me.

“But the ones gathered on the 50th floor will be different.”

I said.

“The Princess mentioned it. The content of each tower is different, but from the 30th floor, they are generally similar.”

"....."

“To accept you as humans, to embrace you as children, our hunters first need to accept all this as reality. Not as NPCs or dungeons. They must see all of you as living beings right before their eyes.”

But.

How many towers have prepared themselves in this way?

Even our tower, even when the Black Dragon Witch was the second in the hierarchy, before my regression, didn't we consider the tower a kind of [game]?

“How many of them cleared the 40th floor by annihilating their nurtured tribes?”

I remembered the 14 Asuras who perished in my previous tower, and I also looked at the hundreds of thousands of Asuras now before me.

“If there's one such tower, that's millions. Ten towers, hundreds of millions. A hundred towers, billions. Countless corpses will be beneath those who stand triumphant.”

Before I knew it...

The vassals of the King of Death Family had gathered around me.

Kim Yul, with long hair tied with the hairband I gave, quietly looked down at the jungle. Silvia Evanair, with her hands clasped in front, stood demurely, unfazed by the millions of humans gazing up at her.

“Those who don’t see people as people.”

The former Flame Emperor.

“Those who flatter such people as heroes.”

The former me.

“That’s exactly what lies there.”

I pointed to the red sky with my hand.

“That’s the world beyond the 50th floor.”

If that's not hell, then what is?



[Quest Progress.]

[The Vampiric Tribe's voting begins.]

Then.

The Black Dragon Witch landed silently beside me with a thud.

She stood emotionlessly next to me, gazing at the world drenched in blood.

“The words of the King of Death are true.”

“Anastasia.”

“It’s hard to see this as the fault of us humans. After all, the wolves that appear in the hunting grounds are called monsters, and people who appear in the Aegim Empire are identified as [NPCs] when read with psychic powers. Well, the Aegim Empire might be like that because it’s a reenactment of a once destroyed world.”

The Black Dragon Witch tilted her lips, almost in a sneer.

“Humans kill people even if there are reasons not to. If it’s of no consequence to kill, it’s essentially granting them a license for free slaughter. If the world beyond the 50th floor of all towers is a battleground as the King of Death said... it might be even harder to find someone who isn’t a slaughterer.”

The Black Dragon Witch turned her head.

Bats were hanging from the thick palm branches.

“Sorry. I’ve been a nuisance in your conquest of the continent. Even as a mother.”

-.....

“But this world is wider than you think. The enemies you have to face are more than you can imagine. Of course, monsters that you cannot defeat.”

-.....

“You have watched over other tribes for thousands of years. The Earth Spirit Tribe would never betray you first. Neither would the Gill Fish Tribe or the Ghost Tribe. Even now, the Mountain Calamity Tribe and the Fairy Tribe. Kids, your task isn't to chase dominion over this cramped continent and quarrel with meek tribes.”

The Black Dragon Witch smiled gently.

“Unite, and strike down the enemies that will threaten your world.”

Flap, flap.

The bats flapped their wings.

[Vote counting complete.]

[Option 2 votes: 01.32 percent]

[Option 1 votes: 97.55%]

“We are a blood alliance.”

[Stage Clear.]

[The 43rd floor has been cleared!]

The 43rd floor.

A level I had reached in my previous world before regression — surpassing the 40th floor, which even the Flame Emperor failed and the Black Dragon Witch despaired.

We had successively conquered those stages.

But that wasn't all.

[Quest Progress.]

[The Dream Demon Tribe's voting begins.]

‘Huh?’

I blinked and looked at the Black Dragon Witch.

The Dream Demon Tribe wasn't originally part of the tribes we were taking care of.

She then gave me a small smile as our eyes met.

“Kim Gong-Ja, Sometimes you see me as too simple.”

“What?”

“There are others who are frantically working to clear stages, not just you. Remember I told you I exhausted all my points bringing in the Dream Demon Tribe, inevitably failing. Have you ever thought about what I, someone of my standing, would risk failure for?”

[Vote counting complete.]

[Option 2 votes: 00.00%]

[Option 1 votes: 100.00%]

"....."

I couldn't help but be slightly astonished.

"Not a single objection..."

"Well, let's just say I've successfully concluded various contracts. Even among friends, contractual secrets should be respected, right?"

The Black Dragon Witch winked lightly.

[Stage Clear.]

[The 44th floor has been cleared!]

Haha.

Truly.

"....."

I smiled and turned around.

"Uburka."

I looked at my son.

"You know, I don't consider choosing you as a mistake."

"....."

"Even if I go back, I would choose you. Even if I'm reborn, I would raise you. If I am the best father to you, then you are, to me, the best children."

"I know."

Uburka jerked his jaw, saying Ugohr.

“I know. Daddy, but just.....”

“If you challenged me to a duel because you wanted to lighten the burden I carry, wanting to become stronger and join me.”

“There’s no need.”

I smiled brightly.

“Just as I am precious to you as a world, you are also precious to me as a world. You see the world as I see it. You feel as I feel. But, Uburka. I will also see the world as you see it and feel as you feel.”

"....."

“We are people of the same world.”

I took Uburka’s hand.



“We are humans.”

I looked beyond Uburka at the many Earth Spirit Tribe members arrayed.

“My dear friends.”

“There will be those who did not enjoy the same fortune as us, beyond the 50th floor. Even those who regard all this as a mere game, becoming kings and lords, indulging in debauchery.”

[Quest Progress.]

[The Earth Spirit Tribe's voting begins.]

“Let’s go.”

[Vote counting complete.]

“In the name of the Demonic Heaven. With the steps and words of the Blood Fire.”

[Option 2 votes: 00.00%]

“Let’s show them who we are.”

Uburka remained silent.

But it was not an ominous silence; it was a silence to embrace my words. Uburka’s fangs were always sharp, so it didn’t take him long to chew and digest my words.

“Shall we kill those who deserve death, daddy?”

“We shall rightfully save those who need to live.”

“How will we recognize who should live, how they should live?”

“By my death.”

I produced a dagger from my bosom.

Then I tapped the tape-wrapped handle of the dagger.

“By their life.”

"....."

So it is, then.

Uburka nodded, muttering to himself.

He then firmly grasped my hand that tapped the dagger.

Without words.

“It’s okay.”

I stroked Uburka’s red arm.

[Option 1 votes: 100.00%]

“We are stronger and more capable than any tower.”

[Stage Clear.]

“And thus capable of saving countless worlds, numerous people.”

[The 45th floor has been cleared!]

I looked down.

To my children who would be known as Asuras from now on, who will stand in the heavens one day, the Heavenly Demons who were once at the lowest.

I reached out to those children.

“Let’s ascend the tower together.”

# Chapter 271:

## Epilogue (1)

---

There's a story to tell.

The tribes, seeing their god for the first time in thousands of years (literally in front of their eyes), celebrated.

Was it a neat meeting?

Many tribes were happy to find that their parents were better than expected.

".....Ah."

It was when we were sitting together on a wide rock, watching the jungle festival. Ah, said the Black Dragon Witch, as if she had realized something.

"Why?"

"No... It's just that, hearing from [The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages], there are many hunters climbing the tower from other worlds, aren't there? It's hard to imagine."

"Well, yes...?"

I glanced back subtly. A ghost was floating and yawning in the air. Despite being a ghost, it burped, "Gurgle! Huhuhu." It was an amusing sight I thought would be fun to show others.

"Huh? Why are you looking back suddenly? Is there someone there?"

The Black Dragon Witch narrowed her eyebrows, following my gaze into the empty jungle. To Anastasia's eyes, it would just be the sight of the jungle with vines hanging down the palm trees.

She doesn't have spiritual insight. What a pity.

"No, just felt a presence. Probably a snail or squirrel."

"Hmm."

"Please continue."

"Well, so... As such, strong warriors from all sorts of worlds are flooding into the tower, right?"

"That's correct."

"Among them, there will surely be hunters much stronger than us. King of Death, you're right that we are strong but... we're not invincible. There may be forces more ruthless, stronger, and more numerous than us."

"Yes."

"So I was thinking..."

The Black Dragon Witch slightly lifted the corner of her lips. A hint of awkwardness, absurdity, or whimsy? Anyway, it was that kind of smile.

"Why don't we just not climb to the 50th floor and live?"

"....."

"Ah. Don't misunderstand. I'm not suggesting we do that. It's not like we are going to. Just, it seems like many hunters and residents of the tower might think that way."

Hmm.

I quietly sipped my tea.

"That's probable."

In the remote jungle, far from cities and towns, and gathered here for a war against the Ki Dragon, it was hard to find even proper tea leaves, let alone a cup.

But the Earth Spirit Tribe found unusually sturdy leaves. They selected non-toxic ones, overlapped and knotted them, creating a respectable makeshift leaf teacup from the jungle. The children of the Earth Spirit Tribe shyly laughed and gifted me the teacup.



-The jungle is cold in the morning! The body gets cold.

-Ugor, you need warmth inside to have a happy day!

That was my offering this morning.

As a god, there couldn't be a happier offering than this, and as a parent, there couldn't be a more endearing service than this.

I'm happy.

"There would be many people like that."

I took a sip from the world's most luxurious teacup.

Warmth slowly enveloped my throat and stomach.

The care of people isn't just seen in smiles and laughter, but also permeates deep into their insides.

"Right. We've already incorporated the continent ruled by the Aegim Empire into our tower. The magic books obtained there are just the most trivial resource. Millions of labor forces, countless monsters and hunting grounds, ores, gold, oil....."

"There are already many extremists who want to drive out the Aegim Empire."

The Black Dragon Witch lowered her voice.

"Like America did to the natives. They argue that if we seize all the lands they occupied and loot their resources, we, with our advanced civilization, can become the new conquerors of the world."

"Thanks, Anastasia. If you hadn't strictly limited the movement between stages in the Black Dragon Guild, such incidents would have already happened."

"I'll gladly accept your gratitude, but I can't suppress the voices of the extremists forever."

"....."

"Kim Gong-Ja. You are a hero."

The Black Dragon Witch's face became serious.

It was the expression of a friend giving a heartfelt advice to a close companion. Therefore, her words "You are a hero" felt not like praise, but the beginning of a warning.

"You've been treated as a hero so far because you really didn't get involved in governance. Black Dragon, Temple of All Gods, Merchants Union, Celestial Martial Guild, Vigilante Corps... top-tier guilds offered you vice-guild master positions. But you never once used the title to wield power. You didn't jump into politics. You understand what I mean?"

"If I start governing the tower, even the mask of a hero will be stripped away."

"More like the mask will be split in two. One half held by those who fervently follow you and the other trampled and shattered by those who oppose you. It'll split into two factions."

Indeed.

Perhaps because of her experience with civil wars in the outside world.

The Black Dragon Witch's words were laden with heavy conviction and strong intuition.

"If the two forces are evenly matched, a civil war will break out. Guilds following you against those who dislike you. They'll fight over who will dominate our tower... but not this time."

"This time it won't happen."

The reason is simple.

"The five guilds ruling the tower from above. Black Dragon, Temple of All Gods, Merchants Union, Vigilante Corps, Celestial Martial Guild, all strongly support you."

We are bound by an unprecedented trust relationship.

On the other hand, what about the opposing side?

Those who want to snatch and break my mask are simply too weak.

Overwhelmingly weak.

There can't be a war.

Therefore.

"I'm planning a [purge]."

"A purge means..."

"Yes. I'll purge all dissidents and extremists."

There was silence for a moment.

---

Somewhere, the sound of wood crumbling into charcoal in a bonfire was heard.

I wasn't listening to that sound. Instead, I remembered the story told by the Heretic Inquisitor in Raviel's world.

I recalled the repeatedly heard words, "You have died."

"Anastasia."

I looked into the Black Dragon Witch's eyes.

"That purge once broke all the guild masters' relationships."

Long ago.

Since the great purge that cost hundreds of thousands of lives, the relationship between the five great guilds deteriorated.

The Sword Saint descended from the Vigilante Corps Captain position. The Paladin stayed as a Vice-Captain instead of becoming the leader. The Black Dragon Witch hid in the darkness, and the Viper, the Heretic Inquisitor...

The view of a rainy street in another world seen through half-closed eyes. The world shown by the Tower Master. Thinking of that while I brought up that topic, the Black Dragon Witch didn't remain silent.

She immediately responded.

"Yes, that happened. But Kim Gong-Ja, you appeared, and thanks to you, we became good friends again. I'm truly grateful for that."

The Black Dragon Witch took a breath before continuing.

"But back then, it wasn't like the five great guilds tightly held the political power like now. That's why it was hard to weed out and eliminate the rotten apples. That's why there were so many unnecessary noises. But now..."

"Now?"

"Now it's different. The relationship among the five great guilds is better than ever, and I've been accumulating information about influential hunters in the tower for a long time. Roughly what kind of thoughts they have, what they've been doing. We just need to single out the extremists and deal with them. Swiftly. And secretly."

The Black Dragon Witch said firmly.

"No one will even know that they died."

At those words, I thought of a certain alley.

I remembered a nameless hunter who died there.

Then I thought of a certain hunting ground.

There, I remembered a nameless hunter who died and is now in my shadow.

"....."

I crossed my arms.

Thought about it, then spoke.

"What about after that?"



"....."

"People keep coming in. As you said, the number of [extremists] will increase over time. What will you do with them?"

The Black Dragon Witch bit her lip slightly.

Then she said.

"I'll deal with them too."

"....."

"Skin peels and changes. Digested food turns into waste. Accumulated nutrients turn into fat. It's just dealing with the inevitable waste products... the necessary tasks to maintain an ideal self. You keep repeating that. Without it, you can't maintain an ideal organization---"

"Anastasia."

I reached out and laid my hand on Anastasia's hand. Despite the stifling heat of the jungle, my friend's hand was always as cold as if holding ice.

“I've talked about this before.”

In the past.

When I was conquering [The Immortal Missionary of Happiness]'s world.

“Bring them to me.”

I declared to the Black Dragon Witch, the Heretic Inquisitor, the Countess, the Paladin, the Viper, that I would become their king and lead them. I proclaimed that I would guide them forward. I never intended to retreat from my declaration.

And the same holds true at this very moment.

“What kind of person are they? Do they really deserve to die? Anastasia, you can advise and warn me about them, but in the end, it's me who will decide. I will judge them by looking

into their eyes and observing their life.”

"....."

“I will make the decision. So, bring them to me first.”

“Ah.”

Anastasia sighed.

It wasn't a sigh of fatigue but one tinged with sorrow.

“So, what? Planning to persuade them?”

“Choosing to kill will be my last option.”

“How difficult that is to...”

“Once you get a taste for killing, persuasion feels bothersome. But, Anastasia. That’s the correct sentiment. You

should find killing the most difficult.”

Anastasia closed her mouth.

After a moment of silence, she spoke slowly.

“As you are, nominally, the vice-guild master of the Black Dragon, it would be difficult to criticize you for wandering around our guild. I won't guide you, so find the extremists yourself and try to persuade them.”

“Okay.”

I smiled.

“Thank you, Anastasia. For listening to me...”

“I'm truly grateful, Black Dragon Witch.”

Thud.

There was the sound of footsteps behind us.

Without any hint, someone approached suddenly, the footsteps resounding within 10 meters.

"-----!"

It took 0.5 seconds for me to grab and draw my sword.

"Black Dragon Witch! I agree with you!"

"[Teleport]!"

It took Anastasia 1.5 seconds to grasp my sleeve, seek agreement, and activate the skill.

"Gong-Ja, step back."

"Hey. It's really impolite to approach our family head without making a sound. What kind of unexpected guest is this, intruding like this?"

Ester, along with the Four Demon Lords, jumped down from the top of the palm trees, rushed out of the dark bushes, and emerged from the shadowy corners of the rocks, taking 2 seconds.

“Whew.”

"Hmm."

And Anastasia and I were teleported far to the rear. By this time, my holy sword was already drawn. Hundreds of church members began to perfectly encircle the area.

3 seconds.

In just 3 seconds, we perfectly responded to the intrusion of an unidentified intruder.

"Huh....."

The intruder stroked his beard. His face was masked, and his voice was distorted by aura, making it difficult to identify his expression and voice. His body was wrapped in a cloak, concealing his identity.

A true uninvited guest.

Yet, it was clear that the guest was quite surprised.

“I just wanted to test how much you’ve improved as a joke. But this... It would only be embarrassing for me if the joke failed, but I saw something remarkable. The protection here is nearly perfect.”

Yet, even with a distorted voice, there was a rhythm hard to conceal.

I roughly estimated the intruder's physique, posture, and aura intensity.

And with a stunned voice, I called out the intruder's name.

“Uh. Could it be... Sword Saint?”

“It's been a while.”

The intruder removed his mask.

A familiar face appeared.

Aged gracefully, the wrinkles only added charm to the smile of the old man.

“When I met the Heretic Inquisitor on my way here, we had a brief conversation. He pledged allegiance to you, and the Black Dragon Witch has become your friend, right? That’s understandable, after all, I’ve lived long enough to know that extraordinary things happen from time to time. But,”

The Sword Saint chuckled lightly.

A rare sight to see him smile, and when he did, it was as pure as a child’s, leaving me no choice but to gaze at it in a daze.

“I heard that even the Vice-Captain of the Vigilante Corps has become your friend! Haha.”

"....."

“What a way to confirm things, huh? Sneaking around incognito?”



“Of course.”

The Sword Saint now removed the cloak he was wearing.

“It was an important event that needed to be confirmed before my retirement.”

Thud.

As the straw cloak fell, the Sword Saint's true attire was revealed.

A suit that seemed ready for a corporate meeting. The black suit perfectly fit his physique, showing off his muscular build.

“Retirement? What are you talking about?”

As I was admiring the Sword Saint's appearance, the Black Dragon Witch inquired about the worrying words with a sharp look.

“Finally fantasizing about becoming a secluded old man?”

Congratulations. Even after retiring from the Vigilante Corps, you've been just like a secluded old man, but now you're truly realizing your position."

"Hmm."

"Really? When you were chasing the Demon King with Gong-Ja, I thought your heart might have changed a bit, but then it was the same laziness afterward..."

"I've been trying my best."

"That attitude is annoying."

The Black Dragon Witch frowned.

"You did the same this time as well. The Pure Humans Race you chose had almost no impact on history. It should have been the most active race, but you must have ordered them to hermitage and seclusion, right?"

The old man smiled faintly.

It was also a rare occurrence.

“I won’t deny it.”

“Why? Thinking of retiring?”

“No matter my position in the outside world, now I’m just a hunter here. My profession is a swordsman. If a swordsman retires from the sword, it’s only at the moment of death when the sword slips from his grasp.”

"....."

“I’ve been watching you. Not surveillance, no, not that. Ah, there’s a more suitable term.”

The tension around seemed to grow thicker.

Mostly due to the Black Dragon Witch glaring at the Sword Saint.

The Sword Saint nodded as if understanding her pressure.

But that was it. The Sword Saint wiped the smile from his lips and spoke softly.

“I was testing you all.”

Test.

The Black Dragon Witch let out a scoff.

“Still speaking from a high and mighty position. Who are you to test someone—”

“If.”

The Sword Saint said.

“If the King of Death had accepted your [purge], I would have done everything to kill the King of Death.”

"....."

“Right here, right now.”

At that moment, the encirclement was complete.

Ester drew her red sword and confronted the Sword Saint, with the Four Demon Lords forming a line behind her. Sssring! Sssring! The sound of swords being drawn echoed from all directions. A thousand church members, hidden in the shadows of the jungle, concealed by palm trees, ready to pounce at any moment.

No one uttered a word. Thousands of eyes watched the Sword Saint's hands, feet, waist, and eyes. The Sword Saint was segmented by their gazes.

The moment the Sword Saint ignited aura or harbored killing intent, a thousand swords would mutilate him along those dividing lines.

"....."

But the Sword Saint only kept his eyes on me.

I slowly sheathed my sword back into its scabbard. The Black

Dragon Witch nudged my shoulder, but it didn't matter.

“Sir.”

I too looked into the Sword Saint's eyes.

“I know you would never harm me.”

"....."

The old swordsman's eyes were clear.

# Chapter 272:

## Epilogue (2)

---

“Are you so certain? That I won’t kill you?”

“Yes.”

I nodded my head.

“You could have ambushed us earlier by silencing your footsteps. The Black Dragon Witch’s hand would have flown off, and I might have lost half my body too. You had the perfect timing... but you deliberately made a sound to reveal your presence, didn’t you?”

“Hmm.”

“It’s just a threat. A mere warning. [If something like a purge happens, I will not stand idly by]. That’s the clear message you sent to me, no, to the Black Dragon Witch.”

"....."

"There's already a relationship of iron-clad trust between you and me."

Amidst the still palpable tension around us,

I smiled and approached the Sword Saint.

"Hey! Kim Gong-Ja! Don't go! Stick with me, you fool!"

Naturally, the Black Dragon Witch was shocked.

"Can't you understand? Stick with me so you can use teleportation or whatever! Ah, Kim Gong-Ja! Really! That lunatic!"

From behind me, the Black Dragon Witch was fuming at me like I was insane.

The interesting part was that the sound of her anger was getting closer to my back. Meaning, while she was angrily



telling me not to go, she was actually diligently following me.

Towards a swordsman who had never lost the top rank for over a decade.

“.....Ahem.”

It was then that the Sword Saint observed my form.

“Haha.”

Laughter emerged from the old man's wrinkled lips.

“Uahaha! Haha! Hmm, hmm..... Hahaha!”

Caught off guard by the sudden burst of laughter, both the Black Dragon Witch and I stopped in our tracks. We turned our heads, exchanging glances, trying to comprehend what was happening. But the Black Dragon Witch just shrugged her shoulders.

“Uahahahahaha!”

The old man's laughter grew louder. As if he had seen something he thought he'd never see in his lifetime, like witnessing a truly incredible spectacle, the Sword Saint laughed heartily, holding his belly in a manner unbecoming of his dignified persona. With every laugh, his neatly groomed white beard trembled.

“.....Has he gone senile?”

The Black Dragon Witch approached me with a disgusted look.

I cleared my throat.

“Should I contact the Apothecary to make some dementia medicine?”

“Ah. Come to think of it, the Apothecary is also one of your close people.... How do you always manage to snatch up such promising talents? Makes me think we need to establish a system of fines for hoarding talents.”

“What's that weird system....”

As evident from this idle chat between the Black Dragon Witch and me, the Sword Saint's laughter lasted quite a long time.

Finally, the Sword Saint stopped laughing.

"What was so amusing?"

"How could I not laugh, young man. The owner of the Black Dragon and the so-called Black Witch, known for being cold-hearted and unhesitating in killing those who stand in her way, is so worried about your well-being."

Ah.

The title he used to address me changed from King of Death to young man.

I prefer being called young man to King of Death. It feels much more comfortable.

Like being treated like a grandchild by a grandfather? There was something pleasant about the Sword Saint's way of saying [young man].

“You, on the other hand... I was worried that you might not change.”

The Sword Saint was saying.

“You now belong to the highest floor of this tower, in name and in reality. It’s even natural to see you hanging out with the leaders of the 5 great guilds.”

"....."

“Young man. I was worried that you might unknowingly receive [bad influence] from those kids while mingling with the guild leaders.”

“What?”

The Black Dragon Witch bristled.

“Bad influence? What do you think of us to say something like that?”

“Did it upset you?”

“Should I be happy about it? What makes you so great!”

The Black Dragon Witch bared her teeth, looking as if she wanted to tear the Sword Saint's neck apart.

“Pretending to be noble and superior after carrying out a mass purge together, and then abandoning your role as the leader of the Vigilante Corps to spend your remaining days in a quiet hermitage, only to go around killing hunters suspected of being murderers! Crazy old coot!”

"....."

“Shouldn't people have some shame? Huh? What we do is righteous purging, but what you do is justice as a dark hero? Why don't you just get a bat mask then? Even a hero in a bat mask doesn't kill people!”

The extent of the Black Dragon Witch's long-held resentment towards the Sword Saint was palpable.

Any ordinary person would have been overwhelmed, even

turned pale, by such a storm of criticism, but the Sword Saint did not even blink. He just listened silently, and then casually threw out a single remark.

“The Black Dragon Witch is a human at heart.”

Anastasia flinched.

“.....What?”

“In the tower, most residents know the Black Dragon Witch as a ruthless ruler. A woman who secretly poisons her enemies, scattering spies everywhere, so that every happening in the tower reaches her. A cold-blooded empress who decisively cuts down anyone who blocks her path, no matter who it is.”

"....."

The Black Dragon Witch clenched her fists. Her lips trembled, unsure if the old man was mocking her or had some other malicious intent, making her unable to respond.

“But, look at this woman here.”

The Sword Saint released his grip from the sword hilt.

And pointed at the Black Dragon Witch with his empty hand.

“She’s just an infinitely human person.”

"....."

“She rejoices at reducing meaningless sacrifices. She sheds tears for unavoidable sacrifices. She gets angry at corruption and incompetence, praises effort and struggle, and respects heroes who achieve success.”

Until this moment, the Sword Saint had been laughing loudly.

But for this instant, his eyes were not smiling.

His moon-like eyes glanced at the Black Dragon Witch and me.

“Despite being a powerful figure who assassinated and

purged many people.”

"....."

“Young man. The Black Dragon Witch is human at heart. That’s why I couldn’t help but worry about you.”

The old man’s tone softened when speaking to me.

But the words he offered me were firm, and his white eyebrows firmly set.

“Normally, people say that everyone becomes human once you peel off a layer. But this old man thinks the opposite.”

"....."

“Anyone can seem human once they put on a mask.”

I remained silent.



Across the wide rock where we stood, the sounds of the festival were still audible. Dugurur, Dug! Dur! The Earth Spirit Tribe, having brought drums from who knows where, energetically played them. The Fairy Tribe offered free alcohol, and all races were intoxicated.

“That’s a valid point.”

The Black Dragon Witch, the Heretic Inquisitor, the Countess, and Viper.

Their hands must have been stained with countless blood.

Even the old man in front of me, before he met me and changed.

"....."

And Raviel too.

If, for some reason, I were to face a complete death. If I were to disappear. If I were to be lost forever, never to be reclaimed.

Just as she completes me, I too complete her.

If one of us were to vanish, what would remain is nothing but shattered remains.

A heart completely frozen over.

It doesn't take much for a person to break.

"But it's okay."

I looked straight into the Sword Saint's aged eyes.

"As long as I am alive, it's fine."

"....."

"Anastasia always tries to choose the easy path, resigning to inevitability. But if I'm by her side, she'll think twice. If I ask her to, she'll ponder it thrice. And if I outright say I hate it, she might sigh, but she'll relent her own view. [Ah, choosing the hard path again], she'll think."

"....."

"The same goes for the other members."

I looked down at the festival.

Dozens of tentacles from the Mountain Calamity Tribe formed a net to carry the Heretic Inquisitor on a stretcher. "Ahaha! Haha! Amazing! This is an incredible ride!" I could hear the Heretic Inquisitor's laughter from here.

The Countess having tea time with the Fairy Tribe, the Paladin swimming with the Gill Fish Tribe, were also visible.

"The Heretic Inquisitor often blurts out things like [Mmm! Kill them and get rid of future problems!]. A child who knows only the easiest, simplest, and most definitive method. But if I ask him to think again... he will. That child definitely will."

"....."

"You said, sir, that anyone can appear human when they put on a layer of a mask. Elder, if that's the case, I'm willing to become the mask for our members."

Thud.

I walked up right in front of the Sword Saint.

A distance where if someone drew a sword, one of us would surely lose our life.

There, I looked straight up at the Sword Saint.

“You’re not an exception either, elder.”

"....."

“After meeting me, you stopped relying on skills to kill murderers. You decided to trust your own eyes.”

"....."

“What makes a person human isn't a mask, pretense, or acting superior, elder. What keeps a person human is always someone else being there for them.”

I raised my hand and grabbed something in my pocket.

The white lily-scented handkerchief Raviel had given me.

Unseen by anyone, I tightly held the small white handkerchief.

“I am that person for Anastasia, and she is that person for me.”

"....."

“And I hope to be that person for you as well, elder.”

Silence ensued.

The distant cheers and laughter echoed in our ears. Especially the Heretic Inquisitor's high-pitched laughter. Ahaha, ahaha. Ahaha....

Other than that, it was all quiet.

No sound came from the surrounding jungle.

“.....Indeed.”

The old man opened his lips.

“You have already become one of those people to me.”

Ah.

My heart rejoiced.

I smiled faintly.

“I am glad to hear that.”

“You have painfully taught me that [I myself can be wrong]. Now, you have shown me that [even someone like the Black Dragon Witch can change]. Every time I meet you, I change a bit. You're more than a good friend; you're a good teacher.”

No.

That's too generous.

This elder always tends to exaggerate. His threats, warnings, emotions, compliments, everything is over the top.

He might look neat in a suit, but in reality, he's incredibly passionate.

“But young man, there's a fatal flaw in your words.”

“Yes?”

I tilted my head in confusion.

“A flaw?”

“Hmm. A flaw, or perhaps a weakness, would be a better term.”

The Sword Saint nodded.

“It's that if you die, everyone around you will revert to being worse than before, worse than beasts.”

It was the same thing the Princess had once told me.

“The Black Dragon Witch who made a pact with you. The Heretic Inquisitor. Those hundreds of warriors watching us right now, ready to jump in at any moment... all of them, if not as much as your Matriarch, would lose their minds. They'd become beasts tearing the world apart.”

“So.”

Thump.

The Sword Saint lightly tapped my chest.

The location of my heart.

“If we want to remain human, young man, above all else,



you must value your own life the most."

"No matter what happens. No matter what sacrifices are made, you must protect your own life. That is the duty of someone who decided to lead the Heretic Inquisitor on a human path, the responsibility of someone who befriended the Black Dragon Witch, and the obligation of a young man who stopped me from slaughtering anyone in the past few months."

".....That is true."

I nodded slowly.

A fact I already knew, but I reaffirmed it once more.

"I will never leave."

"Never?"

".....I will do my best."

“Hmm. Yes. That’s the most truthful promise you can make.”

Only then did the Sword Saint smile playfully.

“Sorry, but I trust people less than the Black Dragon Witch. Since I was young, I found humans somewhat unreliable, sometimes even despicable. I used to hear such remarks from McCallister, wondering why I had such little faith in humanity.”

"....."

“The promise you just made... I have a feeling it won’t be kept. No. Rather, I’m certain it will be broken. I hate to gild my own face, but predicting ominous feelings is one of my specialties.”

Huh?

"King of Death"

“Yes?”

Rustle.

The sound of grass being lightly crushed was heard.

The Sword Saint had knelt on one knee in front of me.

“I want to become your bodyguard.”

"....."

What?

“I want to be your bodyguard, to protect your life, and to eternally guard the humanity of those around you.”

The old gentleman gave a cheeky wink with his left eye.

A remarkably fitting gesture despite his advanced age. A wink that suggested he must have been quite the heartbreaker in his youth.

“Although I’m well past the average retirement age for a bodyguard, would you hire this pitiful old man?”

No, elder.

You're a former conglomerate president and currently the top-ranking swordsman.

Why would someone like you want to be my bodyguard!?

# Chapter 273:

## Epilogue (3)

---

“You, becoming my bodyguard? .....You, Elder?”

"Hmm."

The Sword Saint nodded vehemently.

“Don’t think for a second that because of my age I’m incapable of being a bodyguard.”

“No, it’s not about age. That’s absurd.....”

Well, just the act of nodding reveals the beautifully contoured trapezius muscles peeking out from under his shirt collar, making me doubt if physical age really applies to him.

“Don’t be so surprised. Didn’t you say it yourself? That as

long as you are alive, the Black Dragon Witch and others won't revert back to their old, disastrous selves."

"Disastrous? Who might that be, this disastrous one? Ah, perhaps you're referring to a certain old man who goes around slashing and killing murderers every ten days? Kim Gong-Ja. Gathering information on people is a specialty of the leader of the Black Dragons. Oh my. Interestingly, the list and details of those the old man has killed are securely stored in a vault only I can access. How about we take a look together later?"

"Thankfully, my list is still too short to be included in that vault, Black Dragon Witch. Your list is so long, you'd probably need to rent out an entire building to store it."

"It's recorded on USBs, not paper! What, you think I'm some old geezer?"

Your relationships are really terrible....

"Oh ho!"

Perhaps the sound of their argument reached far. The Heretic Inquisitor, who had somehow approached without notice, was now exclaiming behind me. Well, he probably used [Holy Technique - Teleportation] to transfer here instantly.

“The unshakable top-ranked Sword Saint and the rapidly rising second-ranked King of Death. It appears they maintain a peaceful relationship, but the tower's residents are interested to see how it will end. A bodyguard! Now that's news.”

The Heretic Inquisitor nodded, grinning from ear to ear.

As always, he had an angelic face, but just moments ago, he was being tossed around by the Mountain Calamity Tribe kids. Tossed around by tentacles. Following the laws of physics, the slime from the tribe had transferred to him, and now as he nodded, slime dripped from his face.

Drip, drip, drip, drip.

“Uh, Bambolina, sorry but could you step back a bit.....”

“Ahaha! If the Sword Saint becomes the King of Death's bodyguard, everyone will know! It'll reveal who has the upper hand between the two!”

Thump!

The Heretic Inquisitor spread her arms wide and laughed

heartily. The fluid from the children, that is, the aloe-like slime from the Mountain Calamity Tribe, shot out like bullets. Naturally, I was the target, standing right in front of him.

"....."

This attack feels like it might be good for the skin.

"It's about time for the King of Death's power to fully emerge. Let's take [The Number 1 Ranker becoming a bodyguard] as a symbolic event and make it public!"

"What? Make what public?"

I slowly evaporated the slime off my body with my aura and asked.

"Of course, the fact that the King of Death has unprecedented power in this tower!"

"....."



“The King of Death is already a hero of the tower, but the image of a warrior is strong. Thanks to the Black Dragon Witch's image-making! But now it's time to also adopt the image of a ruler or leader. Haha. Perhaps, the King of the Tower.”

“No, I don't see why I need to...”

“Because it's the truth, master.”

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled brightly.

"....."

I looked around with a strange sensation.

At some point, both the Black Dragon Witch and the Sword Saint had stopped arguing and were looking this way.

Silently.

Looking around again, not only Ester and the retainers of

our family but also the Countess having tea with the fairies and the Paladin swimming with the mermaids were all gazing in our direction.

"....."

Uh.

What's this atmosphere?

"Gong-Ja, that rogue old man mentioned it to you earlier."

In the midst of the unfamiliar silence around me, Anastasia opened her lips.

"That he was testing you."

"....."

"I hate to make you feel bad, but it wasn't just the old man testing you. Me. And all of us. We have been continuously observing you."

I recalled hearing something similar before.

That they were watching to see if I was worthy of being their [comrade].

But I thought that test had already been passed. Why...

“To see if you truly deserve to be our [leader].”

"....."

“Having you as a friend, becoming comrades with you, I’m happy. It’s fortunate. But we cannot merely accept misfortune as an accident or fortune as mere joy.”

“We are the ones on the frontline, after all.”

Splash.

The sound of wet footsteps resounded.

“The Black Dragon. Temple of All Gods. Sang-Ryun. Celestial Martial Clan. Vigilante Corps.”

It was the Paladin.

He had climbed up onto the broad rock. He was soaking wet from swimming with the Gill Fish Race. The Paladin squeezed the water out of his hair once, and droplets of water fell onto the rock where we were gathered.

“The mid-tier guilds under us, including the Alchemy Castle, number 13 on the rankings. Officially unannounced, but virtually direct subordinates, there are 4 guilds. Hundreds of guilds work for us as subcontractors, and if you count their subcontractors, it spans the entire city of Babylon.”

"....."

“It’s easy to become our business partner. To become our comrade, that’s hard. To become our friend, even harder. And you’ve managed that difficult task.”

“So.”

The Black Dragon Witch continued.

Accordingly, my gaze shifted to her.

“Maybe we thought that you could handle [something a bit more difficult].”

“We had hopes.”

The Paladin took over.

“We maintain the 5 great guilds system, not for any other reason but to keep checks and balances. Almost everyone living in the tower belongs to a guild, that is, they are [members].”

“The idea was for the 5 equally powerful and specialized guilds to cooperate while competing. Furthermore, to protect the personal and property rights and safety of the members.”

“Which guild to join, leave, or rejoin, it all depends on the residents’ freedom. Guilds that can’t make money will naturally decline, and those that don’t share the wealth will naturally disappear.”

“That’s the system we created for the tower.”

“In other words.”

“We didn’t trust ourselves alone.”

The Paladin spoke softly.

“To not become corrupt.”

"....."

“If I had the power to subjugate the Black Dragon guild, I would have gladly thrown them in jail. Declaring all their legally and illegally operated shops, stores, and informants as tumors of the tower and punishing them. During that execution, could I have remained true to myself? I wasn’t sure.”

“I have scenarios ready to assassinate all hunters from rank 1 to rank 10.”

The Black Dragon Witch said.

“Haven’t used them since the mass purge though.”

"....."

“If the Black Dragon were the only guild instead of one of the 5, would I really have carried it out? Even if I think of myself as a person with strong self-control, that self-control comes from the presence of others.”

Meow.

A cat's cry came.

With the body and eyes of a cat, but not the eyes of a beast, the tricolor cat spoke.

“As you know, we never really trusted each other. Yet, the reason we didn’t fall into civil war or reached rock bottom is because we didn’t trust ourselves much either.”

“That’s right.”

The Sword Saint spoke.

"After all, we also appear human just because we put on a layer of a mask."

"....."

“King of Death. We were testing to see how you would be.”

Testing.

What test are they talking about?

When did it start?

“There have been quite a few times when we gathered without you and discussed you.”



“When exactly.....”

“After clearing the Great Library of All Knowledge and before entering the 30th floor. We conducted various background checks on you, your spending habits, the people you meet, how you behave when you meet strangers. Almost everything was investigated and shared.”

Gathering information is my forte.

That’s what the Black Dragon Witch said calmly.

“That’s... a violation of privacy, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Sorry. Really sorry for the intrusion. Ah, how awful of me to dig into a comrade’s past. Vice-Captain of the Vigilante Corps? Could you arrest me for the crime of snooping around people’s backgrounds?”

“Hmm. I declare you not guilty.”

“See? Kim Gong-Ja. Not guilty. Let’s just say I’m sorry and move on.”

"....."

Gosh, my comrades and friends here are indeed wielding unparalleled power in the tower....

"Don't worry. We only confirmed that your private life is disgustingly clean."

"I feel like you just put together two contradictory words..."

"We also confirmed that you write a diary every night to show the Duchess of Ivansia. Be thankful that I didn't get my hands on the contents of your diary. I really debated whether to order my subordinates to find out what's in it or not..."

"Hello? Anastasia? Have you lost your mind?"

"Oh, but the first sentence is always the same, so I got to know it. Dear..."

"Let's break off our friendship!! Bring back the friendship contract! Right now!"

“.....Anyway, the conclusion is that you are a person with integrity.”

The Paladin smirked.

“But just being consistent isn't enough. If we are to consider you as our leader, there are qualities a leader needs. Convincing us to be human is just a secondary issue.”

“It's not about political power either.”

The tricolor cat clung comfortably to the Paladin's calf.

Then, the Paladin picked up the cat, and in his arms, the Countess in her cat form said,

“Politics should be left to the experts. Law enforcement to the Paladin, internal affairs to the Black Dragon Witch, economy to yours trule, and when you need a shoulder to lean on, you can rely on the Viper. Diplomacy with the outside world can be handled by involving the Sword Saint. He's terribly stubborn, but he might listen if it's a request from you, King of Death.”

"....."

“So, the last thing we need to test is only one thing.”

The cat opened its eyes narrowly. It was the Countess's playful smile.

“If you were to become a leader, we were interested to see how you would rule the people.”

A real example.

“When I first received the quest from [The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages], I thought, Aha.”

From the 31st to around the 40th floor.

“Could this be useful?”

Stages where one becomes a god and leads a race.

"It wasn't that I immediately drafted the test. The Temple of All God's Master. That child wreaked havoc for over 200 years purely out of his own will."

"Ahaha."

The Heretic Inquisitor laughed innocently.

"Right! This is the first time I'm hearing this!"

"Well, not just you, the Celestial Martial Guild Master didn't participate in my plan either."

The Countess said.

"But eventually, the spontaneous actions of the Temple Master gave me a lot of inspiration. To be able to watch from up close as you rallied us all together in a time of dire crisis, where every race was enslaved, and led a rebellion."

The cat gently stroked the Paladin's cheek with its paw.

"In short, you had the makings of a revolutionary. A revolutionary! Not bad, I don't dislike it. But the leader we need isn't a revolutionary but a ruler of the tower. Countless refugees who fled from various countries, these tower residents who are busy hating, despising, belittling, and mocking each other, need a leader who can gently stabilize them. I needed a bit more information. For example..."

The Countess spoke.

"How would you treat [different races] under your rule?"

"...Different races?"

I briefly thought of the Earth Spirit Tribe, but changed my mind seeing the Countess's eye smile.

"Don't tell me, the Fairy Tribe.....?"

"Correct. King of Death. I like how quick-witted you are."

"....."

I opened my eyes wide.

The Countess looked at me and growled softly like a cat.

“The Heretic Inquisitor was the first to drop out. Then it was me. When [The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages] announced my elimination, I remember your dumbfounded face.”

"....."

That time.

『Wait a minute! That's absurd! Why am I being eliminated!?』

『Erm, the Fairy Tribe gave up their dominance.』

Certainly.

In the video shown by the Princess, the elder fairies whispered,

『Let's surrender. We can't win in a fight, and there's nothing to gain by winning. No point in investing money or gaining anything. It's a losing deal no matter what we do.』

『Let's offer our country to the Earth Spirit Tribe and become people under their rule. In return, we ask for protection.』

『Yes. Let's surrender.』

『We're just using them, that's all.』

『Thank you. Great Cat.』

That's how it was.

I thought it was just a trivial incident that the Countess played off as a joke.

"....."

I spoke up.



“.....Did you deliberately get eliminated?”

“More accurately, I induced my own elimination.”

“The Fairy Tribe kids surrendered to the Earth Spirit Tribe on their own.”

“Right, but who nurtured those kids? Who was revered as a god by them?”

"....."

“With just a little prophecy, suggestion, and command in their dreams, the kids easily followed. King of Death. It wasn’t much different from how you conquered the stages.”

Thinking about it.

The Fairy Tribe was the financial backer behind the multi-racial alliance.

Before I met Uburka, I had a discussion with the Countess.

She advised me to [negotiate in a way beneficial to all races], and following her advice, I entered Uburka's dream.

From beginning to end?

If the Countess's grand plan was for the Fairy Tribe to surrender bloodlessly to the Earth Spirit Tribe without any battle or war.

“Why would you do such a thing.....”

“Didn’t I say it? To test you.”

The Countess said.

“Discrimination based on nationality alone is easy in governance. Let alone another race under your rule. Ah, they look different, have different habits, and even worship different gods. Wouldn’t the Earth Spirit Tribe discriminate against the Fairy Tribe?”

"....."

“I was curious. How you would handle the Earth Spirit Tribe is your business. But beyond that, I wondered if you could also manage other races that fled their homelands like us. That's the quality our leader needs.”

I fell silent.

I slightly raised my gaze to look at the Paladin's face.

Holding the tricolor cat, the Paladin's expression was calm.

“Patricia.”

The next person to be eliminated after the Countess.

A comrade who [voluntarily] abstained from the stage.

The Fairy Tribe held the capital, and the Gill Fish Race held logistics. Along with the Countess's race, she herself naturally became part of the Earth Spirit Tribe's hierarchy.

"Hmm."

The Paladin nodded.

“Yes, Kim Gong-Ja. I abstained on purpose.”

"....."

“To understand the person you are.”

I realized.

Why the Earth Spirit Tribe was able to conquer the continent with so little bloodshed.

# **Volume 12 – Chapters 274-298**

# Chapter 274: Swordsman (1)

---

The Paladin had said when she abstained on the 34th floor,

『If you have to choose just one person, make it me.』

『It's fine.』

『I'm saying this now, but I don't necessarily want the Gill Fish Tribe to have continental dominion. Just having enough to live and protect is sufficient.』

Was the Paladin lying to me, or was it all an act?

I don't think so.

Probably, after hearing about the [Kim Gong-Ja Test Plan] from the Countess, she agreed to participate. But not so much

out of suspicion about me; rather, she joined because she trusted me.

『I leave the rest to you, Gong-Ja.』

She just didn't tell the whole truth.

The Paladin.

Patricia was almost always that kind of person.

“I expected you wouldn't fail.”

The Paladin stroked the cat in her arms.

“The issue was how you would control the failure.”

“Control?”

“Discrimination against the Fairy Tribe by the Earth Spirit

Tribe is inevitable. Conflicts will surely arise. And even if resolved once, they won't disappear overnight. Gong-Ja, even if you mend the wounds of conflict, they will reopen over time. That's why....."

The Paladin smirked.

"I thought you'd be a bit frustrated."

"....."

"Who would have imagined you'd introduce a new art form to the Fairy Tribe? I didn't see that coming. Blood Fire Drama! Right, Countess? Neither you nor we thought of such a clever solution!"

The Paladin's strokes became a bit more vigorous. Receiving the petting divine art, the Countess cat meowed, Maah, Maah.

"Nya. Choosing the Fairy Tribe as the revivalists of Blood Fire Drama was an excellent move. Blood Fire Drama isn't just a stage art; it's beyond a normal performance. It's not martial arts, even though it uses aura. It's both art and martial arts. Martial arts and art. Truly, a martial artistry. ....But vice-captain, your touch is a bit, well, overwhelming....."



“People discriminate and despise everything! It's impossible to heal discrimination and contempt!”

Pet, pet.

The Paladin, seemingly oblivious to the Countess's complaint, started getting excited.

“But there are two things where people willingly, voluntarily abandon their contempt. Strength and beauty. Physical strength prevents others from physically provoking them, and aesthetic beauty makes people open their hearts voluntarily!”

“V-Vice-Captain...? Maybe stop petting for now.....”

“Blood Fire Drama encompasses both! Brilliant. Who among the Earth Spirit Tribe would look down on fairies who elegantly dance and scatter strong aura? Aah. The perception of the Fairy Tribe must have changed. No, it might have been a turning point for the Earth Spirit Tribe to soften their view of [different races] completely! Completely!”

“Miyaaaah...!”

Hmm.

I understand the Paladin is excitedly praising me, but it's a bit awkward focusing on her words while watching the cat, melting like ice cream in real time.

Wait a minute. Could it be the Countess, walking around transformed into a cat and mandating cat ears for the Sang-Ryun guild members, is not her own taste but the Paladin's?

That's a dangerous thought. Surely not. Even if it's true, I'll faithfully respect the privacy of my friend....

“.....You're not listening and again daydreaming about something strange, aren't you.”

The Black Dragon Witch seems to be reaching max level in reading my expressions.

“Well, sure. I'm great, but Blood Fire Drama was originally a culture the Earth Spirit Tribe kids had. I just helped their talent to fully bloom.”

“Did you hear that! Countess!”

The Paladin became even more fervently excited.

“I have the [Lie Detection] skill on now! That statement is utterly true without a hint of falsehood. Even when he said [I’m great], the [Lie Detection] didn’t go off. Isn’t that amazing! Countess, when you speak, the detector buzzes annoyingly 8 seconds out of 10, but this is a different level!”

“Miyaa, Miyaaaah...!”

“That's how it is. Countess, you think the same way. Great! No more need for tests. Kim Gong-Ja, you not only passed the Countess’s test, but you also solved the difficult problem in the most effective way. If you are our leader, I will gladly follow you.”

Leader.

“I, of course, agree!”

The Heretic Inquisitor chimed in.

“Some of you may not know this. Right after clearing the 32nd floor, I already swore loyalty to the King of Death! I was a

bit faster than the rest of you!”

".....Loyalty and such are irrelevant, but yeah. Talking to him seems pointless.”

The Black Dragon Witch sighed.

“I agree too.”

“.....Anastasia.”

“I know you don’t need the title of leader.”

Her eyes, holding the colors of the night sky, looked at me.

“But we need you. It’s not me, the Paladin, the Heretic Inquisitor, or the Countess, but all of us, the guild masters who act independently. To call us ‘us’... Kim Gong-Ja, we need you.”

"....."

“And you also need us.”

The Black Dragon Witch nodded. Was she unconsciously showing that she had convinced herself? Or did she connect this conversation to some other thought?

The answer came straight from the Black Dragon Witch's mouth.

“We've been together for quite a while, haven't we?”

“.....Yes.”

“I've never heard a single joke about Ukraine from you.”

I tilted my head, not understanding at all.

"What?"

"Ukraine. My homeland.”

"No, I'm aware of that... A joke? What do you mean?"

"Aren't I pretty?"

"....."

Is Anastasia sick?

Worried, I examined my respectable friend, but she just looked at me expectantly, as if it was the most natural question in the world.

"I'm pretty, right?"

"B-Beautiful, certainly. It's not for nothing that you're on magazine covers with the Heretic Inquisitor."

"Then why haven't you ever joked? Because I'm from Ukraine, like 'You're beautiful because you're Ukrainian'?"

What's she talking about?

It's not just a cold but a flu-level issue?

Did she become infatuated with her own appearance while fighting with mirrors summoned by her skill? Was there a warning in the skill description like [\*However, you may become somewhat addicted to your own appearance]?

“.....Yes, that's right. That expression. ....It seems a bit like you're treating me as a fool, but anyway, it clearly shows your way of thinking.”

“Sorry. I'm still not getting what you're talking about.”

“I've heard that joke over 300 times. Also been asked if I'm a communist over 200 times, and about my thoughts on the Nazis about 50 times. I've received countless questions about which side I supported in the civil war.”

“I-Is that so?”

"Yes."

The Black Dragon Witch turned her head to look at the Paladin.

The Paladin, too, gave a slight nod and moved her chin.

“Gong-Ja never made a joke about Venezuela to me. I sometimes use beauty jokes or oil jokes to lighten the mood, but I can’t recall him ever doing so.”

Uh.

...I just didn’t know much?

“Nor have I!”

The Heretic Inquisitor laughed.

“I’ve never heard Kim Gong-Ja delve deeper into my past! Aha. It’s curious. Normally, one would ask out of curiosity!”

“C-Cat jokes too, I’ve never heard them from him.”

While enduring the Paladin’s assault, the Countess in her cat form managed to speak.



“Weren't you curious about our religion? Whether we are atheists or not? Didn't you want to ask?”

“Uh....”

“Have you even thought about it?”

I hadn't.

“Maah.”

The Countess laughed.

“You have no interest in that area. None at all.”

None.

“Your indifference is comfortable for us.”

"....."

“We’re not indifferent to humans themselves. Rather, we’ve been very passionate in learning about you. You know almost fervently about what we said, what we did, the mistakes we made. Frankly, you like us. But interestingly, your interests seem quite limited, aren’t they?”

"....."

“The Black Dragon Witch and others call you a virtuous person for that.”

Blam.

Finally, the Countess jumped out of the Paladin’s arms.

As she fell through the air, she was a cat, but by the time she touched the ground, she had transformed back into a human. Her beautiful emerald sari fluttered like a cape for a moment. Flap! The sari concealed the shadow of the Countess between the sky and the earth.

“I don't care whether you are a virtuous or evil person.”

The sari gently settled.

There, the Countess stood, holding a fan with a crafty smile.

“Your character might simply be the result of not wanting to be disliked by others. Deep down in your heart, there might be a strong desire to be recognized by others, so maybe your attitude towards us is all flattery and fawning.”

"....."

“But that doesn’t matter to me. What I care about is not where a person's character originates from but where it is going and where it has arrived. The destination you’ve chosen is quite comfortable for us.”

Isn't that an overestimation?

Of course, I want to appear good in front of these people.

But suddenly, I was worried. What if my wish was too successful, earning their favor more than I could handle? Can I always meet their expectations, my comrades' trust, my friends' belief? Was my success too excessive?

Will I disappoint them?

“Nisha.”

"....."

“That's my real name. You must have heard the Paladin casually call me by my real name.”

Indeed.

I knew the Countess's real name.

When fighting against [The Immortal Missionary of Happiness], the Paladin undoubtedly shouted the Countess's name. Although she never told me her name directly, it was registered in a corner of my memory.

“But you never mentioned my name. Not even a hint or suggestion that you knew it in front of me.”

“That’s because obviously.....”

“Obviously, you were just practicing common courtesy, you

must be thinking that now.”

The Countess flicked her fan.

“That’s precisely why we, I, want to endorse you as our leader.”

"....."

“Become a natural existence for us, Kim Gong-Ja.”

As the Countess smiled broadly.

[Quest Progress.]

[The Pure Humans Tribe voting begins.]

I looked at the Sword Saint.

The intimidating aura he had when he first approached us

had completely vanished. Now, the Sword Saint was just gently smiling at us.

“Before coming here, I told the kids to start the vote if they didn't hear any sounds of a fight after 30 minutes. They listened well to my words.”

“Elder.”

“I already agreed with the Countess's opinion. I observed if you could really cooperate to advance through the stages without giving any help, without participating as much as possible.”

[Vote Completed.]

[Option 2 votes: 23.81%]

[Option 1 votes: 76.19%]

“Not just me, but all the races who watched your actions directly through [The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages] have been watching you.”

"....."

"Responsibility is heavy. I too once took the lead in the tower's conquest, bearing responsibility. And to take even a piece of responsibility for the purge, I stepped back from the front lines, never to involve myself in the tower's politics again."

The Sword Saint chuckled.

"In other words, standing before you is a [failure]."

"....."

"What you are seeing now is [the worst case], the end of my merciless failure, and the fears and worries you have becoming reality. Now, tell me, King of Death."

The old man's eyes twinkled.

"Does this failed creation look truly unbearable?"

“.....No.”

I spoke.

“Elder... you are not... terrible. Not at all. At least, to me, Mr. Callenbury is not.”

“That’s good to hear.”

The old man nodded.

“Then your failures won’t be so terrible either.”

" ....."

“Although I may not be the most reliable source, don’t fear failure too much. Perhaps, like me, you will also get a second chance. Someone might appear, bringing you back from retirement to active duty.”

[Stage Cleared.]



[The 46th floor has been cleared.]

"....."

Heretic Inquisitor.

Real Name, Bambolina.

In charge of the Mountain Calamity Tribe.

Vote Percentage, 77.50%. Stage Cleared.

Countess.

Real Name, Nisha.

In charge of the Fairy Tribe.

Vote Percentage, 88.40%.

Stage Cleared.

Paladin.

Real Name, Patricia.

In charge of the Gill Fish Tribe.

Vote Percentage, 98.68%.

Stage Cleared.

Black Dragon Witch.

Real Name, Anastasia.

In charge of the Vampiric and Dream Demon tribes.

Vampiric Tribe Vote Percentage, 97.55%.

Dream Demon Tribe Vote Percentage, 100%.

Stage Cleared.

Sword Saint.

Real Name, Marcus Callenbury.

In charge of the Pure Humans Tribe.

Vote Percentage, 76.19%.

Stage Cleared.

King of Death.

Kim Gong-Ja.

In charge of the Earth Spirit Tribe.

100%.

Stage Cleared.

“---Hey, hey.”

Then.

“Nobody objected except me. Is this for real?”

Everyone's too naively good-natured. “Ah? Your relationships are like, ‘Hey, I like you,’ and ‘Hey, I like you too,’ but if it ends there, therapists would be out of work and wandering the streets. Eh? Emotions, you see, they don't resolve with words.”

Crushing the shadows of the jungle, the one-eyed swordsman walked forward.

“Hey.”

The swordsman started the conversation with a casual

greeting.

“I’ve been through a grand retreat just as you said. Now, I feel like the protagonist of a martial arts novel. You know, a martial arts protagonist should first converse with the sword before agreeing with words. That’s the way of the martial realm. My kids also said they would ignore the voting and everything unless we have a rematch.”

Among all those gathered here.

Excluding the Sword Saint, he was the first to reveal his real name to me.

“Draw your sword, Kim Gong-Ja.”

Viper.

Real Name, Liǎofàn.

In charge of the Ghost Tribe.

“Let's have a bout.”

Vote Percentage.

Undetermined.

[Quest Progress.]

[The Ghost Tribe voting begins.]

Voting initiated.

# Chapter 275: Swordsman (2)

---

You're not listening.

Is it immersion?

This guy has cojones. I like it.

Hey, my name is Liǎofàn.

Even if you don't hear it, it doesn't matter.

Back in the audience chamber, you saved my life. I always make sure to return favors.

Just keep running straight ahead.

I'll take care of the left side.

That's an enormous privilege, you know.

No one who stood to my right has ever died.

Go, rising star.

---

"Come on, King of Death."

"....."

I quietly observed Viper.

'What should I say to you?'

Viper had one eye, with a patch covering where the other should be.



Have you ever made eye contact with someone who has only one eye?

It's not common. Like most, I grew accustomed to interacting only with people with two eyes. My eyes, my gaze, my thoughts – they're all adapted to binocular vision.

But it's different with a one-eyed person.

When facing them, when I need to look at them, my field of vision narrows to half its usual breadth. My eyes, usually adjusted to a wider perspective, narrow down to a single path. As my vision constricts, my thoughts deepen and stray.

Maybe that's why.

Even as I'm making eye contact with the Celestial Martial Clan Master, my mind drifts to the past.

'Viper doesn't remember.'

That was during the battle against the monsters summoned by the Demon King of Autumn Rain.

For the first time, I was completely engrossed in the fight with my sword. Back then, Viper had assisted me, ensuring I could stay in a state of mindless fury for as long as possible. A kind gesture, wasn't it?

'He doesn't remember.'

I died hundreds of times at the hands of the Demon King of Autumn Rain. Viper's assistance was just one of those hundreds of deaths. Buried and obscured by time, it's impossible for Viper to recall that specific moment.

Simply impossible.

'But I remember.'

Slowly.

I drew the holy sword from its sheath.

Before the blade was fully drawn, the moment my palm touched the hilt, I had already begun to summon my aura.

Another red hue flowed alongside the blood in my veins.

As the aura surged more violently through my veins, swirling tightly around my heart, my thoughts accelerated and my vision slowed.

During the brief moment the sword was drawn from the sheath, I thought.

'You said you were jealous of me.'

Why...

Why are the children I look after...

Even now, same as back then, King of Death, why? Why can't the ones under my care be like the ones you tend to?

'Even though you don't remember my countless deaths, I do.'

Why was it you who was able to give the Heavenly Demon such precious moments? Despite being devoured by the pain of

death, she could genuinely smile because of the gifts you gave her.

Why.

'My realization always found you by my side.'

Why couldn't the Head of the Martial Alliance do the same?

Is it my fault?

King of Death.

Why am I...

'As much as you've become an object of my jealousy, you too occupy a part of me.'

The sharp sound of metal.

The sword, embodying the Holy Goddess, was now fully drawn.

'How can I convey this to you?'

That you're not meaningless to me.

That I'm aware of your existence, and I still remember a day you've forgotten?

Can I even convey it?

“Very well. That's it. You're getting it.”

With words?

“That's right. During my seclusion, I fully grasped the teachings of my master, Namgung Woon. He taught me something, and in the solitude, those teachings came flooding back. Perhaps it's true that a person needs their own time.”

With a mere tongue and one eye?

“Thanks for recommending seclusion, kid.”

What should I say?

“Anyway... why have you been silent?”

Maybe, no words at all.

“Did my ascended aura intimidate you? That's disappointing. I was so glad to see you after decades that I didn't even greet the others. Even if we fight, we should exchange a few words, right?”

It's easy to defeat you with words.

To overpower you with a sword might be effortless as well.

“Right? Aren't I?”

Though you've trained for decades, the realm you've reached now seems beneath my vision.

Your stance, the color of your aura - I can guess from these.

It's easy to hurt you with words, saying, "Is that all you've achieved?" And just as easy to prove it with my sword.

“...? Hey, King of Death?”

It's always been easy to inflict wounds and win.

What's always been hard is winning your heart.

“...Really, you won't say anything?”

This makes me remember my master's teachings.

Reflecting on it, my master only taught me a few things.

How to infuse wounds with emotions.

How to overlay voices onto the sound of a sword.

"....."

Words uttered by humans are mere noise, but when that noise takes direction and meaning, it can wound the unseen heart.

The sword I wield is also just a chunk of metal, but when it takes direction and purpose, it can cut through hearts it otherwise couldn't.

My master aimed to cut the cycle of suffering with a strip of metal, while I aim to cut your stubbornness, obsession, contempt, and delusion.

"Indeed."

Can I cut it?

"That settles it. If words aren't needed, then."

With a single stroke of metal, a line of reality can be formed.



As I let aura flow through my veins and wrap around my heart, extending to my blade, I bring the flow of my life, the warmth I've gleaned from the world – here, where my blood flows, where my heart beats – to you.

If I extend it, you might understand.

For you are a swordsman, who has closed yourself off from the world, enduring decades of solitude.

“Here I go.”

Shine.

[Shiny responds to your call.]

Hwiya.

[.....]

[Goddess of Protection listens to your call.]

The Idol.

[.....]

The Pity.

[.....]

The Prayer.

[Goddess of Protection responds to you as follows.]

The Sacrifice.

[Yes, King of Death.]

The Salvation.

[I obey your command.]

As I called the swords one by one and reached the third name, Hwiya had already perceived my intention and manifested in this forest.

Hwiya radiated light.

The light was intense. As the light grew and spread, to my eyes, it appeared slowly, like a series of photographs.

The light diffused in all directions. As the blade's light brightened in the air, its shadow on the ground deepened. As if pressured by the surrounding light, the shadow cast by the sword on the ground steadily narrowed.

It became narrower and darker.

More.

A bit more.

[The Salvation Sword obeys your command.]

Finally, the length of the sword in my palm and the shadow cast on the ground were equal.

[The Sacrifice Sword obeys your command.]

Neither were mere physical entities nor mere shadows.

[The Prayer Sword obeys your command.]

Stir.

Despite the intense light, the shadow that no longer shrunk suddenly moved as if it were alive.

[The Pity Sword obeys your command.]

Viper, who was about to charge at me, hesitated.

".....!"

He squinted his one eye.

In a mere moment, the shadow stirred and divided into four separate shadows. One. Two. Three. Four. The single sword shadow split into four directions – east, west, south, north, forming a square.

They scattered, but not in disarray.

The sword shadows surrounded me as if guarding me.

Like the hour, minute, and second hands of a clock, the shadows slowly revolved around me as I stood in the middle, holding The Idol.

[The Goddess of Protection manifests.]

I then aimed the tip of the sword at the Viper.

"Ah..."

The Viper paused and lifted the corner of his mouth.

I heard that sound.

His breath folding along with the curl of his lips, the Guardian Spirit behind me blinking heavily, the Sword Saint, Black Dragon Witch, and Paladin widening their eyes, and Ester moving her eyes - all these sounds rang clearly in my ears.

“Hey---.”

Swish.

Four swords emerged from the four shadows.

“Really?!”

The swords which arose from the shadows maintained their shadowy hue even after leaving the ground. They were dark, with continuously writhing textures rather than clear outlines. They pulsed. Throbbled. Undulated. Growled. Like half-ripe beasts.

They were alive.

“This is cheating...!”

The aura that coursed through my body and played around, now serving as the avatars of the [Goddess of Protection], manifested themselves.

"Just one sword was barely enough to win, and now you use five?!"

If mere aura is called sword energy, then what approached was akin to sword force.

As I turned my head, the four swords moved with me. As I aimed the sword tip, the four tongues whined in unison.

Unerring.

My Salvation, my Sacrifice, my Prayer, my Pity. Ever since I held the sword, everything I've gathered, collected, and harvested, now perfectly synchronized with the Idol in my hand.

“Fine! Let’s do it!”

This is the level I stand on now.

The view I see with my own eyes.

I may not yet be able to fade the shadows like my master, but...

"If you plan to defeat me without a single word!"

I might not be able to slice through the tail end of winter, but perhaps I can cut a strand of the heart tucked within your chest.

"I'll definitely drag at least a word out of you!"

Viper swung his sword.

I've seen this swordplay somewhere before.

When was it?



Ah.

It resembled the techniques demonstrated by the Head of the Martial Alliance Namgung Woon in the snowy field, battling my master. Yes. Even as his body crumbled and flesh decayed, he manipulated his muscles with Ki, turning into a puppet with rigid joints, resembling that desperate technique.

"King of Death!"

If it were the old me, maybe I wouldn't have recognized it.

Back then, I wouldn't have understood the martial arts, no matter how expertly they were displayed. I couldn't read it. I couldn't understand it even when I saw it.

Even the sword dance between my master and Namgung Woon, even their 989th duel, was seen as merely whimsical puppetry.

"-----!"

The martial arts that the Viper now displayed were just like that.

My Blindness.

Something that I wouldn't have understood, even if I saw it, becoming ■■■■ in my ignorance.

Something I didn't even regard as anything. Smoke. Husk. Illusion.

".....! ---, ---!"

Now I know it as 황월파천(黃月破天), a gesture with a voice.

I parried the Viper's swing with The Pity Sword. Silence. His sword clashed with my shadow, but there was no sound of collision. His sword couldn't cut through my shadow with sound.

"-----!!"

The Viper swung his sword.

■■■

Earth King Strike.

■■■

Dragon of the East River.

■■■■ ■■ was ■■ ■■ ■■ like ■■ ■■ and ■■ ■■ like ■■■■,  
■■■ to ■■ ■■ ■■ ■■ before ■■ ■■ ■■, ■■ to ■■■ ■■ ■■ to  
■■■ ■■■.

With the ferocity of a snake's venomous fangs and the cunning of a dragon's coils, you must snatch the breath before the jaws open, grab the distance before the schemes unfold, and turn the opponent's strength against them to strike at the neck.

"......! -----!"

■■■■.

Celestial Martial Guild Master.

■ ■

Viper.

■ ■

Hey.

■ ■, ■ ■.

Come, rising star.

"My name is Liǎofàn."

Slowly parrying his swing and.

‘I remember you.’

Flying Ki Sword Technique.

I swung my sword.

# Chapter 276:

## Orthodox Faction (1)

---

He was never suited for the Orthodox Faction.

---

-.....

Day 61 of closed-door cultivation.

Viper stood there, his mouth agape in astonishment.

-This isn't right...

A droplet of water fell from the cave ceiling.

He remembered the King of Death joking about going on a hunger strike for several days during his cultivation. Viper took those words seriously and embarked on a 60-day fast, but

as the days passed, it wasn't just his stomach that felt empty; his mind began to feel numb.

-No, this can't be right... I can't even imagine the King of Death seriously practicing fasting... This kind of training seems like a waste of time, life, and brain cells.

Eureka.

It was the moment of realization.

-Damn it!

That day, Viper abandoned his 60-day fasting and went down to the Ghost Tribe village to feast. Pork hocks, fried dishes, noodles – the village was abundant with cuisine he had introduced. After making up for his missed meals over the course of 5 days, he sat in his cave, despondent, feeling like a dieter who couldn't beat the yo-yo effect.

-How can I defeat that guy?

He had wasted 60 days.

It was a depressing thought, but fortunately or unfortunately, Viper had plenty of time left.

A lot of time.

-.....

At least 60 years.

60 years.

Just barely.

-What should I do... Damn, how should I...

The only thing his 60-day fasting left him was a habit of talking to himself.

Viper groaned as he stared at the cave wall, hoping for some incredible martial arts epiphany to be miraculously inscribed there, but that fantasy never materialized.



Viper was not the protagonist.

-.....

Perhaps.

It should have been him, not the King of Death, who joined the Demonic Cult.

-... Yeah. It's all been wrong from the start.

Thinking of King of Death's brightly shining smile, Viper chuckled to himself.

-No matter how you look at it, he fits the Orthodox Faction. Not me... I can accept striving for a better world, but saving people in the Tower, that's just not my style. I just enjoy the thrill of the fight...

Viper threw a stone against the cave wall.

Thud.

Thud.

Thud.

-Right.

Four days.

He did nothing, thought nothing, and nothing changed – an empty time outside, called four days by the pace of the clock hands. In the cave, without a way to measure time, only the pockmarks on the wall – the traces of the stones Viper threw – marked the passing time.

-I was never meant for the Orthodox Faction.

Thud.

-I joined the Heavenly Demon under Elder Namgung Woon, not because I was impressed by his martial arts, but just to spend some time learning... And I went along with King of Death's plans to make the two elder's journeys more comfortable... It was fine in its own way.

Thud.

-But it was rather half-hearted. Especially compared to him.

Thud.

-.....

Thud.

-I've lived a half-hearted life.

Thud.

-Wow, did I really live my life half-heartedly? I thought I was diligent. Did I just drift here without doing anything decisive? Shit. I reached Hunter Rank 6 and became the Master of the Celestial Martial Guild so easily. Am I a genius? What if I hadn't lived half-heartedly? The Tower would have collapsed.

Thud.

-Yeah. I could have brought down the Tower.

Thud.

-Being Rank 6 doesn't mean much. Will my achievements or titles be remembered? Maybe for 3 years, at most 6 years.

After 6 years, my name and alias will be forgotten.

Thud.

-Being the Celestial Martial Guild Master is only impressive in the Tower. Drop it in the real martial world, and it would barely be a mid-sized sect. It'll just be a place where I gather kids to tell them not to wave their swords in the streets, to train themselves instead of fighting...

Thud.

-I've lived half-heartedly.

Thud.

-Shit. Go to hell. All of you, just die.

Thud.

-.....

Thud.

Day 260 of closed-door cultivation.

The opposite wall of the cave where Viper meditated was ravaged by the stones he had thrown. It looked as if a bomb had exploded there, with craters and blemishes all over. He had thrown the stones merely to clear his mind, or rather, to vent his thoughts.

Who am I?

How did I end up here?

What did I miss on the way here?

What did I manage to hold onto?

What exactly were those things?

-.....

260 days.

That was how much time Viper needed to compile his life.

He used the minute hand as the warp and the hour hand as the weft, weaving a sieve of time. Through this sieve, he shook off all the unnecessary things – distractions, stray thoughts, stress, crumbs of thoughts and emotions, the fat and flab that had crept into his life. When they wouldn't shake off, he threw stones and shattered them.

-.....

After shaking everything off, only one main concern remained.

-I need to beat the King of Death.

With just a sword?

No.

The Demonic Heavenly God Art he inherited. A sword imbued with the cries of the common people.

The King of Death always modestly refers to himself as Vice-Lord, speaking of his master with bright eyes—perhaps even sparkling ones—but Viper saw it differently. Yes. Viper knew something that others, perhaps even the King of Death himself, didn't know.

-Defeating the King of Death doesn't just mean overcoming the Demonic Heavenly God Art.

Once upon a time.

The unnamed first Heavenly Demon wandered the martial realm and created the Demonic Heavenly God Art. He heard the endless deaths, screams, and moans that filled the world.

How could a sword made and wielded by humans in such a world be anything special? Praising a sword as noble when it's disconnected from the world means it can only cut illusions, futility, and emptiness, not reality.

A sword that doesn't cut reality is merely decoration, not a true sword.

To cut the world, the sword must first contain the world within it. The world now consists only of screams, moans, and blood. Therefore, a sword of the Demonic Heavenly God Art must naturally scream, moan, and bleed.

-.....

King of Death.

He spread the Demonic Heavenly God Art to all of the Earth Spirit Tribe.

He infected them.

-...Terrifying.



King of Death's Demonic Formations Art is not just an upgrade of the Demonic Heavenly God Art. Even if the King of Death began with simple motivations like coming up with a new idea or thinking how wonderful it would be to share the Demonic Heavenly God Art with others.

It's not just that.

-Distributing the burden of a single Heavenly Demon among hundreds of thousands of common people...

Viper's eyes darkened.

The Heavenly Demon was exalted but alone. The followers not only revered the Heavenly Demon as a leader but also as a living myth, a deity. The Heavenly Demon's words were law, her actions history.

Only the Heavenly Demon could fully unleash the Demonic Heavenly God Art.

But formations are different.

Anyone somewhat familiar with the Demonic Heavenly God

Art can participate in the formations. There's no need to embody the screams of all people. Just be true to one's role, like an actor in a troupe, blending into the formation and performing just that one part.

-Sigh...

King of Death is merely the conductor of the first orchestra.

The Demonic Formations Art can unfold without the King of Death. It changes and renews itself with each participation, depending on who joins and whom they choose to embody and cry out for. Uburka could be the conductor of the second orchestra, Seimslam of the third.

He has shared it.

The burden, mission, role, status, and thus, power.

-If only he had simply followed in the footsteps of the Heavenly Demon, he would have been easier to defeat...

There are others in the world who've been wounded, not just me.

I am not the one with the deepest scars, nor the most agonizing pain.

My role as the leader of the Demonic Heavenly God Art is merely because I express it well.

Literally, I am just a Vice-Lord.

-What should I do?

Slowly.

Viper stood up.

-How can I defeat him... Huh?

He mumbled to himself, leaving the cave.

There was no longer any need to force himself into solitude.

He had firmly settled within himself.

-What to do...

His emotions, past, regrets, pride, sighs—all tangled, kneaded, and knotted into a gloomy mass within his heart, weighing a hundred pounds.

This dark mass was himself.

-Hmm.

Even if he went to the village for a drink, chatted with the Ghost Tribe children, wandered the streets alone, or climbed a mountain, the dark mass in his heart remained, constantly reminding him of his [self].

The Viper in his heart flicked its tongue strangely.

-How to defeat the King of Death.

282 days.

Viper emerged from seclusion.

---

Clash!

Swords and blades collide.

“Argh...!”

A sharp metallic sound rang.

But Viper only has one sword forged by hammering metal. I am different. There are four more shadow-blades lurking in the shadows.

“Damn it! T-This sneaky bastard!”

He was getting desperate.

“This isn't right! The Flying Sword Technique should be sending out actual swords! Is this really the Flying Sword Technique? No, seriously, is it!? That technique should not

have Ego Swords, ah damn it!!!.”

-To be precise, it's a privilege only zombie has.

Guardian Spirit commented. He had been quietly observing our duel from a distance. Unfortunately, his response was impossible for Viper to hear.

-The Holy Sword Goddess has summoned each of her swords. She gives them a body with aura and fuels them to move, but the problem is they are part of the constellation. They're very intelligent. They are ego swords that fight on their own. Five ego swords scattering aura and flying around while zombie calls it the Flying Sword Technique. Hmm. Very zombie-like...

“This crazy bastard!”

-Yeah, that's what I meant. Even when I talk to myself, sometimes my intentions get across. The world is getting better each day~

Despite their chatter, it had no relevance to the current battle.

I just need to swing my sword.

I can't be distracted by the surrounding noises and voices. Right now, I only focus on Viper, while relentlessly attacking.

“Damn!”

Viper's fierce slash was automatically parried by the [Pity Sword].

A waist-targeting strike was blocked by the [Prayer Sword].

An attempt to slice the wrist was deflected by the [Sacrifice Sword].

Then, rushing into Viper's exposed bosom,

“Damn you!”

I cut.

A slashing sound rang out.

‘Shallow.’

It's not a fatal wound. Viper hastily backstepped, avoiding a deeper cut. A few droplets of blood stained the blade, but that's all. Just like when the sword and blade clashed earlier, the sound lingered.

"....."

Again.

I furrowed my brows, sensing something strange.

‘I heard metal again.’

It's natural to hear metallic sounds when a sword and a blade clash, but not now. Not in this case.

Because the shadow-blades aren't made of metal but of shadows.



Purely aura-made shadow-blades, even if they clash with Viper's sword, shouldn't make a metallic sound. It's almost silent. At most, they should make a sound like something melting or being bitten.

If the metallic sounds aren't coming from my blades, then.

‘Viper.’

It must be the moans from the opponent's sword.

‘What kind of training have you undergone for your sword to cry out?’

I quietly observe Viper standing before me.

“Hoo, huff... Haah, hoo... hoo...”

Viper was bleeding, gasping for breath.

With a smile on his lips.



# Chapter 277:

## Orthodox Faction (2)

---

Originally, he was not a person who would fit into the Orthodox Faction.

-Hmm.

Ever since leaving the cave, Viper had been wandering the world.

Beautiful places known for their scenic beauty. Impressive landscapes. Hidden gems.

He visited places where waterfalls cascaded from the heavens, sitting alone on rocks to endure the force of the waterfalls, and climbed to the highest places, closest to the sky, gazing endlessly at the world spread out below for days on end.

-This isn't it?

He felt no particular emotion.

The [self] that had settled in his heart showed no reaction.

Viper scratched the back of his head, recalling the advice of Namgung Woon, the Head of the Martial Alliance.

-It's spoiled. Completely spoiled. The Orthodox Faction is about capturing nature in the sword, but no matter how beautiful and pretty things I see, I don't feel any emotion. I would rather watch people commuting in the city, even that touches my heart more.

The majestic force of the waterfall.

The vastness of the world spread out beneath the mountain peak.

The frightening lightning and torrential rain.

-This is not appealing at all. Like, oh wow, it's amazing! I'm so glad to be the Orthodox Faction leader! .....There is no feeling at all.

None of it captivated his [self].

-Ah, maybe I should have joined the Demonic Cult instead? King of Death is just lucky. Why did he have to match up with a master so perfectly suited for him? Damn...

Day 407 after leaving seclusion.

The [self] lurking in his heart was still speaking only of jealousy, lament, and sighs. A black mass. Murky and sticky, he could feel its outline clearly. Viper moved on, feeling its presence.

Clang!

The sound from the marketplace initially went unnoticed by Viper.

His senses, honed from years of training, detected the metallic sound. Although his body reacted, the [self] entrenched deep within him remained indifferent.

Clang!

He was currently in Guru, the homeland of the Earth Spirit Tribe. Viper occasionally visited Guru to watch the Blood Fire Dramas, wondering if it would provide insights on how to defeat King of Death.

As a result, Viper could recite all 11 lines that Kekerkker used to confess to Raviel with his eyes closed. He sometimes wondered why those guys acted so absurdly, but then realized that the one being most absurd was his [self].

Clang!

And slowly.

Clang!

The [self] coiled up in his head raised its head.

All sorts of smells and scents from the streets were detected. Shhik. Shhuk. Among them was a sharp and fishy smell. The [self] sniffed around, searching for its source.

Clang!

It was a blacksmith's forge.

Located a couple of blocks from the city center, the area was less populated. Minor theater troupes huddled together here, and Asuras with slightly tight purses lingered around.

Clang!

The blacksmith's forge stood somewhat isolated.

It was more like slowly sinking than standing. The roof was partially broken. The pillars were decayed. Some had already lost their balance, pushing the roof dangerously to one side.

A place that would vanish with a strong gust of wind.

Clang!

A muscular blacksmith was swinging his hammer there. Clang! The red-hot metal spat sparks when struck, and Clang! It bent slightly each time.

There was no remarkable skill.

No eye-catching performances.

-Hey, Master.

Just.

-You have an interesting way of hammering, huh?

-Oho.

The blacksmith wiped his face with a towel. Approaching closer, Viper realized he was actually quite small. Not just compared to the Ghost Tribe, but even smaller than the average Earth Spirit. The blacksmith, barely reaching his own waist, was...

-What do you need, sir? Are you a guest from the Ghost Tribe? We don't make weapons, just so you know.

-Eh? Why not? Weapons are the pride of the Earth Spirit



Tribe's blacksmith industry. Especially swords. Earth Spirit Tribe gives a sword as a gift when their kids come of age, and if it wears out within a year, they gift a new one. It's a joyful tradition.

-Ah...

The elf blacksmith finished wiping off his sweat.

He looked somewhat indifferent.

-It's nice that you treat minority races well and without prejudice, but... including that, it's just too much. You know what I mean, right? It's just over the top.

-Ah, totally.

Despite being strangers, they quickly found common ground, nodding vigorously.

-So annoying.

-Yes, really annoying.

Their nodding synchronized perfectly.

One was an elf blacksmith running a shabby forge despite his livelihood, and the other was a human Hunter traveling around while possessing a Ghost Tribe member. For a moment, they were united in spirit despite their dark pasts and murky insides.

-Nice to meet an understanding customer. So, what would you like? I'll give you a discount.

-Ah.

Viper then remembered his original purpose for coming here.

His pitch-black heart urged him to hurry up and speak.

-Not really here to buy anything, I was just curious.

-Hmm?

-Don't worry, I'm not suspicious. Anyway, I was just passing by and heard you hammering. The sound was incredibly regular. I thought it was just ordinary hammering, but the interval and strength of each Clang, Clang, were exactly the same.

Indeed.

Without even a 0.1 second discrepancy, the hammering sound continued rhythmically.

To an ordinary person, it might seem like just regular hammering, but Viper, a superhuman, easily noticed the anomaly in the blacksmith's work.

-Could it be? This shabby forge actually houses a great...

-Ah, please don't sit on that chair. It's so shaky I had to fix it to the floor, but even the floor's shaky. If you sit there for more than 15 seconds, you'll fall right through. It could handle me for 15 seconds, but with you, it'll collapse immediately.

-...a great master with incredible skills, or something? Like some S-rank extraordinary fate?

Viper was excited.

His heart, along with the [self] making nonsense noises inside, was throbbing.

Viper always preferred 'this kind of thing' over beautiful nature or magnificent landscapes. Like something seemingly ordinary actually being extraordinary. Hidden power. Hidden status. Hidden settings. Hidden conspiracies. Hidden worlds. His heart always raced for these 'stories'.

-Uh...

The elf blacksmith felt uncomfortable under the intensely curious gaze.

-S-rank? I don't know what you're talking about, but our we're nothing special...

-But you actually have a hidden past and a special talent, right?

-I was just born into an ordinary family and started blacksmithing when our fortunes fell. Sir. I have no talent. Born with internal muscles like an average Fairy Tribe member, how could I compete with Asuras with their incredible muscles in blacksmithing...?

-Ah, that's obviously a lie.

-.....

-Really?

-There's no benefit in lying to a customer for a little money.

-.....

-If you're not going to order anything, please leave. You're hindering my work.

-.....

It seemed to be true.

Viper muttered to himself, "Strange, strange," while pacing around the blacksmith. The elf blacksmith sighed, "Such bad luck," but eventually ignored Viper and continued hammering.

Clang!

Clang!

Clang!

-.....

Watching the hammering from a distance, Viper suddenly spoke.

-It's the same, right?

From Viper's perspective, only the blacksmith's back, the small figure of the elf, was visible. The well-developed back muscles, balanced shoulder muscles, and arm muscles tirelessly moved, working.

-What, aren't you going?

-The rhythm. The interval. The force. It's all the same. There's no discrepancy in the hammering. If you extended your sense of time with aura, you could easily mimic it, but there's clearly no aura. So, doing it by sense...

-Huuk. Hoo...

Viper frowned.

If the elf blacksmith in front of him had not become a blacksmith but walked the path of martial arts and mastered aura, he might have been a fine warrior.

-Impressive, but what's the meaning? Why insist on such hammering?

The elf blacksmith spoke without turning around.

-It makes it a bit more fun.

Viper narrowed his eyes.

-Fun?

-Yes. It's work. Blacksmith work.

Clang!

-Do you know how hard this is? Customers take these home, use them comfortably for cutting, chopping, hammering nails... It's easy to use, but hard to make. If it were just a hobby, maybe, but this is...

Clang!

-My profession. Haa...

-.....

-Damn, I really don't want to work.



Clang!

-It's so hard...

Clang!

-I'm dying.

Clang!

-I want to die...

Clang!

-I'm dying!

Clang!

As the blacksmithing continued, the elf blacksmith's curses grew harsher. It seemed like he was cursing at someone, but

mostly, it seemed he was cursing at himself.

Viper was speechless. Despite the sharp sound of hammering, this forge was noisier than any workshop in the city.

-Ah, I see. With such curses flying, no wonder no customers come. You cleverly time your hammering to swear then. The sound of the hammer masks the curses, so they go unheard.

Viper realized.

-...Are you insane?

-Sir, you've been quite a disturbance. It's about time you left.

Indeed, the races living in the city created by the King of Death, regardless of their race, seemed to be quite peculiar. Acknowledging this, Viper said,

-So it's fun for you. Your expression doesn't look fun, but are you really enjoying this?

-Of course. This has its own charm.

The blacksmith wiped his face with a handkerchief.

-Work is originally hard. Hardness is natural. Especially for my race, I wasn't born suited for this job. I have no talent. But working made me curse, didn't it?

-Well...

-If there's absolutely no joy in work. Absolutely none, I'd really feel like dying.

Clang!

-So, I find just enough fun to avoid dying.

Clang!

-My colleagues go out on weekends for recreation, rest, go to the new sauna to relax. They talk about how amazing the delayed Blood Flower Play was, and they find their own ways

to relax. I don't get it.

Clang!

-When I see tall mountains, I think, why are you so tall and I'm so small, are you picking a fight with me? Even when I visit famous mountains, I feel disconnected and indifferent. Ah, this, working feels like I'm going to die... like I'm actually dying. The deathly energy doesn't go away. It doesn't disappear.

Clang!

-I'm dying.

Clang!

-But, I can't die, so...

Clang!

-I find tiny bits of fun in my work. The Ghost Tribe customer

praised me like it was something great, but... I'm just trying to survive. Look. Clang! See? Clang! It's fun to keep the same rhythm. It's like unfinished music. Clang! Isn't it?

Finally, the blacksmith turned around.

The elf was smiling broadly.

With a face red from the forge and smeared with soot.

-It's fun, right?

-.....

At that moment.

-Ah, it's quite a challenge, you know. To keep matching the moment. It really ignites my competitive spirit. Like I'm the only one playing this game.

Viper.

The [self] he harbored in his heart realized something.

Someone who had already awakened to who he was, saw more awakening in a small blacksmith.

-The rules of the game are there too. When it rains, I go a bit slower.

What he finds beautiful.

What he finds natural.

What he wants to capture in his sword until his arms move and his blood pulses.

The Master of the Celestial Martial Guild understood.

-When fog rolls in, I hammer even slower to make it audible. Why? When the clang, clang, of the hammer resonates through a foggy city, isn't it poetic? The city seems to cry. The fog seems to cry. It's somewhat fun. It's cool. I find such things more interesting than famous mountains or scenic spots.

It wasn't the screaming populace.

Not humans clawing at their starving chests.

Not when the wounded heal and laugh among others with similar scars—the air filled with that laughter wasn't close enough.

-Well, this much should keep me alive.

Those who endure.

-Though I want to die.

Those who find joy to endure.

-I can live.

That happiness.

The fleeting joy that can't even be called happiness.

Enduring every day, breaking a part of themselves just to keep going.

Murmuring to themselves they feel like dying, sighing, smiling broadly.

Willpower.

The desire to survive.

-.....

Viper slowly nodded.

-...That's right.

It was easy to belittle that happiness as mere escapism. It never permanently solved problems, you're not becoming happy, you're just delaying happiness, and thus, you should find your true self, throw yourself into your real talents - such



advice was easy to give.

Saying something is wrong with your life was very easy.

-It seems quite fun.

But.

What does it matter?

-May I give it a try?

No matter how trivial the happiness, it is a grain of happiness.

Even if it's a smile that briefly stays and then fades away, it is a smile.

Something that definitely existed, exists, and will exist in this world.

A proof of being alive and wanting to live.

-Eh. You, sir?

-I'm a Ghost Tribe member, aren't I? I'm good at using strength.

-It's not just about strength...

-Ah, just let me give it a try. I have a lot of money. I'll leave my purse here, if something goes wrong, let the craftsmen use it as they see fit.

Everyone works.

Everyone works painfully.

Everyone finds joy in enduring their pain.

Therefore, this happiness, even if not here and now, will unfold anytime, anywhere, irrespective of time and place, and can surely envelop the world as a sky rivaling the Demonic

Heaven.

-Ussa!

Viper, shirtless, firmly gripped the hammer.

-Okay! Let's give this a try!

Being too far from nature's landscapes to sing its praises.  
Lacking confidence to capture the laughter of children  
spreading through a wheat field in a sword.

But the happiness of ordinary people.

Just putting in a little more effort, struggling a bit more, and  
being slightly happy, yet so painfully tough that without that  
bit of happiness, you'd die immediately. Making plans,  
thinking hard, implementing them, and laughing out loud  
with joy, if it's that kind of happiness.

-It's my first time at a forge! But I can do it! Aja!

He could capture it in my sword.

He wanted to capture it.

Viper knew that the beauty, the resonance in his heart, the landscape he wanted to show the world, the righteousness he had long searched for, was right here.

-After all, what I have in abundance is time!

Clang!

The sound of metal rang out.

Clang!

The sound of metal rang out.

Clang!

The sound of...

Clang!

Rang out.

Clang!

Rang out.

Clang!

Rang out.

Clang!

Clang!

Clang!

Clang!

# Chapter 278:

## Orthodox Faction (3)

---

Clang!

He swung his sword.

"Huff, ha. Hehe."

He swung his sword.

"Ouch! Damn it, resorting to cheap tricks like Astral Swords! That's cheating, you know! He doesn't even listen to his vastly more experienced senior's advice! Ha! Huh!"

He swung his sword.

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The First Form.

Sword of Starving Death.

The Salvation Sword fiercely leaped in mid-air. Even if I don't manually control them, my Ego Swords have walked a lifetime with me and observed the entirety of my life. Being limbs of the same body with me, they unfolded the Demonic Heavenly God Art just like me.

"Huff! Ack!? This, now the freaky sword that ran away is casting Demonic Arts on its own!? Hey, King of Death! You, Kim Gong-Ja! You know this is really, really a cheaty no-manners play, right!?"

Viper, while generously spewing curses, accurately, tactfully steps to block the Ego Swords. The Ego Swords' feints and real strikes, their flashy sword plays, calmly countered by Viper,

"That's enough!"

Clang!

"I've starved for 60 days too, you know! Ughaha! Ugh, hoo..."



Woah. Woah. Mmm, eugh.... Mmm. Kehm, ha. Ha..... Ha. Ah. Damn, it was nothing but a pointless effort!"

Viper kicked away the Salvation Sword. When Viper's sword and my Ego Sword clashed, clearly, Clang! The sharp sound of metal echoed again.

Viper, casually wiping the blood flowing down his stomach with his robe, chuckled.

"Ha. Hoo... Ah.... Hehe."

In every way, he's at a disadvantage.

It's nearly impossible for Viper to stand against me, who has already reached the realm of controlling Ego Swords. No, right now, if I simultaneously attack with all five swords, each imbued with a different aspect of the Demonic Heavens, Viper wouldn't last even three seconds before collapsing.

"....."

However.

That still wouldn't count as defeating Viper.

If he recovers, he'll undoubtedly come back with an unaffected face and challenge me again, saying 'Hey! Let's fight again!'.

'It's not about breaking the body, but breaking the spirit.'

That's why it's difficult.

'While fighting, despite being at a constant disadvantage, he doesn't stop smiling.'

At first, I suspected he might be under a delusion. But no matter how much I observed, it wasn't a delusion. His eyes weren't tainted with madness, and his laughter contained happiness. A very small happiness, one that seems to disappear if not listened to carefully.....

'He looks happy.'

After the initial probing phase ended.

Viper began to swing his sword joyfully.

'How can he be happy?'

Maybe it's the result of his long seclusion?

Before he entered seclusion, Viper swung his sword painfully.

He swung it, trying to win, but every part of it felt torturously painful.

In fact, didn't he go berserk fighting me during that time?

'Can a person change this much?'

I tightly gripped the hilt of my sword.

I had already firmly grasped the answer to the question I asked myself.

'Of course, people can change.'

That's why I'm looking forward to it.

While it makes me nervous, I'm so eager to find out how you, Viper, have changed, that I almost want to ask right now, making it hard to hold back.

'Jealousy towards me, obsession with the Heretic Inquisitor, self-loathing for not becoming the main character, guilt for not making the Head of the Martial Alliance happy, all those emotions, those emotional knots you've been carrying, Liǎofàn.'

I swung my sword.

'How can you smile while holding a sword!'

One of my Ego Swords, the Sacrifice Sword, vibrated woefully.

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Second Form.

Sword of Parched Death.

Blood spurted out.

"Woah! Wooooah!?"

The Ego Sword dashed around Viper, striking from above, left, and right, relentlessly stabbing him. Viper clumsily defended against the stabs.

"I'm dying! Hey, this is deadly! King of Death! Seriously, I'm dying! Shit, ugh!? Oh no! Damn, aaack! Damn it! It just grazed my forearm! Did you see it graze my forearm? It really did. A little deeper and I would've become a one-armed man from a cyclops!"

Clang!

The sound of metal rang out.

Viper successfully repelled the Sword of Parched Death, which had been fiercely swirling around, although the wound which grazed his forearm was quite deep, blood was streaming out. Besides that, his robe was already torn to shreds from the numerous near-misses.

"Keuheuheu... Damn. This is tough."

Viper, wiping the sweat dripping down his chin, grinned.

"Damn hard work, yeah."

"....."

"Kim Gong-Ja, if you come at me with Demonic Heavenly God Art all at once, I'll really be gone, you know? Huh? Why aren't you coming? Ah, right. You can't speak. Planning to defeat me without uttering a word. Geez, kid. You're so serious. How do you live without the fun of talking, huh? We'll eventually talk anyway."

Hoo.

After a light sigh, Viper turned his head.

There were hunters gathered, watching our duel.

"Hey, Heretic Inquisitor!"

"Hmm?"

The Heretic Inquisitor, cradling a snail shell, cocked his head.

"Yes, Celestial Martial Guild Master."

"It's actually been decades since I've seen your face, you know?"

"Ah, yes! I heard you decided to stay in the world for more training! Ahaha. It's a coincidence, but it's the same for me!"

"Aren't you going to say it's good to see me after so long?"

"Yes, it's good to see you!"

"Actually, whether we reunited yesterday or after 100 years, it doesn't really matter, right?"

"Yes! Both are equally good to see!"

"Right."

Hoo.

Viper once again composed his breath.

"You're that kind of guy....."

"Ahaha."

Viper gripped his sword.

And with a smile on his face, he asked.

"Heretic Inquisitor."



"Yes!"

"Are you happy right now?"

"Yes! I am!"

The Heretic Inquisitor answered without hesitation. Beside him, the Black Dragon Witch made a face as if saying 'what nonsense are these guys talking about', but both men paid no mind to the local broadcast.

"You must have suffered in the past."

"Hm."

The Heretic Inquisitor pondered.

"If you're talking about physical pain and psychological trauma, yes. I think I must have suffered quite a bit in the past."

"You must be suffering now too."

"Considering the intensity of my work and the amount of tasks, it's normal to feel suffering!"

"But you're still having fun?"

The Heretic Inquisitor grinned widely.

"Yes!"

"....."

"Though it's very hard, there are still enjoyable aspects to this job! Celestial Martial Guild Master! Offering you an espresso is quite a fun task!"

Silence lingered for a moment.

Viper slowly opened his lips.

"Can you be happy despite suffering?"

"Of course!"

"Yes, of course. Of course, you can be. You're a strange monster, but... you're no different from a human. Right. Pain is pain. Suffering is suffering. Laughter is laughter."

Viper turned his head to look at me again.

His rough breathing had long since calmed.

"Heavenly Demon of the Demonic Cult, Kim Gong-Ja."

"....."

"It's not just the strong ones you need to defeat in this world, nor just the weak ones you need to help."

Viper called me not just the King of Death, not just Kim Gong-Ja, but specifically "Heavenly Demon of the Demonic Cult, Kim Gong-Ja."

He made it clear that he was addressing not just the hunter

at the top of the tower or my personal might, but the weight and breadth of the Demonic Cult and Demonic Heavens that I bore.

"Your Demonic Cult took the cries of the common people as its doctrine. Their cries became vengeance, and that vengeance turned into bloodshed, staining the world red. Bloodthirsty avengers! Even as the heavens and earth have turned red, you still act as if you're the weak ones."

"....."

I paused.

That was the declaration of war given during the 990th battle, much like what the Head of the Martial Alliance, Namgung Woon, had said to my master, the leader of the Demonic Cult.

"You cry endlessly, clinging to the hem of the Heavenly Demon's robe. Begging to dance the death away on your behalf. As long as you cling and whine, you are the weak commoners, the sorrowful people."

Viper's one eye scanned the audience.

Not just the Heretic Inquisitor and the Black Dragon Witch, but also Ester, the Four Demon Lords, and followers who appeared to protect me in case of an emergency were hiding behind the forest leaves, watching us.

Viper nodded.

"Thirst."

Even though his body was beaten and battered, Viper's one eye shone brightly.

"Why rely on the malicious ghosts of the past forever when you rightfully have legs and hands? The Avatamsaka Sutra\* says, 'Even a single tree must shed its flowers to bear fruit.' What about you? Are you just florists in a garden, trading on your own pain?"

\*If anyone wants to read more about it: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhāvataṃsaka\\_Sūtra](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhāvataṃsaka_Sūtra)

So, is that so?

Really, is it?

'This is...'

I couldn't keep silent.

I had to break my vow of silence, my oath, my stubbornness to defeat my opponent without words.

Because that madman, the Celestial Martial Guild Master, elevated this place from a mere duel between the King of Death and Viper into a battle between the Demonic Cult and the Orthodox Faction.

Kim Gong-Ja might be able to remain silent, but the Vice-Lord of the Demonic Cult cannot be.

At any time.

"Ha."

I let out a laugh.

"I wonder if the Celestial Martial Guild Master has the right

to say such things."

Seeing my lips finally loosen, Viper smirked.

"Why? You've got a mouth, so you should check it's functioning properly now and then."

"Has the Head of the Martial Alliance, Namgung Woon, acknowledged you as his successor? Have the Orthodox warriors chosen you as the representative of the righteous path?"

"Ahh, recognition. It'd be nice. But, you know, Namgung Woon's gotten pretty old, right? He got thoroughly defeated by the Heavenly Demon. What authority does a defeated person have? And the other Orthodox warriors are comfortably sleeping under the snow. Let them rest in peace, as etiquette dictates."

"So you claim to be righteous yourself?"

"Sure."

My heart raced.

"Do you have the skills to back it up?"

"I blocked your Demonic Heavenly God Art, executed with those flying swords, twice in a row. Isn't that enough? What more skill do I need? Damn, it's really tough to pretend to be a righteous person."

"I am not the Heavenly Demon."

"Yep. You're not the Heavenly Demon, and others don't call you that, but I choose to call you that."

"....."

"Demonic Cult followers swear loyalty to you and even spread your doctrine to some bizarre continent. The whole tribe turned into Demonic Cultists, and I should call you Vice-lord instead of Heavenly Demon? Isn't that too humble? Everyone else becomes warm and sentimental when they see humility, but I'm a scientific and objective person. I'll just live my way. Kim Gong-Ja, the 2nd Heavenly Demon."

"Ha."



Haha.

"Hmm."

Hahaha.

Ah.

"This is interesting."

Lightly.

I smiled.

"....."

Seeing my smile, Viper's face lost some of its cheerfulness.

Well.

I didn't mind and gripped [The Idol Sword].

"I thought if you were filled with jealousy like last time, I could easily cut you down... but no, is the jealousy still there? The Celestial Martial Guild Master's feelings towards me don't seem to have changed much. I can feel it in your gaze."

"....."

"But, I see."

I gestured slightly.

One of my Demonic Heavenly God Art swords hovering around me, wooing, reacted.

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Third Form.

Sword of Submerged Death.

A surprise attack.

".....!!"

Viper immediately rolled on the ground. Thump! [The Prayer Sword] landed where Viper had been standing. The Prayer Sword immediately raised its head, scattering dirt, circling around Viper, and lunging in whenever there was an opening.

"Shit!"

Viper quickly stepped to dodge the attacks. But, whoosh! He couldn't avoid one slash that caught his ankle. Blood spurted from his ankle. Although not a fatal injury, it was still quite damaging.

"Really,"

Clang!

"You really are a damn Demonic Cultist, not holding back at all!"

Viper raised his aura to repel the sword. The sword flew away as if soaring through the air, then returned to circle around me, guarding me.

"Damn it! My foot hurts!"

"....."

Another sound of metal rang out.

While it wasn't a unique sound, and could be easily imitated with aura, I sensed some connection between Viper's joyful laughter and the metallic sound.

The reason he escalated our duel into a battle between the Demonic Cult and the Orthodox Faction.

'Is he confident he can win?'

No.

Perhaps.

'He's confident he can break me.'

Me, too. The Vice-lord title, and Heavenly Demon.

Just as I came here to shatter Viper, the Celestial Martial Guild Master, Liǎofàn, all three personas he embodied, he also came to break everything about me.

'Good.'

My heart won't stop racing.

'Good.'

What would my master say in such situations?

I recalled the face my master made, the smile, the sigh, the single word uttered after hearing the Head of the Martial Alliance's declaration of war.

So I said,

"Alright."

I lifted the corners of my mouth.

"I accept the challenge."

I briefly sheathed the [The Idol Sword], brought my fists together, and assumed a martial salute. Viper flinched but soon composed himself and assumed the same salute.

I couldn't explain why, but the smile never left my lips.

I was happy.

"May this 991st battle not shame the virtuous."

The Great Orthodox-Demonic War.

Even though a world of snowy fields perished, there are those who carry on the legacy of the Demonic Cult and the righteous path, ensuring that the 991st fight happens here, even after the world has been destroyed by snow.

I chose to view it as happiness.

"It's just..."

"Guild Master. I admire strong people, support the weak, want to make those in hell happy, and reach out to those still enduring here in this not-yet-hell."

"Sure."

"But I dislike those who speak without taking responsibility."

I grinned broadly.

"The stronger the person, the more I dislike them."

"....."

"I'll cut down anything petty, Liǎofàn."

"....."

Viper gulped.

Then, slowly, he smiled.

"Okay, Kim Gong-Ja."

In an instant.

I scattered four flying swords and wielded one Holy Sword, taking a step forward.

In the quiet forest.

Clang!

Suddenly, the sound of metal rang out.



# Chapter 279:

## Orthodox Faction

### (4)

---

From the beginning, he was not a man who fit in with the Orthodox Faction.

-If you bend the metal there, what will happen? No, no, don't reverse it with aura. Look at this gentleman, okay?

Viper swung his hammer.

-If you're using aura to work, that's a hobby, not work. It's just playing around. Did you come here to play?

Clang!

Viper inhaled deeply. The flames from the furnace brightly illuminated his face. Drops of sweat fell, sizzling on the hot metal.

-Did you come here to play?

Clang!

Originally, he was a man who didn't fit the role of a blacksmith.

Hitting the metal, suddenly feeling a rhythm in his forearms, swinging the hammer as if dancing, or feeling his whole body trembling, releasing pent-up frustrations—there was none of that spirit.

-Wow, shit,

Clang!

-It's tough! This!

There's no spirit in work.

-I'm dying! Damn, why is this so hard!

-Dying? Don't worry. From what I see, you're far from death. If you were really close to dying, your eyes would start drooping. You, Sir... I'll just call you 'Sir.' Is that okay? You're still full of energy.

-It's tough!

-Work is always tough.

Clang!

-Just be humble. Ah, damn, it's hard. But this isn't the toughest job in the world.

-That's not very comforting.

-Then what kind of comfort do you want? Is there some miraculous magic spell that, upon hearing a few words, suddenly makes you feel comforted, makes hammering manageable, brightens your day, and makes every day enjoyable? Comfort usually isn't very comforting. It's just there to make things less tough.

-It's, it's tough....

Clang!

-Ahh....

Clang!

The area permeated with the sound of metal gradually reddened. From a clear blue sky at midday to an evening sunset stained with blood. Merchants unpacked their evening wares, and the streets filled not just with the sound of metal, but also various other noises.

-That's enough for now."

-Huff, huff! Haaaaaaah... huff, hah....

-Let's go eat.

The elf blacksmith was neatly dressed in a suit, as if he had just washed. Despite looking like he could casually stroll around, the elf's blood couldn't hide that he always intended to walk around stylishly when going out. Viper casually wiped off his sweat and accompanied the elf.

-Wow! Sir! Look over there!

On a worn street corner, several dancers were performing. Although there weren't many spectators, everyone watched the dance moves with faces full of enjoyment.

-Looks like that store hired a troupe for promotion! That must cost a pretty penny. They're really going all out for business.

-Ah... Is it like hiring a singer to perform?

-Let's go and listen! It's free!

Freebies are loved by everyone, whether they're the Countess or an elf.

Viper chuckled and, with a tired body, walked towards the dance floor.

-Woo! Ah, woo! Ah.

-Grrrrr, growl.

The actors on the makeshift stage in front of the store seemed to belong to a small troupe. There were either very young or very old actors.

Their dance was more about matching the rhythm than powerful moves, and they sang small love songs rather than epic tales of war. The music, somewhat slow, carried on the aura released by the actors, blending into the evening.

-.....

Viper crossed his arms in the front row.

The sunset, drunk on the day's blood, was particularly red. The red sunset stained the roofs, pillars, dirt roads, and cracks in the stone pavement.

-Woo, woo, woo, growl.

-Toot, toot, rrrrr, toot, toot.

This too.

This was quite nice as well.

-.....

It was strange.

Viper had seen several splendid performances. He had seen many martial dances by warriors of the Fire River Council. They were all tragic yet majestic, sorrowful yet beautiful. He had even shed tears. But why?

His heart's [self] slithered, shush, shush, its tongue flickering.

That heart's snake, which had always been silent during those grand performances,

-Ah, they are dancing.

Viper suddenly looked around. It was true. Other spectators,

customers watching the performance, were moving their shoulders joyfully or inviting their partners to dance.

-Good wine! Cheap!

A store was selling red wine. It was a traditional Guruian grain wine, similar to beer.

-Chilled red wine from the waterway! Ah, thank you! Thank you!

The store clerks moved through the crowd like eels swimming deftly in a stream. It turned out that the store mainly sold simple food and red wine. The sound of selling and buying red wine mingled noisily, and the musicians from the troupe played even more passionately.

-I'll have another red wine! Here too! Two glasses of red wine!

The blacksmith, jumping in place, reached out.

-Yes! Two glasses of red wine coming up! Thank you!



-Hehe.

The blacksmith laughed, handing Viper a glass of red wine.

-This is the taste after a hard day's work. You're lucky, Sir. Enjoying a free performance and all.

-.....

-Drink up. Drink. Today, you didn't quite look like you were working, but I'll invest in your future. Everyone starts somewhere, right? Isn't that true?

-.....

Viper felt a strange, tingling emotion as he drank the red wine.

The wine, gulped down his throat, was... refreshing.

With one sip, a crisp wheat aroma burst forth in his throat. The cool, spicy wheat flavor instantly reached the tip of his

head, making his nose twitch.

-Krrhh! Ah!

-How is it? Killer, right? I often come to this bar because the red wine here is just the best. There are plenty of good red wine breweries in Guru, but this place has the best value for money. Oh, Sir! You know how to drink!

-Here, uh. Another beer!

-Beer? What's this talk of beer? If you want beer, you need to go elsewhere. Anyway, hey waiter! Another red wine here!

The world became colorful.

The sunset-painted sky was like a palette of colored landscapes, and the guests chattering, drinking, and dancing underneath looked like angels. The sounds of dance and music drifting nearby seemed to be coming directly from [himself].

-.....What?

His body felt itchy.

-I usually like alcohol, but, hmm. Not this much... What's going on?

-What's up?

-Don't know.

-Ah. The Sir is drunk. Seeing how you drank, I thought you were a heavy drinker and kept ordering. Sigh. You're knocked out after just two glasses of red wine? Come on, come on. Sir. Wake up. You must be tired from work. If the day was tough, alcohol hits harder.

-I'm not knocked out... just, suddenly so happy....

Ding, dong, the music changed.

His heart was elated.

-Hmm.

Viper stood up. Or perhaps it was an inaccurate description. His [heart] stood up first. His body and limbs moved to support his heart, which couldn't stand on its own. The name, Viper, his head, his consciousness, were the last to rise.

-Hahaha.

-Surprise! Sir, what... Ah. Want to dance?

-Yes!

Viper laughed brightly.

Had he ever laughed so freely since he started his training?

The elf blacksmith chuckled and, as if used to it, took Viper's hand. Since there was a significant height difference between the elf and the dokkaebi, Viper had to bend over. But his face, even while bending, was filled with joy.

-Dancing with a ghost tribesman is a first for me.

-The song is great! Woo!

-.....Well, okay then.

Viper led his partner, humming and dancing, occasionally cheering up the troupe with compliments. The troupe danced more energetically with every compliment. As they danced, the aura matched the rhythm, creating beats and playing music along with the strings of aura.

-Whee!

-Great dancing! Great singing!

Other guests joined in with their support. Regardless of whether they knew how to use aura, everyone was tilting their glasses and dancing to the beat. There were even children clapping along. Boom! Clap! The sounds of the troupe's rhythm, boom! Clap! spread from the store to the streets, then from the streets to the intersections.

-Red wine for sale! Refreshing red wine!

-Whee!

-Actors' footsteps sound great! Good hand!

Smoke rose from various places in the village. It was a signal to bring families back from the battlefield known as the workplace. Workers saw the chimneys and left their jobs.

In single file, double file, quadruple file, quintuple file, the streets bustled with people returning home. At the edge of these roads, in a dimly lit bar, old troupes sold alcohol, sang songs, played music, and drank.

They danced.

-Whee!

It was like an outdoor club of sorts.

It doesn't require an expensive ticket. Just one glass of confidently sold red wine from the store. That's all it takes to listen to this old Blood Fire Troupe's performance. No dress code needed either. Customers who came straight from the workshop, those who put on a coat over their work clothes to look somewhat decent, or those who came shirtless as they were from work – all kinds of customers gathered, eventually humming with a glass in hand.

They danced.

-Ahh....

Viper firmly held the blacksmith's hand, which was as small as a rabbit's front paw, moving his face here and there, continuously looking at the surrounding scenery.

-It's beautiful.

-What is? The song?

-The song? No, not the song.... Just.... people drinking, laughing, singing along, everyone having fun and enjoying themselves....

-Wow..... You're really drunk, Sir. Now you're babbling nonsense.

-It's beautiful.

-.....

-How can it be this beautiful? The world.

Viper was shedding tears.

Not tears from his eyes, but from his [self], the snake. It was blood. Tears flowing from the heart, through the veins, reaching the tired calf from working all day, the knee joints, the back, the shoulders, the forearms, the palms, under the eyes, all over the body.

-Because work is tough.

-It feels like dying, wanting to die. Everyone does.

Viper, while shedding tears from his heart, with a smile on his face, led his partner here and there. The front of the store had already become a small square. Drunk dancers surrounded the Blood Fire Troupe. Sounds like "Another red wine here!" and "Yes, coming right up!" were not just noise but seemed like a part of the music, joyfully blending in.

-So, we drink to live. To have fun.

-Drinking, dancing, getting excited, music flowing. Then



dancing again.

Viper lifted the small-bodied elf. Embracing him, he spun around. "Ooooooh!" sounds were heard from around, but Viper didn't hear them, nor did the elf wrapped in his arms.

-Then dance again. Work. Feel like dying. Dance again. Have fun. Beautiful. Work. Feel like dying, dance again, have fun, beautiful... Work. And work again. Want to die again, but become fun again.

Clang!

-Ah. I think I'm starting to understand now.

Viper hummed happily.

-Humans all work desperately. Working desperately, naturally, makes you want to die. Wanting to die, you find just enough fun to not die. You have to find it. Yeah, you have no choice but to dance.

Clang!

-Singing because it's tough, drinking because it's tough, eating out together because it's tough, dancing because it feels like dying. Ah, yes. There's no such thing as music for music's sake. Of course not. After working so hard that you want to forget the day, music becomes music only for those who have a day they want to forget. For those who don't have such days, it's nothing.

-What are you mumbling about..... Sir. Do you change when you're drunk?

-Ah.

Clang!

-I'm happy.

-.....

-The hammering was damn tough, but yeah. It'll be tough again tomorrow, but. Blacksmith. Aren't you happy now?

-.....

-Isn't life a bit fun now?

Originally, he was not a person who would fit into the Orthodox Faction..

-Yes.

Originally, he was an elf who didn't fit as a blacksmith.

-Of course, I'm happy. That's why I love the time when I'm not working.

There were many people who originally didn't fit in with something. Dilapidated stores, cool red wine, busy store clerks, those with the weariness of the day's work visibly staining their collars, the streets, crossroads, Guru, cities, every city, filled with workers exhausted from their day's work.

The luxury they have for a brief moment.

A glass of liquor. Delicious snacks. Nonsense with friends. To shave off, to lessen the dead spirit that almost killed them that day, just to be able to work again tomorrow.

Dancing.

-.....Everyone is alive.

-.....

-Life, it's tough enough to kill, but when you get past that moment, you can breathe for a while."

Viper wanted to protect that breath.

Righteousness is saying that the happiness of the common people is beautiful.

Righteousness is telling those who somehow finished a hard day's work to rest.

Righteousness is loving liquor, dance, and songs, but only for those who have worked and finished.

And righteousness is the Orthodox Faction's way.

-Blacksmith.

-.....Yes?

-Live long. Be careful of accidents....

Viper tapped the blacksmith's shoulder.

Staggering, he left the square where songs and dances flowed.

-Survive to the end. You too. I too....

-.....

-All of us.

As he left the square, the shadow of the dokkaebi was hidden by other crowds.

Slowly.

He became invisible.

The elf blacksmith was left alone, watching the back of someone who had disappeared into the sunset.

-Right.

Clang,

Viper was running.

-Dressing up and listening to the Blood Fire Troupe seriously, no wonder I couldn't feel anything, no matter how good the plays were. Ah, of course.

He ran.

Releasing the aura sealed for half a day, blood boiled throughout his body.

His vision brightened.

Clang, and the moment he leaped, Viper's feet were already stepping on the roofs of the village. People in the streets pointed at him, "Hey- Hey-", but they couldn't catch up with Viper's figure quickly disappearing with a taat, clang!

Viper breathed heavily.

-Originally, it's tough and feels like dying from working. Because it feels like dying, only then can you hear music and dance. To forget. To endure. Not to live happily, but to become happy to survive. To survive....

Clang!

-To survive.

From a certain point.

Whenever Viper stepped, whenever he stretched his aura in the air, a clang sound followed.

Clang!

Day 410.

Viper entered a Mountain Calamity Tribe's farm as a guest, working the land with the farmer's family for 2 years. The hardened ground was torn by the plow.

Clang!

Day 1503.

Viper joined an elf bank, working with money. Always hiding his origin, his boss, not knowing he was a ghost tribesman god, nagged at the back of his head.

Clang!

Day 2874.

Viper entered a noble's mine, wielding a pickaxe. Compared to when the Mountain Calamity Tribe enslaved people, mining



conditions had improved a lot. Still, mining was tough work. Viper, gasping, struggled and swung his pickaxe.

Clang!

Day 7021.

Clang!

Day 14059.

Clang!

Day 19856.

Clang!

Day 22400.

-.....

Originally, he was not a person who would fit into the Orthodox Faction.

-Hmm.

Originally, he was not a man who fit the image of a lonely but highly skilled swordsman.

-Is this enough?

Originally, he was not a man who fit as a protagonist.

-Whew.

Standing on a mountain peak, Viper took a deep breath. The world he inhaled became blood circulating through his body – arms, shoulders, back, waist, thighs, calves, feet. Then slowly, he exhaled.

-Hoo....

In the distance.

A huge turtle monster, rising from the abyss and heading this way, looked monstrous enough to destroy the world. However, Viper did not care about the monster, not even sparing it a glance.

His focus was on humans.

-Come on, Kim Gong-Ja.

He was.

For the first time in a long time, having shed the guise of a ghost tribesman, in his own body, with his own arms, above all, with the voice in his [self]'s heart, he thrust a righteous fist into the air.

-Here lies the righteous path.

Clang!

A clang sounded.

-Fighting is work.

Clang!

-Work is naturally tough and hard.

Clang!

-Fighting you is really, among them, tough enough to die.

Clang!

-After this work...

Clang!

-Let's go to a place with good music and drink like hell!

Viper laughed.

With the Five Noble sects buried under the snow, the Ten Sect Alliance disappeared in the snowstorm, and even the Head of the Martial Alliance was broken by the sword in these times. The Demonic Heaven prevailed beyond the boundaries of the world, and songs of Baraya could be heard now, here in this snow-filled world left by the last of the righteous warriors of the Orthodox Faction.

The Celestial Martial Guild Master was laughing.

# Chapter 280: Final Vote (1)

---

Inevitably, the Demonic Heavenly God Art is a demonic technique.

Clang!

Namgung Woon, Head of the Martial Alliance, mocked us as mere cultists. My master did not retort. Now, Viper, claiming to be a descendant of the Orthodox Faction, uttered the same mockery, but I too did not argue. I just smiled in response.

Clang!

We all know.

Those who blindly use the sword without knowing are mere novices who have just stepped into the world, those who wield the sword to know are intermediates, and those who hold the sword despite and because they know, are the masters.

We all know.

Clang!

That there are people in this world who, despite their difficult lives, manage to find small joys, enduring yesterday's pain and today's fatigue, surviving in their everyday life.

Clang!

They sometimes say they want to die or kill, but their murderous intent has not yet led to actual killing. They sometimes cry out in hardship, but their cries have not yet turned into screams.

Even if their happiness does not fully reach life, ending merely in an hour, half a day, a day's worth of joy.

I know there are numerous such people enduring everyday life in this world.

Clang!

Demonic Heaven cannot soothe those small joys.

The small and pretty flowers, the people of Red Dust I want to love, comfort, and kiss, are too many for the busy sky of Demonic Heaven to embrace.

Still in this world.

Clang!

There are too many screaming in this world,

Clang!

Too many eyes looking up to the heavens in hatred, bleeding.

Clang!

Those who starved to death, those who died dried up without water, those who couldn't escape the deep sea and were buried in water, those who had no place to run and froze surrounded by snowstorms, those who were bitten by poison



and fell to the ground without even a chance to utter their last words, those whose limbs were gnawed away by illness with no means to cope, those beaten to death, those who burned to death, those who took their own lives.

Clang!

There are many.

Clang!

"That's right! Too many! Still, still, there are still too many things!"

Clang!

"Look, Celestial Martial Guild Master! If you still have one eye left, look!"

Clang!

"Do you really think all these countless screams will be

subdued by the happiness you bring?”

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Fourth Form.

Sword of Frostbitten Death.

I swung my sword, which Viper barely, narrowly blocked. But blocking it was not the end. I had not only [The Idol Sword] but also [The Pity Sword], [The Prayer Sword], [The Sacrifice Sword], [The Salvation Sword], casting shadows, flying around from all directions. Swish! Swoosh! The demon swords rushed in, turning their blades whenever Viper showed an opening.

“Damn, shit, foot!”

Clang!

Viper, with almost miraculous movements, knocked away [The Pity Sword] aiming for his neck. But it wasn't perfect. The blade grazed his neck, and whoosh! A stream of blood spurted out.

“Heh, huff. Huh, haaaaaaa..... huff, huh, hoo, hooo...”

Viper staggered.

But even while staggering, he tightly gripped the swords in his hands.

"....."

He's already a wreck.

Though he kept talking nonstop as if nothing was wrong, there seemed to be no part of his body left unscathed. Viper was covered in wounds.

Without a superhuman will, he would have fallen twice over by now.

“Ha.”

That’s why I smiled.

“Celestial Martial Guild Master. That's why you can't defeat me. Do you understand? Even if you continue to fight for a hundred, a thousand years, you can never defeat our Demonic Heaven.”

“That's... probably true.”

“You had the audacity to recite the phrase from The Great Orthodox-Demonic War and call me the Heavenly Demon, a fight already concluded with the Demonic Cult's victory. And yet you still claim it's not over and challenge me to a duel. I secretly expected something that could captivate me, if not a heaven-tearing move, at least a martial art from someone who has committed such audacity and rudeness.”

“I am doing it...”

Viper breathed heavily.

His wounds and bleeding ate away half of his breath, making his words sound faint.

"What?"

“I am, already, doing it...”

“What do you mean?”

‘One.’

Click.

Holding the sword hilt tightly with both hands, Viper straightened up.

As he slightly lifted his stooped posture, Viper’s single eye became visible.

“Me, right now. I’m working. 2nd Heavenly Demon, you jerk.”

"....."

Viper’s eye was fiercely blazing.

“Working...”

“A job is also a karma. It’s fate. Weighing down on life, even though I wonder how I ended up here, it’s the karma clinging to me. There are so many jobs in this world, and each profession has its own fucking karma. Kim Gong-Ja.”

“Yes.”

“What do you think my job is?”

I frowned.

“Your job is being the Celestial Martial Guild Master.”

“Right. But that’s more of a side job. You’re nominally the Vice-Guild Master of the 5 great guilds, but your real job is being the Heavenly Demon, right? Or maybe the Family Head of that King of Death Family or something. Huh? Recently, I’ve got a new job. Do you know what it is?”

"....."

“It’s to endure you.”

For a moment, I couldn’t comprehend his words.

“...What?”

“Enduring you. Enduring the existence called the Heavenly Demon. That's the job I chose.”

Viper readied himself, holding the sword hilt.

There was not a single part of his body – ankles, thighs, waist, back, neck – that wasn’t wounded.

Yet, the way Viper stood on his two legs was firm, and the way he held the sword was orderly.

“How about that? Interesting, isn’t it?”

"What on earth..."

“As you say, Kim Gong-Ja. There are too many grievances in the world. Too many silent screams buried. As long as these sounds echo, the heavens will be a faded Demonic Heaven, and you, swinging your sword under it, will continue to be the Heavenly Demon. But, you see... However...”

Tat. Grains of soil shattered.

Stepping on the ground, Viper charged towards me.

“There are plenty of people who endure life’s hardships!!”

Clang!

I controlled [The Sacrifice Sword] to block Viper’s breakthrough. Even though [The Sacrifice Sword] was a shadow sword not made of steel, when the two swords crossed, a sharp metallic sound rang out.

Viper plunged in.

“There are people who starved to death! Yes! I know! There are so many unfairly dead people, I know! It’s sad. Sometimes it brings tears. But, Kim Gong-Ja! Regardless of whatever



damned deaths occurred last night, we must carry our karma and head out again today! Do you understand!”

I summoned another demon sword.

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Fifth Form.

Sword of Noxious Death.

[The Prayer Sword] swiftly exploited Viper's vulnerability. Whoosh! Blood gushed from the back of his right hand. Gagging, Viper groaned. He cursed. But his hand gripping the sword didn't even flinch.

“I can't just keep crying!”

Clang!

With a steady hand that did not flinch, Viper swung his sword.

“The weight of a day is heavy! So heavy that sometimes it feels suffocating! My heart pounds before starting the day, wondering if I can endure today, and even after finishing work, it gets crushed thinking about tomorrow's work! Do you understand! My heart is choked, beaten, and crushed every day, it's tight even to spare a place in my heart to cry for you guys!”

Clang!

“I'm sorry!”

Clang!

“Sorry for being born in this world, for not being able to live a day without shouldering karma, for having to earn each day's living. Damn you, Demonic Cult! I'm sorry! I'm truly sorry!”

Clang!

“So, stop blaming us!”

Clang!

“How long should we keep apologizing?”

"....."

“Until there's no one left screaming out in hunger? Until that day comes? Shall we apologize until then? Shall I throw away the karma I'm bearing now, plunge into your Demonic Heaven, follow your doctrine, and strive until not a single person dies of hunger?”

"....."

“It's tough.”

"....."

“I don't have the strength. I don't have the courage. Right now, the only thing securing my daily bread is this hammer in my hand. I've just gotten used to hammering to make ends meet. All I know is this much thievery, barely surviving with it. I can't drop everything and run to the place where your screams are heard.”

“Every day is filthy, Heavenly Demon. It's unbearably hard.”

Viper swung his sword.

Clang!

“I once helped a farmer with his work. It was the season when the wheat fields rippled like gold in the distance, with golden grains on every ear of wheat. But then we heard a typhoon was coming.”

Clang!

“Preparations and responses were useless. We had to abandon the swept-away wheat and throw only a few saved stalks into the barn. Those few stalks rolling around in the barn were the entire fortune the family had to survive the year. But it's a relief, right? At least we saved something. The farmer smiled awkwardly... Then we heard from the neighboring village. An old couple who couldn't evacuate in time were swept away by the typhoon, crushed to death under their own roof.”

Clang!

“It's sad.”

Clang!

“How can it not be sad when people die unjustly? We help when we can. There are times when tears come. But.....”

Clang!

“We still have to work.”

Clang!

“Go to the forge, to the fields, to the bank, to the mines, linking yesterday and today just like yesterday, and today like today, barely connecting to tomorrow, fearing when it will end, we immerse ourselves in this karma.”

Finally.

There was a gap.

Avoiding my swung sword, Viper stepped back, creating distance. I didn't pursue him. Naturally, a small clearing

formed between Viper and me.

"....."

"....."

Many people were watching our duel.

Black Dragon Witch, Sword Saint, Heretic Inquisitor, Countess, Paladin, and Vampires, Pure Humans, Mountain Calamity Tribe, Fairy Tribe, Gill Fish Tribe\* who had followed their parents. The tribes enjoying the festival across the jungle had now quietly turned to watch the duel of the two warriors.

\*The Gill Fish Tribe is being renamed to Gill Fish Tribe. Apparently the hanja in my version of the korean source text was a mistake and the author fixed it later on.

Ester and Uburka. A thousand followers of mine, too.

Their silence was denser than the quiet of the forest.

“Kim Gong-Ja.....”

Viper's breath was terribly disordered.

He struggled several times with my name, mixing it with gasps and heavy breaths.

But he finally pronounced my name correctly.

"Heavenly Demon."

"....."

“Your existence threatens us.”

I...

Gripped the hilt of the Holy Sword tightly.

“Is that so?”

“Yes. We... we lack even the tears to shed for ourselves. It's tough. There are so many who've never cried for themselves. They don't die even when they want to, don't cry even when they want to. Just... because they need to survive. But... because of you, we have to shed tears even for strangers we don't know.”

"....."

“Fine. Initially, it can be good. It's a tragedy that could happen to us too... they are just like us. But, we can't keep crying forever. It's hard to continue crying. We, the people,”

Are.

“Busy with work.”

"....."

“We drink to catch our breath, play, dance, walk the streets, smile foolishly at the seasons turning red... That's the happiness we're barely clinging to, not to die. How precious that happiness is.”



Viper pointed his sword at me.

“Don’t ruin that happiness.”

“When you come, the world becomes chaotic. Heavenly Demon.”

I remained silent.

‘That is true.’

And I understood.

‘That's how one falls into demonic obsession.’

When I see people ignoring the death of a person here,  
Demonic Heaven's blood boils.

When I see people just passing by where someone died here,  
Demonic Heaven's fangs sharpen.

When people ignore it, pretend they don't know, later claim they really didn't know, and finally show sympathy, saying, 'Was there really such an incident?' - when I see such people, Demonic Heaven's eyes turn red.

Even though I know they are all ordinary humans.

'I want to kill them all.'

Murderous Intent arises.

There was a time when my master fell into demonic obsession. Then, with a bright smile, my master slaughtered all the humans in sight.

-Ho ho. Are these the Orthodox warriors who came to assassinate the master?

-Good. Come at me. Let's share our swords.

Because Demonic Heavenly God Art is demonic to the bone.

Ignoring screams makes one a bystander, not helping death makes one an abandoner, making no one in this world unrelated to the screams and deaths, slaughtering and killing every human.

That danger, that possibility, is always there.

“...Still.”

I opened my lips.

“I can't stop. No, I won't stop. If there are forgotten screams out there, I will collect them. And I will tell those who didn't hear those screams.”

“To make them feel guilty?”

“To make them see the world.”

I said.

“This is the world.”

Four shadows encircled me as if guarding me.

[The Salvation], [The Sacrifice], [The Prayer], [The Pity]  
surrounded me.

“So, ascend the tower with me.”

Ester, the family Advisor, stood behind me.

Uburka, the Chief Warrior, crossed his arms, and Kim Yul,  
the Shadow, leaned against a tree.

A thousand followers also hid in the forest shadows, forming  
a formation.

"....."

Slowly.

Viper curled his lips.

“I'll be your spectator, Heavenly Demon.”

And he said.

“When your Demonic Heaven becomes too vast to caress the little petals, I'll block your path and point out that there's a blossom here.”

"....."

“When you draw your sword to scream in this world, I'll judge and advise whether the people living there can still bear those screams, whether they have the strength left, whether your screams in their oppressed lives will become an additional burden, whether you should wield the sword of Demonic Heaven now, what reasons there are not to. All of it.”

Viper.

“I'll always be by your side, working. As a representative of mortals. I may not become the protagonist or even a main character following the protagonist. But if the day comes when you fall into demonic obsession and dye the world red.”

Celestial Martial Guild Master.

“I will be right beside you to strike at your neck.”

Liǎofàn.

“That’s when I finally defeat you. Understand? No need to hurry. Until the day you lose... until you’re devoured by the Demonic Heaven. It’s enough just to watch you from your side.”

Liǎofàn smiled.

“Kim Gong-Ja. I’ll make you my karma.”

The last warrior of the Orthodox Path left by the snowfield pointed his sword.

“See if I’m qualified for that, test me all you want.”

# Chapter 281: Final Vote (2)

---

Plum blossoms fell.

They were flowers, not cold snowflakes.

---

“Alright.”

I spoke and raised my sword.

“Let’s test it.”

I charged.

Swinging.

My sword collided with Viper's blade.

Clang...!

The sound of metal rang out.

Clang...!

The sound of metal rang out.

Clang...!

Viper's shoulder flinched, then suddenly, with a pop, his coiled muscles unfurled, splitting the sword path.

It's like an illusion of several sword paths striking simultaneously.

'No, it's not a sword path, but a choice.'



Drawing out Aura to create multiple afterimages of the sword, asking me which one I will respond to.

Depending on which one I choose, the change in the sword path will be completely different.

And none of those changes will be favorable to me.

‘Unrivalled Martial Artist.’

That was probably the skill Viper gained when he first entered the tower.

That ability to read predicted paths, which I briefly encountered in my master’s world.

“Then...”

I lifted my sword.

“There's no need to choose!”

It wasn't just one sword.

The sword strike Viper swung from the upper left was countered by [The Pity Sword].

“One!”

The strike aiming for my waist was blocked by [The Prayer Sword].

“Two!”

The strike targeting my wrist was stopped by [The Sacrifice Sword].

“Three!”

The attack diving for my neck was deflected by [The Salvation Sword].

Thus, I blocked all of Viper's attacks. After tying up the opponent's hands, I dove into Viper's embrace.

“Haat!”

I swung the [The Idol Sword] in my hand.

"Eut–"

Viper stepped back.

He’s probably trying to create distance and regroup.

Sorry, but I won’t give you that leisure. I charged ahead.

Swerving.

"-----Huh!"

And at that moment, I saw a smile flicker across Viper’s lips.

“Hryaaaah!”

Clang! The metallic sound rang out.

The [The Idol Sword] I swung was blocked by something.

It wasn't Viper's sword.

Viper's wrist---the glove wrapped in Aura stopped it.

Not only that, he turned his hand around, gripping the blade.

And pulled.

“Liǎofàn,”

Viper's single eye, whoosh, came closer.

“Aren't you a swordsman,”

“I'll tell you two things,”

Our voices intersected, and at the next moment, they were drowned out by a loud explosion.

Boom.....!

The sonic boom that occurred as Viper's other fist brushed past my ear swallowed up all other sounds.

-This is also one of the fine arts of swordsmanship,

Thus, Viper's words were conveyed only by the movement of his lips.

-I mainly use the sword, just because it suits me and looks cool.

In the moment his fist brushed past, Viper was already moving into the next attack.

Pulling the gripped sword, he aimed his bent knee at my abdomen. If I let go of the sword and step back, he'll swing it around and hit my shoulder in a cross-cut. Then should I brace my legs and stand firm? No. Then he would straighten his bent knee and strike at my solar plexus.

-Right, I see.

I see it.

I feel it.

-I also handled many weapons simultaneously when controlling the Seven Ghost Heroes.

-Yes.

Viper's intentions. My predictions of his responses. The next actions based on those predictions. The pure purpose underpinning all of it.

-From a scythe to a fist, there's no weapon I can't handle!

We are now 'conversing.'

-Yes.

Swimming in the flow of time created by Aura, I glanced at the number of cards Viper could play.

I tried counting but soon gave up.

-That's a lot.

Dozens.

Even counting the traps waiting to be triggered, there are hundreds.

In a fleeting moment, from my left, right, behind, all around, and beyond, I felt Viper's intentions and murderous intent.

-Wow.

It's a literal human wave tactic.

Seven Ghost Heroes, Twelve Winged Generals, Seventy-two Demon Kings, One Hundred and Eight Arhats... Whatever it is,

it's different from the harmony I once spread by controlling numerous bodies with a single will.

Spreading numerous wills with one body.

That's why the one in front of me is yet not Liǎofàn.

-That is really a lot!

The blacksmith-like fist aiming at me, the farmer's sickle-like hand blade, the gardener's scissor-like, the fisherman's net-like countless attacks unfold towards me.

-Right, give it your all.

I will also do my utmost to defeat you.

No, to defeat you all.

‘Let's go, Hwiya.’



As I leaped into the pulling blade, I also swung my fist. Was that the right answer? Strength drained from Viper's sword-holding hand.

‘Resonate with my heart.’

The moment my fist cuts through the air, I wish.

‘The Torn Goddess's Salvation.’

Among the four swords floating in the air, [The Salvation Sword] vibrated intensely.

[Activating skill.]

A secret technique once possessed by Constellation Killer.

To forget memories, drawing power equivalent to the weight of the forgotten memories.

The more the past is discarded, the more the current memories die. Since I promised Raviel not to recklessly throw away my

life, I try not to use [The Torn Goddess's Salvation] unless it's a moment when I must exert all my strength.

Like right now.

‘The Salvation Sword.’

I swung the sword.

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The First Form.

Sword of Starving Death.

The Salvation Sword wildly leaped in the air. “Kuh!” The blacksmith-like fist coming from my right repelled far away. One, two, three, four lives joined, but they could not withstand [The Salvation Sword].

I too was fiercely consuming Aura.

But.

‘I discard the memories of the four attacks I just repelled.’

Suddenly, my vision cleared.

My heart beated. The depleted Aura was replenished. My steps lightened, and my gestures quickened.

Glancing to the right, although surrounded on all sides, that area alone is clearly empty. Looking closer, four lives are groaning and rolling on the ground.

Although I can't remember how it happened, why it happened, and what it meant was clear.

‘Okay.’

My right side was open.

‘The Sacrifice Sword.’

Then the next thing to do was clear.

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Second Form.

Sword of Parched Death.

From my left, [The Sacrifice Sword] struck. Groans and screams rang out. The attack approaching from the left was blocked.

‘I discard the memory of the attack I just blocked.’

My left side was open.

‘The Prayer Sword.’

Look.

Celestial Martial Guild Master.

I am giving it my all right now.

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Third Form.

Sword of Submerged Death.

You are not an insignificant existence to me.

How could I wield the sword of Demonic Heaven against someone who means nothing to me? How could I forget memories, moment to moment? How could I scrape my soul, collect each piece of flesh torn from wounds, and form it into a stroke of the sword?

‘The Pity Sword.’

You said you would stop me.

You said you would take me as your karma.

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Fourth Form.

Sword of Frostbitten Death.

I am fully handling such a you.

To be all-out means my life is laid upon my sword.

I wonder what excuse I will give to Raviel. I can't say I didn't break our promise since I didn't die. How can I show Raviel such shamelessness, stubbornly sticking to the literal meaning of words?

Right?

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Fifth Form.

Sword of Noxious Death.

I am conscious of the Guardian Spirit's gaze. This gentleman. He has become much more serious since I developed Demonic Formations Art. He spends more time watching me than talking to me. He's started to see me as a more equal warrior, which pleases me but also keeps me anxious. What does the Guardian Spirit think of the swordsmanship I display?

Right?

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Sixth Form.

Sword of Plague Death.

I think of my master. I recall the decisive battle my master had with the Head of the Martial Alliance. At that time, my master fought even to the point of breaking her life force, and wherever she stepped, plum blossoms bloomed and flowed.

The world devoured my master's life force and blood,  
blooming a few petals.

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Seventh Form.

Sword of Contusing Death.

That level is needed to convince the opponent.

Only at that level can I cut you down.

Can I even reach that level with a tip of my finger or a single  
finger,

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Eighth Form.



Sword of Scorching Death.

I am worried.

Because you make me worry about my love, my friendship,  
my admiration.

You cannot be a mere existence to me.

Right.

‘The left is clear.’

Gone.

‘The right is clear.’

Nothing to hinder.

‘The rear is empty too.’

No one to grab my nape.

'Then.'

The only place left is the front.

My path ahead.

Left, right, rear, all sides cleared, only the path to Viper's body remains open.

'I'll go ahead.'

I step forward.

'Piercing through the entire life you have lived.'

One step.

I recalled the swords sent to block the incoming lives. The

Salvation, The Sacrifice, The Prayer, The Pity, four swords quickly gathered, circling close to me.

‘I will cut your heart.’

Three steps.

The four swords scattered like iron dust. The Aura used to maintain the Flying Ki Sword Technique was withdrawn. Instantly, my vision brightened and blood boiled in my body.

Towards me, an accountant’s pen, a vegetable vendor’s basket, a drunkard’s bottle, countless everyday objects from countless people flew, but...

‘Good.’

I stomped the ground with a determination to face all of it.

"Celestial Martial Guild Master!"

My voice burst out.

The long night subsided, the shadows cast by the forest turned pale, and as the leaves trembled coolly in the dawn light, my lion's roar resounded through the jungle.

“Viper!”

Suddenly.

Something seemed to flow where I stepped.

“Liǎofàn!”

Three steps.

My feeling that something flowed was not an illusion.

With each step, a few petals flow from the ground I stepped on.

It was just a brief flutter at the bottom of my vision, not like the master and the Head with plum blossoms blooming with each step, not with flowers spreading where the sword passes,

not turning the surroundings into a garden, but merely a few white petals briefly passing between Viper and me.

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Ninth Form.

Sword of Self Death.

Four steps.

My sword cut through a petal.

"-----"

The sound of inhaling.

A panting breath was at the tip of my sword.

~.....

The petal, cut by the blade, silently split in two. A white line divided left and right, slowly opening my view. On one side, Liǎofàn with his black eye patch appeared, on the other, Liǎofàn's left eye.

The blade, stopped beside Liǎofàn's neck.

No.

It had to stop.

"....."

My heart.

At my solar plexus, Liǎofàn's fist rested.

~.....

~.....

Because of it being a bit late to stop, the place where my blade halted was shallowly cut, a tiny bead of blood trickled down the blade.

Because of it being a bit late to stop, the place where Liǎofàn's fist halted was slightly sunken, blood trickled down his chin from a cut lip.

"....."

I couldn't swing my sword any more. The next moment my heart would burst.

He couldn't thrust his fist any more. The next moment his neck would fly off.

Knowing this, we naturally stopped.

"Ah...."

"How, how could this..."

“Incredible.”

The forest swayed.

Again, not only hunters were spectators in this forest. The tribes following the hunters thronged, especially our King of Death Family’s retainers were attentively watching the martial field from the shaded forest.

A forest of people.

With such a scale, it's not just people in the forest; the forest is made of people.

Receiving everyone's gaze, I first casually said.

“I even defeated the Sword Saint.”

A corner of the forest twitched. Probably the Sword Saint.

Viper casually replied.



“I beat that old man too. A long time ago. In the past.”

Sure enough, the Sword Saint twitched again.

I laughed.

“You said you lost an eye.”

“That doesn't mean I lost.”

“What? So the Sword Saint is just a measuring stick for combat power? A complete cliché.”

“He's an old man.”

“Isn't there some kind of rejuvenation chance like in stories?”

“Ah. Suddenly becoming a silver-haired young boy, right? Though it's a cliché, it's possible.”

“No, I was thinking more of a young man or uncle. A young boy? What are you talking about... It's kind of upsetting me...”

“I'm sure it's not as upsetting as me!?”

The last shout was from the Sword Saint.

I laughed. Liǎofàn also laughed. Blood flowed with that laughter. Droplets of blood fell to the ground with a plunk.

"Ugh...."

And then, both of us collapsed simultaneously.

# Chapter 282: Final Vote (3)

---

A shout was heard.

"Family Head!"

"Viper!"

Until now, the spectators had been quietly watching our fight. Although the Sword Saint had shouted earlier, that was just getting back at Viper, which deserved respect. It was proper etiquette for outsiders to quietly step back during a duel.

But now that the duel had concluded, they rushed in urgently.

"Stop!"

"You're the last ones who should be moving!"

And those people immediately divided into two groups, facing off against each other.

On one side stood the King of Death Family, led by Ester. She had been the Demon King of Autumn Rain, Preta, a daughter, and now a family Advisor of our lineage, always ready to counsel me right or wrong.

On the other side stood the Ghost Tribe, led by a figure in a white helmet and full-body suit. It was the leader of the 256 True Color Ghost Troop that had joined at the end of the Dragon Resistance.

"What are you blocking! A bunch of clowns dressed in color-coordinated costumes!"

"And you guys, where are you headed to play cards? All in black. You guys are simply our RGB code 000000 ~The Real Black-."

"Even lacking sense in making aliases!"

"And what's your alias?"

"I was once called the Saintess of the Wilderness, the Demon King of Autumn Rain, and Preta. Now, I am known as the Advisor of the King of Death Family!"

"Uh, what... that's actually kind of cool..."

The leader of the Ghost Troop hesitated while scratching the back of his helmet, but Ester paid no mind.

So, I had to step in and stop Ester.

"Ester. Let it be."

"No, Family Head! I cannot!"

Her immediate objection felt like rebellion. Slightly shocked, I lowered my head, and Ester glared at the Celestial Martial Guild Master.

"The Celestial Martial Guild Master's words to you, Family

Head, are arrogant and disrespectful to the point of being unbearable."

"....."

"Always the possibility of you going astray? Ha. Falling into demonic obsession, slaughtering civilians and commoners indiscriminately, erasing all the screams in the human world as if they never existed, slaughtering all humans, gathering only those worthy of survival to create a small paradise. That's what the Celestial Martial Guild Master is talking about as your danger."

"Right."

Viper barely propped himself up on his palms, then slid on the grass and fell back into the mud.

"Damn it...."

Feeling embarrassed, he gradually calmed his breath.

He said,

"You're right. I think you, all of you Demonic Cult bastards, are capable of falling into demonic obsession at any time, causing an unprecedented massacre."

".....You."

Ester gritted her teeth.

"How long have you been observing the Family Head? Without knowing the people around the Family Head, what kind of people they are, and with what resolve they have taken up the lineage's flag. Despite all of us swearing to assist the Family Head with our lives and honor! Yet still..."

"It's not about 'yet still.'"

Viper coughed, clogging his neck wound with mud, but it didn't stop the bleeding.

"It's exactly that."

".....What?"

"You won't be able to stop your Family Head if he falls into demonic obsession."

Ester clenched her fists.

"Ha. I may have fallen, but I am the Demon King of Autumn Rain. When my tears become raindrops, thousands of ogres, orcs, goblins, and numerous monsters turn into raindrops and form an army. A bit of elevation in skill level doesn't compare to a mere swordsman."

"Yeah, you guys are strong... damn strong."

Viper coughed out blood.

Then he smirked.

"But can you stop the Family Head if he falls into demonic obsession?"

"Yes. Of course. Even if it costs my life..."



"No, that's not it. Imagine the specific situation. Did you really hear what I said? Huh? We're talking about your Family Head, Kim Gong-Ja."

Viper looked around.

Like a tired swordsman who sat in the middle of the Colosseum, shoulders drooping.

"Who is Kim Gong-Ja? Huh? Who is the Heavenly Demon of our era? Take a look. He didn't fall into demonic obsession even when his master died. He just accepted it as sadness. Why did the master have to die when there are so many people deserving death in the world, huh? He didn't even let out a roar of anger. He just... just mourned while sending her off. Actually, this guy is tough."

Sitting in the Colosseum of the jungle, Viper raised his voice.

"Even if the world ends or the heart of his most beloved woman is torn apart, ah, he's fine! He never falls into demonic obsession. Holding onto his sanity, thinking if he lets go, he's nothing, whatever hellish event befalls, he never falls into demonic obsession."

Clap, clap, clap.

Viper clapped his hands. Despite the wounds on his hands, already bandaged, every clap made blood ooze from the not yet healed wounds.

"Such impressive patience. His level of controlling his mind is almost superhuman."

"....."

"Lady, what on earth would it take for Kim Gong-Ja to fall into demonic obsession?"

Silence ensued.

"He's seen the world end countless times, so that won't do. He's seen the world end in especially horrible ways. That won't work either. So what would it take? Truly... when human malice, combined, crushed, and so concentrated that just being close or smelling it makes you think, [Ah, this is hell]... Only that might do it. Only then, our Family Head, the Heavenly Demon of the Demonic Cult, might finally lose his mind."

Viper chuckled.

"Then, you. All of you retainers. Could you stop Kim Gong-Ja?"

"....."

"Would you want to?"

"....."

"What kind of hell will you see then? I don't know. I can't even imagine. But if it's hell horrifying enough for Kim Gong-Ja to lose his sanity... and then, if he tries to kill all those who created and ignored that hell..."

Viper glanced around.

Advisor Ester, Chief Warrior Uburka, Shadow Kim Yul, Head Steward Silvia Evanair. Even the Sword Saint, who wasn't officially part of the family but volunteered as a bodyguard.

"Could you all... stop Kim Gong-Ja?"

“We are...”

“Rather, it seems like you'd follow Kim Gong-Ja to kill those bastards who created that hell. Flipping your lids.”

"....."

“In other words, the entire lineage, the entire doctrine, would fall into demonic obsession and massacre the entire world. Wow, what a picture.”

Viper laughed lightly.

“Among you are a former Constellation, a current active Constellation, a hunter who earned an alias for slicing up Constellations, an Apostle who almost destroyed the world with the power of Constellations. The rest aren't ordinary either. The elites of the Demonic Cult who survived the end of the world. The elite! Nearly a thousand subordinates capable of at least high-level Demonic Arts....”

Thud.

Viper picked up a stone and tossed it.

It fell in front of Ester.

“Looks like an easy force to destroy a world, right?”

"....."

“If the Heavenly Demon falls into demonic obsession, it’s natural for the entire family to follow suit, and if you all, fully obsessed, roam the tower, then that’s the end of the world. The end.”

Thud.

The second stone tripped up in front of Uburka’s front paw.

And then.

“King of Death.”

Thud.

“Heavenly Demon.”

Thud.

“Hey, Kim Gong-Ja.”

Thud.

“You need me.”

"....."

“Without me, you’re doomed.”

"....."

“When you feel like you’re about to go mad, when you think, ‘How can someone create such a hell? If you’re human, shouldn’t you at least do this much?’ When you start to get enraged, when your heart races and blood rushes, turning your body red with anger.”

Thud.

A small stone flew and tapped near my heart, just where Viper had pressed his fist earlier.

Looking over, Viper was grinning.

“I’ll be there to restrain you.”

"....."

“If you can’t be restrained, I’ll kill you.”

So that's it.

And the moment I fall into demonic obsession and am executed by Viper, the Orthodox Faction wins.

No.

It would mean the defeat of the Demonic Cult.

“Ha.”

I laughed.

“What a long... a battle that will take so long... 10 years? 20 years? 30 years? Maybe even centuries. Liǎofàn. Are you proposing a martial contest that lasts for centuries?”

“That’s right.”

Viper laughed.

“From my perspective, it’s like getting a contract job that lasts centuries, so thank you.”

Hmm.

Right.



“Alright, Liǎofàn.”

Ester looked up at me.

“Family Head.....?”

“Ester. There’s no time limit in a martial contest to begin with. To determine whether Demonic Cult or the Orthodox Faction is right, Master and the Head of the Martial Alliance had to fight 990 martial contests. Even as the world was ending, they continued their contests, yet no decisive outcome was reached. There’s no need to rush.”

Ester took a deep breath. Then, as if spitting fire, she said,

“Family Head, you will never fall down the wrong path.”

“Why do you think so?”

“Well, because I have already walked down that path.”

I thought of the clouds mixed with ashes, of the rain pouring

down red.

Yes.

That's right.

“Thank you.”

“So even if you seem to be straying, we will all unite to persuade you, grab you by the scruff of the neck if necessary, and pull you back.”

“I trust you.”

“There's no need for someone like him, though.”

“But still, I might fall down the wrong path.”

I patted Ester's head.

Then I looked at Viper, who was roughly wiping his mud-covered face with his hands.

“Liǎofàn.”

"....."

“Thank you.”

I bowed my head.

“For your effort for me. For spending time to defeat me. I really appreciate it.”

"....."

“You said you were jealous of me, but it wasn’t an ugly jealousy. You didn’t slander me. You didn’t plot to harm me. You just looked at me straight, acknowledged your jealousy, and tried to beat me. I think... you are beautiful.”

"....."

“Rather, it’s embarrassing for me to think that my Flying Ki Sword Technique would naturally extinguish your jealousy. You had already overcome your jealousy long ago. You’re incredible.”

I stood up. It was hard to breathe due to the sunken chest where the fist had hit, but I endured and walked towards Viper.

"....."

Seeing me approaching, Viper seemed a bit tense.

‘Yes.’

I know.

What to say at this moment, at this time.

‘It’s inevitable to feel tense.’

Facing the person you’ve envied, the person you’ve admired,

finally coming face to face, meeting at the same eye level, what would you want to hear from them?

What do they desperately want to hear?

What do they need?

As someone who envied and admired Yoo Soo-Ha more than anyone, I know.

“Liǎofàn.”

I lightly tapped his shoulder.

“You’re quite a madman yourself.”

“.....”

“I don’t dislike good madmen. I like them. You even thrust your fist into my heart... really, you’ve worked hard.”

"....."

"You were like the protagonist."

I smiled broadly.

"But if you think that's enough to cut my neck when I fall into demonic obsession, you're far from enough. Train harder. Don't neglect your practice."

Liǎofàn made a baffled face.

"Look at this guy talking. If someone saw this, they'd think you just won?"

"Hey. Think about the situation. When I fall into demonic obsession, my combat power rises, you know."

"What kind of calculation is that..."

Liǎofàn laughed helplessly. I also sat down in front of him and laughed.

“Let’s have a drink.”

Soon someone brought drinks. The cups were prepared, and they were filled with liquor.

Then a petal fluttered from a branch and settled on the rim of my cup.

[Counting complete.]

The observing tribe had made their decision.

[Option 2 Votes: 00.00%.]

[Option 1 Votes: 100.00%.]

[Stage Clear.]

Perhaps what they had been watching was not the stage, but the transparent tears that flowed in someone’s eye.

“Yeah, let’s have a drink, Kim Gong-Ja.”

He said.

“You crazy bastard.”

Thus.

[The 47th floor has been cleared.]

The last vote was completed.



# Chapter 283: Final Vote (4)

---

We held a banquet.

It was almost an instant clear of the 40th to 47th floors, and Viper had returned much stronger than expected from his solitary training. It was more than enough reason to celebrate. We, the leaders of the 5 great guilds, no longer regard a comrade's rapid growth with caution or fear. Like good friends, we simply congratulated him with pure hearts.

Very purely, indeed.

“For you, the Sword Saint! I specially made my signature milk cocktail.”

“Stop it! Stop! Elder Sword Saint! You know nothing about cocktails! You just want to enjoy the atmosphere of a cocktail bar but don’t understand the taste, so you just keep drinking milk like a kitsch dandy, using me as your sacrificial lamb... Pfft!?”

“Here, drink. It’s a cocktail made by a battle power gauge. I thought plain Kahlua milk would be boring, so I mixed in durian juice and espresso, then added milk. Isn’t this place similar to a seaside resort in the jungle? I’m going to measure your romanticism.”

“Suck... Ugh, ugh! Huk, huk, ugh!”

“Hoho, romanticism 1 million... 2 million... 5 million... 53 million... It’s rising. Being young is great. An old battle power gauge like me just needs to die.”

“You crazy old man, has the Medicine King infected you!?”

Such a purely chaotic scene.

“You guys really never grow up... Is there something wrong with your brain development...?”

Black Dragon Witch shook her head and enjoyed a simple drinking session with the Paladin. The neatly laid mat seemed to give off a vibe that said people with below-average intelligence should not approach. The Countess was also snuggling up to them on the mat, cooing 'nyangnyang'.

Peace. Elegance. Grace.

This was the true elegance of a drinking session, Black Dragon Witch seemed to be subtly showing off.

“One side is hell, meanwhile the other is paradise...”

I sipped my orange juice with a bitter smile.

Suddenly, a familiar voice popped up next to me.

“No. I think both sides are paradise.”

"....."

I turned my head.

A white-haired, doll-like face, embodying the ideal of a young girl – no, an idol – was right there.

“.....You always appear out of nowhere, Princess.”

“Yep! That's my specialty!”

The girl, clearing her throat, supported her waist with her hands.

[‘The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages’ manifests.]

The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages.

The guide for our journey from the 30th to the 49th floor.

Others know her as a Constellation, but she’s actually one of the Pillars, the highest authorities of the Tower, and most importantly, the true daughter of the Tower Master.

“Yaaaay— But really, it's amazing. Yep. The King of Death is amazing. I've praised him several times already, but still, he’s amazing! Yep yep! Definitely worthy of the candidate I had my eyes on!”

Thud.

The Princess casually sat next to me, smiling radiantly. Seeing her sneakily sitting next to me, I shifted a bit but still looked at her with wary eyes.

“What scheme are you plotting this time?”

“Nothing at all. Nothing! I just came to praise the King of Death.”

I sighed and drank my orange juice.

The daughter of a mother, a Constellation and a Pillar, laughed next to me, the sound of her voice carrying her inherent playfulness.

“I’m sincere about wanting to praise you. You, umm. You all really did well. I’ve been around various towers, but there’s never been one with such unanimous stage clearance like here.”

“There’s never been one?”

“Yep! The best case I've seen is when one species was completely ostracized. There's a saying, 'To make friends, create enemies first.' In that tower, the ascending candidates, the strategists, came up with a proven strategy. They agreed to make one species the scapegoat. Everything was the fault of that species. Flood? Their fault. Drought? Their fault. My life sucks? Actually, it's because of that species.”

"....."

“That's the [best case]?”

I looked at the Princess.

Every scream, hatred, and death in the Tower is embraced by the Tower Master, who feels all the pain on behalf of everyone.

That's not something a child who asked me to save her mother should say.

"Yeah."

The Princess munched on rice cakes.

“Because that one species, called the [Witch Clan], turned the tables, beat up the species they believed to be gods, the strategists, and even thrashed the other four strategists.”

"....."

Wow.

“Yes?”

“Yeah, yeah. Then they brainwashed the other species into slave soldiers and attacked the lower floors of the tower. They massacred all humans who were comfortably relying on the strategists. Humans were used for biological experiments. Happy ending, happy ending.”

The Princess smiled cheerfully.

“By the way, the [humans] I'm talking about are different from your [humans]. They looked like toads. Basically, the tables were turned, and those world's humans, who were treated like gods, suddenly became laboratory toads.”

“Goodness. Really...”

“Cool, right?”

The Princess continued munching endlessly on rice cakes with her cheeks puffing up like a hamster.

How can she still enunciate clearly while eating like that...

“That happened about 1000 years ago.”

Her eyes turned serious.

“You actually have a deep connection with them, King of Death.”

I blinked.

“Really?”

“Think about it.”



Her eyes suddenly became serious.

“You've met them before.”

"....."

Her playful nature always lingered around her, but her eyes were like untainted jewels, looking deeply into mine.

I couldn't recall immediately.

“People who conquered the tower 1000 years ago? How could I meet them? Even considering everything, the time difference is...”

“Just living simply, whether using Aura or Magic, it's common to live for thousands of years beyond the 50th floor. Isn't that obvious from Constellation Killer?”

Suddenly.

“.....Ah.”

The [hints] casually thrown by the Princess clicked together in my mind.

『Sword Emperor.』

『Huh?』

『150 years ago, you demolished one of the towers there, right?』

That was when I reached the 50th floor to meet Constellation Killer, using almost cheat-like methods.

The 50th floor was completely different from any stage I had experienced before - perilous and dominated by a fearsome [force].

『There used to be six towers.』

『But I demolished one.』

This [force] was entangled with the grudge of my Guardian

Spirit... the Sword Emperor.

A sworn enemy, so to speak.

So when I mimicked the Sword Emperor and shouted, this [force] immediately responded.

『Sword Emperorrrrrrrrrr!!』

The response was a bit intense, I recall.

『Sword Emperor, you've returned! I knew you would someday! Even when all the constellations announced your death, only we believed you, the bastard who wouldn't die even in death!』

『Possession or reincarnation? Doesn't matter! Either way is fine!』

『Kill him! We will kill you, Sword Emperor! We'll tear your soul to shreds and scatter it across the world, then defecate over it! Kill him! Kill!! Kill him now! In the name of the tower's history, chase him down to hell!』

I can't forget the sight of hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of wizards flying towards us on broomsticks.

Shivering slightly at the memory, I turned to the Princess.

She was beaming innocently.

"....."

Hmm.

Let's summarize.

1. 1000 years ago, a species reversed roles with gods and humans, becoming the tower's protagonists.

2. Their name is [Witch Clan].

3. Coincidentally, for over 1000 years, the 50th floor has been dominated by a force ruling as the stage boss.

4. The name of this force is [Magic Tower].

5. The Witch Clan used the species that persecuted them as slaves or lab rats. A total of 6 species suffered this fate: 5 species that ostracized the Witch Clan and toads that were humans in that world.

6. Coincidentally, the Magic Tower consists of 6 towers.

"....."

So.

“The witches from the Magic Tower I met on the 50th floor are the Witch Clan!?”

“Bababang- Correct!”

Bang!

The Princess set off a birthday firework.

“Yay, as expected of the King of Death! You're so quick-witted, it's easy to talk to you.”

“Insane.....”

As I realized how entangled and knotted my connections had become, I suddenly noticed an important question I had missed.

“Wait a minute. The main inhabitants of the tower can change?”

“Of course. If the Earth Spirits go berserk and massacre all the residents of your tower, from that moment, the inhabitants of the tower would no longer be humans but Earth Spirits. But as long as the King of Death is alive, that won't happen.”

“.....”

“Aegim Empire's citizens and the Revelations' residents could theoretically replace you and ascend the tower. It's just that you still monopolize the [rankings], so they haven't realized it yet.”

Rankings.

Indeed, currently, only those up to 7th place in the rankings could take the frontlines of the tower.

“If someone from the worlds we've conquered entered the top 7 rankings instead of us...”

“Yes! They would be able to ascend the tower too.”

The Princess shrugged.

“But it won't be easy for them to climb the rankings.”

“Why is that?”

“Well, they are busy fighting every day in their own worlds. Those who don't need to leave their land usually don't find a reason to ascend to the heavens. No matter how strong they are, the tower doesn't pay attention to them.”

Her words left a strange resonance in my heart.

After a moment, the Princess shrugged again.

“But there could be those aiming for ascension for other reasons. Like the Earth Spirit Tribe, or should I say, [Asuras]?”

The Princess' eyes twinkled playfully.

“Asuras are strong. They know there are higher worlds since a Constellation emerged among them. Not just that. They've mastered the incredible Demonic Heavenly God Art and even know how to deploy the Demonic Formations Art. They will rise in the ranks quickly, but... that will cause its own problems.”

Perhaps the child had inherited not only her mother's playfulness but also her venom.

“What kind of problems?”

“You're confident that the Earth Spirits will never betray you, and so are your comrades. But what about the vast majority of residents who haven't joined your conquest? Will they welcome the species you suddenly bring in as their children with open arms?”



"....."

“Hehehe.”

The Princess mockingly imitated laughter.

“What will you do? Will they believe you if you say, ‘Don't worry, there's no problem’? You're the King of Death with a good image, so maybe your words might have some impact, but what about the others? Only a handful know that Black Dragon Witch has changed. And those who know that Heretic has changed, can they be counted on one hand?”

"....."

“Will they trust you if you say, ‘Please believe us’? What about Viper? What about Sword Saint? Will the people living below the tower trust you? Will they trust the children you bring?”

I looked around slowly.

The noisy sounds of the banquet reached my ears.

“Sadly, I’ll have to end the durian course here.”

“I, I’m alive... Ugh. I survived...”

“Next is a cocktail made with the essence of the Mountain Calamity Tribe and top-quality salt hand-mined from Limepolis. Sword Saint, this cocktail is said to reveal its true flavor only when drunk in one go. Drink up.”

“Uh... Isn’t that just jelly and salt water?”

“Drink it.”

Indeed.

Regardless of age, gender, or race, everyone at the banquet mingled in their own way. There was jealousy, admiration, friendship, and a mix of immature hope and deep sighs.

Everyone was looking straight at each other.

Like Viper and I did to each other.

‘When you see a person as a person.’

I nodded.

‘That's enough.’

And I looked directly into the Princess' playful eyes.

“I can solve it.”

“Really?”

“Exactly, I can help make it happen. Well.”

I turned my head to Black Dragon Witch. She was playing cards with the Paladin, not particularly chatty, and seemed bored as she observed the scenery. Just then, our eyes met.

-What are you looking at?

Black Dragon Witch's lips moved. Her face was shaded under the palm leaves. Despite the distance, her telepathy resonated clearly in my ears.

“Please come over for a moment.”

-It's bothersome... Why?

“There's something important I need to tell both you and the Princess. It's important.”

Black Dragon Witch sighed and set down her cup. Before the cup could land, before her sigh could fully escape, she appeared right in front of me using [Teleportation].

“What's going on?”

“Before we head to the 50th floor, there's an event we need to prepare.”

“An event?”

“Yes. An event.”

Black Dragon Witch tilted her head. The Princess looked at me with interest.

I took in their gaze and slowly began to speak.

“Tomorrow. Let’s return to the 1st floor of the tower and hold a vote.”

“A vote? But we’ve already completed all the votes with the Ghost Tribe.”

“No. There’s one last vote remaining.”

I shook my head.

“We haven’t yet received the votes from [the people living in Babylon].”

"....."

Anastasia fell silent.

Indeed.

‘There’s one crucial vote remaining.’

The 5 major guilds have overcome past divisions and united.

The heads of the guilds have decided to look forward despite the scars in their hearts.

It’s a good thing.

It deserves celebration.

‘But it’s still just our story.’

The ordinary residents living day-to-day in Babylon don’t know this.

They're happy and cheering for the rapid conquest of the floors, supporting the massive guilds, but still, there are [unseen issues] lurking everywhere.

Like in a world shown by the Tower Master, a rebellion could occur in the Temple of All Gods, Black Dragon Witch could be betrayed, and the tower might crumble from within.

If we ignore the people living ordinary lives, they too will ignore us.

‘We need to talk to each other.’

No, talking isn't enough.

‘We need to show them. Make them feel and experience it.’

For that reason alone.

This event is essential.

“Anastasia.”

“Please prepare a press conference.”

Anastasia furrowed her brows.

“Mmm.”

“I will hold my second press conference since becoming the King of Death.”

“That kind of event... wouldn’t be bad. It’s a triumph worth boasting to the outside world...”

“Let not only journalists but also the residents of the tower freely attend the conference. They can ask questions, and I won’t avoid answering them.”

“And.”

I looked directly at Black Dragon Witch.

“Not just me, but I hope all of you will attend as well.”



"....."

“To all the people living in Babylon, let's speak honestly and straightforwardly.”

For us to ascend the tower together.

"....."

Black Dragon Witch was silent.

The silence was long.

Not because there was little to say, but because there was so much to say, and that silence was needed to withstand and swallow that onslaught. Therefore,

“It will be dangerous.”

The words that flowed from her were inevitably suggestive.

“A normal press conference can be controlled by us. We can control which newspapers and journalists are allowed, the questions permitted in the conference, the reactions, the seating arrangement, everything. But if we allow the residents to ask questions...”

“I know.”

"....."

Anastasia closed her mouth again, taking more time to digest the silence before speaking again.

“There are many who want to slander you.”

“That’s right.”

“The major guilds have secretly nurtured you as a star. The achievements of the King of Death are actually the work of the major guilds, but we intentionally credited them to the King of Death to build a star. The King of Death is just a marionette following the commands of the major guilds...”

“I know.”

“You’re an orphan. You brought your orphanage director to the tower. People will subtly belittle you for being an orphan, saying you’re taking care of those around you as soon as you got power...”

“Yes.”

“Those people have no right to hurt you. There are many like them. There's no need to create a place for you to get hurt.”

“There is.”

I nodded.

“There is. You know there is, right?”

"....."

“If someone wants to hurt or blemish me, of course, some of them are just petty like I used to be. But Anastasia. This is the consequence of the major guilds secretly running the tower for over a decade.”

I placed my palm over Anastasia's hand.

“They aren’t fabricating lies to hurt me. They’ve been treated as non-existent all this time, and now they want to hurt someone to prove their existence.”

“Hurting a completely unrelated person with a completely unrelated wound.”

“Hmm. Well. The world is full of irrational things.”

I smiled.

“But sometimes, a leader has to take on irrational tasks for a while.”

"....."

“You made me a leader.”

I spoke.

“So now, it’s my turn to be the leader of this tower.”

# Chapter 284: Final Vote (5)

---

Snip.

The hairdressing scissors crossed in mid-air.

“...Are you sure you want to leave it to me?”

“Yes.”

My reflection in the large mirror nodded back.

Over my shoulder, the orphanage director wore an unconvinced expression.

“I want you to cut it, Director. It’s a strong wish of mine.”

“The phrase ‘strong wish’ always sounds odd to me. It's as if a wish doesn't come true unless it's strong. Interestingly, right now, you are tied with a white cloth around your neck, and I hold quite sharp scissors in my hand.”

“Ah. Considering I'm an A-rank Hunter and you're F-rank, it becomes even more interesting.”

“Sigh...”

The director exhaled expressionlessly. Snip. The scissors made another unnecessary swing through the air.

“It's not too late to change your mind. Black Dragon Witch has prepared a professional hair designer for you. It's disrespectful to her if I, an amateur, handle this for a press conference.”

“Director, think about it.”

“Here we go again...”

“If you cut my hair, first of all, the hair designer will be happy. He gets paid without working, as he's already called to

standby outside right now. You mentioned it's disrespectful to Black Dragon Witch, but she's close friends with me. A little discourtesy like this is fine. After all..."

"Enough. I get it."

The director sounded weary.

"I shouldn't have encouraged debate during your lessons. You all became slick talkers despite being fools at heart."

-Indeed. You were the culprit behind his slick tongue...

Guardian Spirit commented, as if solving a decade-long mystery. But since the director couldn't hear, she kept mumbling.

"Kim Han-Bi was even flying around on broadcasts. Sometimes, I wish I could stitch his lips shut."

Kim Han-Bi, formerly known as Kim Han-Bi-Ja. Who exactly is he?



Seems like a guy who would star in a spin-off, playing a politician engaged in blackmail, violence, and betrayal...

“So... are you really going to make me cut it?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t blame me if it turns out badly.”

“Of course.”

“It’s not my fault if you look bad. It’s just your inherent ugliness showing.”

Isn’t that a bit harsh?

“Relax. I won't let it get to you.”

Snip—

The scissors cut through my hair.

"....."

I watched the mirror impassively. The director was also expressionless, focusing on the haircut. Recalling the old times made my lips curl into a faint smile.

"You used to cut our hair, Director."

"Yes, I did."

"Volunteers used to come from the nearby barbershop, didn't they? Why did you bother learning it yourself?"

"Volunteering isn't always free. They sometimes require paperwork, and it's only right to treat them well when they come. Plus, you have to give them a tip. If they come from far away, you have to pay for their taxi fare too."

"I see..."

“I thought it would be better to learn and do it myself.”

Snip.

"....."

"....."

Snip.

“Did it embarrass you?”

“Maybe a bit...”

I cautiously nodded.

“A bit, I guess.”

“Because of the school kids?”

“Yes. I couldn’t even say our Director cut it...”

“Understandable. Even kids who have their hair cut by their parents feel embarrassed at that age. Surprisingly, children care a lot more about their hair.”

“I think I used to say a sister or brother I knew cut it.”

“That makes sense.”

“Kids can be cruel, right?.”

“What do you mean? They become even more venomous when they grow up.”

Snip.

“I learned it diligently, knowing they’d be embarrassed. Was it for about 2 years? I think I became quite skillful, but just the fact that it was cut at the orphanage made them self-conscious.”

"....."

"Doing good is always like that."

Snip.

Black clumps of hair fell.

"Gong-Ja, even the best intentions can't overcome a single point of someone else's embarrassment. No matter how hard you try, the process of your efforts is never painted in the other person's mind. Volunteer work is always seen as clumsy, and people easily mock it."

"Is that a downside to accept?"

"No."

Snip.

"You just have to be more thorough."

The sound of hair being cut resembled silk being sliced.

“Thinking back, I shouldn’t have cut hair in the director’s office. While cutting, other kids would peek through the window. That’s why they felt embarrassed. I should have cleaned an unused storeroom, covered it with proper curtains, and set up a system to use it only for haircuts.”

"....."

“That’s how much calculation goes into cutting a child’s hair once. You must anticipate the child’s embarrassment, analyze why they feel that way, and create a system to prevent the cause of embarrassment.”

“Ah.”

I blinked.

“That’s why a beauty room was made when we entered middle school?”

“Yes. I bet it was the prettiest room in the whole orphanage.”

“Right.”

I recalled how my juniors enjoyed visiting that room.

“It’s fascinating... something...”

“Clever?”

“Yes, and...”

“Diligent.”

"....."

Hmm.

I’m beginning to see where half of my personality comes from.

In the mirror beyond, the Guardian Spirit seemed to have

realized something too.

“Remember, Gong-Ja. Good deeds, virtue, don’t materialize just from good intentions. Instead, plan as if you’re about to do something really bad.”

“Something bad...?”

“When trying to help someone, plan as if you’re plotting their murder. In your mind.”

Snip.

“Murder isn’t achieved just by intention. It doesn’t happen automatically, never. But if you must commit murder, what should you do?”

“You prepare the tools first.”

“And then?”

“Choose the murder location and time.”



“And then?”

“You learn about the victim's lifestyle. That way, you can murder them when they're most off-guard, and there's the least chance of getting caught.”

“And then?”

“...After the murder, you think about the body. Where and when to dispose of it, how to ensure it doesn't get discovered by the world, preparing an alibi in advance. And if the police come to investigate, you plan the expression, face, gestures, and words you'll use...”

“And then?”

“If you get caught, you think about that too. Escape routes, lawyers, defense arguments, or maybe a public opinion campaign, psychiatric evaluations...”

“That's right.”

Snip.

“Even villains put that much effort into a single act of evil.”

"....."

“Gong-Ja, if you want to do good, you must be more thorough than any villain.”

Creak.

“Don’t expect your kind heart to comfortably change the world for you. It’s not your intentions that create miracles. It’s your actions. Actions are better the more thoroughly they are calculated, analyzed, and implemented.”

"....."

“Did you calculate thoroughly?”

Thud.

“Don’t overlook the emotions others might feel due to your frank attitude and good heart, even unconsciously.”

Thud.

“Have you considered potential enemies to your plan? Did you simulate the smallest to most annoying possibilities? Do you know the identity of your enemy? The media? Public opinion? Your image?”

Thud.

"You need confidence, Gong-Ja."

Thud.

“Goodness is like water, but it’s not a river that flows gently down the mountain, nor a waterfall that breaks everything in its path. If goodness is water, it’s simply a well. When the season is dry and the land parched, you have to break the soil and shatter the rock to finally draw a bucket of water from the well.”

Thud.

“Kill them.”

Thud.

“Proceed with your good deeds as if you’re about to commit a murder.”

Thud.

“Then, finally...”

Thud.

“Those who stand with you will feel proud.”

Yes.

Director.

I understand.

Now, where to?

To do some good.

“Ah! Master!”

Heretic Inquisitor.

“The venue is ready! Ahaha. Preparing in just a day was indeed a challenge. For this past week, we mobilized all the manpower of the Temple of All Gods to set up the space!”

Did you consider the presence of a traitor within the Temple of All Gods?

“Yes! I even deliberately baited them, thinking they might plant a bomb or something. Hmm. No bites, though. It seems they are more meticulous than I thought.”

Right.

But they won't be more meticulous than us.

“Ahaha. Of course!”

Good.

Bambolina.

Let's go.

“Security is perfect.”

Black Dragon Witch.

“Just between us, Black Dragon is actually composed of four separate organizations, each working independently. They compete and scheme against each other. I had them take turns inspecting security, promising to cut the funding of any group that misses a loophole by half. They were all eager, but nothing was found.”

You still have a ruthless way of working....

“So what? That's who I am. Don't like it?”

Having a reliable friend like you is a fortune in my life.

"Oh my. Thanks for telling me the truth."

My pleasure.

Anastasia.

Let's go.

".....Your attire is the same as usual. It doesn't look shabby."

Paladin.

"Your hair looks a bit roughly cut. Are you really okay with that? Most of Babylon's residents are coming to see you, maybe even to speak, and probably to curse at you."

The Director cut it for me.

"Hmm?"

She used to do it often when I was young.

"....."

I'm thinking of bringing it up when I get the chance.

".....?"

This is the most comfortable for me.

It feels like the Director's warmth is still on the ends of my hair, reminding me where I came from, where I am. It's comfortable.

I wanted to meet everyone in my most natural state.

—Something like that.

“Really..... Is it intentional?”



Yes.

“A good strategy. Even better because it's not a lie. You're exploiting your orphanage background to create a strong impact on people. That's.....”

“Hmm. Since everyone in the Tower has lost their hometown, it should resonate strongly.”

Countess.

“While it may sound harsh, your background isn't a negative but a huge plus in the Tower. There are many who've lost their families. Losing a country applies to all residents. Being an orphan symbolizes losing everything from birth. But...”

Overdoing it could backfire.

“Oho?”

My background is just a slight catalyst for empathy to start the conversation. That's it.

Dragging out the orphan story will bore or even annoy the audience. We are people who, despite losing much, decided to live anew.

“Right. A very apt observation. ...Hmm. I thought you were just going to show a naïve face at the press conference, but you’re not that type. I trust you a bit more now.”

Pioneer.

“Hmm?”

We’re not refugees or exiles.

‘Residents of the Tower’ sounds too bland.

People here, they need a name.

"....."

From now on, I’ll refer to those living in the Tower as [Pioneers].

“Ha.”

A name defines a person's life.

How one greets the day changes.

Waking up in the afternoon thinking, ‘I’m unemployed’, versus waking up at dawn thinking, ‘I’m a working person’, changes the day. Accumulated days transform into different lives.

Countess.

We will be Pioneers.

Starting today.

"....."

“...What to say about that.?”

"Hmm."

"It's truly a thought befitting your real name."

"Such a Kim Gong-Ja\* remark."

\*Reminder that his name means Confucius.

Let's go.

Patricia.

Nisha.

"I've decided to oversee the meeting's security myself."

Sword Saint.

"As the Vice-Captain, you should join the stage and take questions. For now, I'll act as the Captain of the Vigilante

Corps and oversee the security inside. Don't worry about any accidents, as long as you're there."

Thank you.

Mr. Callenbury.

"We've finished checking everyone entering the meeting."

Viper.

"Using skills really makes it easier. Detecting weapons, explosives, poisons, just positioning those with such skills does the job. Haha! Though there were hundreds of thousands lining up, our guys managed to clear them all efficiently. It's a good time we live in."

"Internet around here will be down for a while. I asked the Wide-Area Communicator, ranked ninth, for a favor. Even if someone secretly records, they won't be able to broadcast it. So..."

"The meeting will be like a small, isolated island. If the Tower is an isolated island from the outside world, then

within that island, another secluded island is being created, perhaps?”

“Hey, hey, don’t interrupt me. Anyway, that’s right. We’ve confiscated all smartphones and recording devices at the entrance. People were so annoyed! Our Celestial Martial Guild members nearly died out there, man.”

“You only know how to use brute force. We have to find some way to use you.”

“Huh? Are you challenging me to a guild war?”

“Look at him, getting all high and mighty just because he sparred with Kim Gong-Ja....”

Ahaha.

"Huh?"

No, I’m just happy.

".....?"

Let's go.

Liǎofàn.

“Leave it to me!”

Great.

“However, there’s a huge crowd at the meeting. Wow. It spilled from Babylon Square to the alleys?”

“Ho, are there really so many people? We were so focused on the preparations that we didn’t notice the current situation!”

“Yeah! Basically, everyone living in the Tower is there. It’s a whole different level from when you first held a press conference.”

Thud.

“Hmm... Since the public can ask questions too.”

“The fact that they can see all of us together adds to the appeal. The media has already started spreading ridiculous stories. Claiming that the five great guilds are about to unite into one...”

Thud.

“Ahaha. It's easier to think of it as preheating the grill for us!”

“In case the meeting runs long, we've cleared all buildings, accommodations, and hotels nearby. No problem. Most of them are owned by me anyway. Be it half a day, a full day, two days, three days, or even four—”

Thud.

“Let them talk as they wish, Kim Gong-Ja.”

Okay.



“We are always ready to support you.”

Everything is ready.

Alright.

Don't forget to smile.

Even if it won't be recorded or remembered.

We are about to converse with all the [Pioneers] living in the Tower.

"....."

Politely.

With respect.

Even if they see us as demons, monsters, blackmailers,

agitators, we will always treat them as individual humans.

“...That’s a tough conversation.”

“You're talking about it so casually. Really.”

Can we do it?

“I’ll try my best.”

“I'll give it my all.”

Okay.

Good.

Then, Bambolina.

“Yes! Master!”

Open the door.

“Understood!”

Creak—

# Chapter 285: Final Vote (6)

---

The bustling crowd was palpable.

"....."

The murmurs continued.

"....."

Murmurs filled the air.

.....That's him..... Oh, it feels weird not being able to use cameras. Why aren't cameras allowed according to the rules..... Are they filming this themselves? Planning to distribute the original source later? .....The conference might last for days. With various information circulating online, it would create confusion, so until the end of the conference..... Days? Is that even possible? What about our sleep? Do we go home to sleep and come back? .....The 5-star hotels under Sang-Ryun are all booked out today..... Wow. Really? .....

Even the 7-star hotels are empty. They say if you participate in the conference, you get a discount of 1/100 of the regular price, but I'm not sure if that's true..... Someone check during the break! .....Amazing..... King of Death is truly a treasured gem to the major guilds.....

The buzzing continued.

".....What are you doing, Kim Gong-Ja?"

Thump.

"You should go up to the stage first and greet everyone. Why are you spacing out! They took away the cameras, so no flashes will go off. Are you losing your mind because tens of thousands are looking at you all at once?"

Hmm.

Well.

Seeing these people, who I'll be with moving forward, makes me feel anew.

“.....Cut the nonsense. Get on the stage already.”

Yes.

I must go.

It's time.

"....."

Thump.

"....."

The murmurs grew.

"....."

Thump.

"....."

The murmurs.

"....."

Thump.

Murmurs...

"....."

.....

.....

Ah. Ah.

Actually, we don't need a mic test.

The thing I'm holding now is not even connected to a wire. I just prepared it because it felt awkward standing in front of people empty-handed. I'm speaking to you all directly with my own voice, using my aura. It's commonly known as telepathy, right? Similar to a lion's roar. I'm amplifying my voice and spreading my aura with it, to speak to you.

The voice you are hearing is my voice, unfiltered by any device.

The face you are seeing is my unadorned face, not prettied up for any media.

So....

You are seeing me right now.

Hello, Pioneers.

Nice to meet you.

Ranked 2nd among the hunters, Vice-lord of the Demonic Cult, Moon of the Ivansia family, Head of the King of Death Family. Alias, King of Death.



Kim Gong-Ja at your service.

I look forward to working with you.

"....."

Ah.

Not much of a reaction.

Was my greeting too abrupt?

"....."

Today, I have arranged this meeting to have a relaxed conversation with you all. Some of my colleagues questioned the necessity, but I insisted on the importance of this gathering.

Despite your busy lives.

Thank you for taking the time to gather here.

Let me first call my colleagues...

“Why didn't you allow the entry of recording equipment!”

Ah. Thank you for the prompt question.

But let me first call my colleagues...

“I'm from Summons Times, a hunter with an alias, Jeon Seo-Gu. Not only our reporting equipment, but even the personal smartphones, cameras, recorders of the individuals were all confiscated by the general members of Celestial Martial Guild. This measure was taken even before the start of the conference. Many are curious and even worried about this decision.”

Hmm.

“The tyranny of the major guilds has been an issue for a long time, but this conference seems especially dangerous. It's just a grand-sounding event without any record, a 'blind conference.' Aren't you just trying to create a meeting where no records are

kept?"

.....

"King of Death! Please respond to the media's question!"

.....

".....King of Death? Are you listening?"

.....

"Please respond to the question..."

I made that decision.

"..Yes?"

Regarding the recording equipment. I requested a complete ban on their entry. Black Dragon Guild opposed it, but I

persuaded them, and I convinced the other guilds, leading to the massive turnover you see now.

“Does that mean... the other guilds acted according to the King of Death's wishes?”

You said you're from Summons Times, right?

"....."

And you have an alias.

“Yes, that's correct.”

There's no need to reveal your name here. Feel free to mention your affiliation, but just saying you live in a certain area of Babylon, on a certain street or in a certain building, or what you do for a living is sufficient.

Or you don't have to say anything at all.

"....."

I banned recording and filming equipment, not for me, but for you.

"....."

“What do you mean.....?”

We have an unprecedented number of people gathered here in the history of the tower. As I mentioned, I'm using telepathy, and the aura consumption right now is immense. That means there are many of you here.

At such a moment.

"....."

Right. If...

If filming or recording were freely allowed.

Those seated in front or standing in the back, or those watching me from the rooftops, those over there, would be

busy flashing their smartphones.

The reporter who just asked me a question must be holding a camera in one hand.

"....."

If you all did that...

Then, I'd be conscious of the outside world.

"The outside world, you say?"

Yes.

The people outside the tower watching us.

If filming was allowed, it would instantly flow out to the outside world.

“Why...”

You, the reporter, must know.

No.

Everyone gathered here knows.

When the outside world watches us, we try to look good.

Those who left their families behind would want to show they are doing well.

Those who were almost forced to transfer from the main office in the outside world would want to show they are living just as well here.

Refugees, minorities, etc., who had difficult circumstances in the outside world, would deliberately dress up to show off.

That's what we do.

"....."

I don't want to do that.

I don't want to do that to you.

In a place where I came to talk to you, listening to your voice, seeing your faces, but in my mind, I don't want to be preoccupied with someone else I don't know, can't see, and will never meet in my life.

I am sure that it's not respectful to you.

"....."

Think about it, everyone.

When was the last time we had [time just for us]?

Talking and drawing attention to what happens in the tower through newspapers, broadcasts, live streams, internet, communities... Fighting and getting heated up over it.



Although this place is supposedly eternally cut off from the outside world, aren't we sharing stresses with the people of the outside world more than ever?

We live in the tower.

And we will live in the tower forever.

In this place, where once you enter, you can never escape.

"....."

So, let's turn off our concern for the outside world, even just for a moment.

The voice you are hearing is my voice.

I am not speaking to anyone else but you.

The face you are seeing is my face.

I did not dress up my face to show to anyone else but you.

Everyone.

At least for this moment, I am only looking at you.

Let's talk for us now.

"....."

"Right!"

"There must be over a hundred thousand smartphones collected. Wonder if we can get them back properly..."

"Just complain to the Celestial Martial Guild."

"The hair style doesn't look weird..."

"King of Death! King of Death!"

“Hey, be quiet...”

If anyone has something to say or a question for me, please raise your hand. Ah, just a moment please. There's still an order to follow.

Don't worry.

Right now, I have enhanced not only my voice but also my vision with aura. My sense of time is flowing 6 to 12 times slower than a regular human who cannot use aura. You can tell because I haven't stumbled or bitten my tongue even once while speaking.

Ahaha.

You can do a lot when you are skilled with aura. Alright.

I won't miss anyone who raises their hand first or feels unfairly deprived of their turn. There will be absolutely no such thing.

Since no filming is taking place, there's no risk of your identity being exposed.

Please feel at ease.

When it's time for questions, just leisurely raise your hand.

"....."

Now, let me introduce my colleagues.

In order, Black Dragon Guild's Black Dragon Witch, Heretic Inquisitor of the Temple of All Gods—.

---

“Question. A rookie, secretly raised with the support of the 5 great guilds, a manufactured star - rumors are rife. Is it true?”

Hmm.

If you saw my old apartment room, you'd know it's not true...

My life brightened with lottery tickets.

I was the type who thought, why buy such things when I could buy stick mix coffee and make rice soup instead of just a cup of Americano. But now I've been adding all kinds of strange things to the point it's no longer coffee but something else entirely.

I'm lucky.

You might also consider buying a lottery ticket once a week.

“Is that an advertisement to increase the sales of the lottery tickets issued by the Merchants Union?”

It wasn't my intention, but seeing the Countess laugh next to me, seems like it is.

I apologize.

“Since ranking 3rd and above, you've been operating power privately, bringing people from the outside world into the tower. There's also talk of contact with a congressman from your hometown. Do you have any relations with powerful people in the outside world?”

Uh, my official contact is managed by Black Dragon Witch.

Black Dragon Witch, what do you think?

“Currently, it’s being used quite usefully.”

"....."

“Beyond that, I cannot say much as it involves the confidentiality of various countries outside. However, one thing is for sure, King of Death knows almost nothing about it.”

My goodness.

“For reference, the person King of Death brought into the tower is the orphanage director. A person who looked after King of Death since childhood, akin to a parent. It’s a story of settling in the tower and bringing their parent to live here. I’d be grateful if you thought of it that way.”

.....

Yes, the director is my...

.....

The person who gave me half of what I am.

"....."

The person who cut my hair today is the director too.

Though they said they didn't want to.

I pushed through forcefully.

I plan to force them a lot more in the future.

Thank you.

"King of Death!"

Yes.

“Is it true that you and Black Dragon Witch are dating?”

It’s good that I’m meeting you all officially today.

I haven’t yet gained enough power to commit a public murder without being punished.

I don’t have such power, and I never will, so be thankful for that.

Above all, be thankful that my one and only love is not here today.

Next.

“King of Death!”

Ah. Yes.



“There are rumors floating in reality and on the internet that the Master of Temple of All Gods calls you ‘Master’!”

Hmm.

“Are the two of you dating?”

Can’t we remove this person from here?

# Chapter 286: Final Vote (7) (Part 1 Complete)

---

“...It’s a big deal. It’s break time but the crowd isn’t thinning.”

Is that so?

“Look over there. The number of people in the alleyway is increasing! My goodness. Originally, it was expected not to exceed 7 hours no matter how long it took!”

It’s proof that the conference is successful.

That’s good for you, Anastasia, isn’t it?

You were so anxious it might fail.

“...Even if it's successful, it's too successful, that's the problem. Right now, there are 13 B-rank hunters attached next to [Wide-Area Communicator] as batteries. They are using their aura to block external transmissions and broadcasting, but, I don't know the details, they are almost at their limit, smelling like spinach from their mouths.”

Eh.

Please tell them to hang in there a little longer.

".....How long is a little?"

Well.

There are people setting up tents over there.

At least until tomorrow?

“You crazy bastard.....”

I hear that often.

“Master!”

Yes?

“After quickly surveying a hundred people, the questions they want to ask next are exceedingly diverse! There are even questions our guild masters can’t answer! Ahaha.”

Hmm.

What do you mean?

“It seems we might need to call on [Duchess Ivansia] and [Chairman Seimslam] too!”

---

"Good day. Thank you for taking my question. I run a café at Babylon Crossroads. We also deliver.”

.....

Ah, the place Yoo Soo-Ha frequently ordered from...

“Pardon?”

No. Sorry.

It’s nothing.

Please refrain from advertising your store and continue with your question.

“Ah, yes.... alright. Cough. My question is for the King of Death. Recently, the raid teams have been on a successful streak, significantly expanding our tower’s territory. It happened with the Aegim Empire and now the newly conquered new continent. However, currently, access to these floors is strictly controlled by the 5 great guilds.”

Yes.

“Isn’t that a monopoly?”

.....

“In essence, the 5 great guilds are monopolizing the resources of the new continent, intending to further strengthen their influence within the tower based on that...”

“Hmm. Let me take this question.”

Raviel.

“Continue, please.”

“Uh..... My point is, there are many smaller guilds in the tower, even guilds barely functioning with only three members, like a hole-in-the-wall shop. These guilds hardly benefit from such developments....”

“What kind of benefits are you referring to?”

“Err.... like that....”

Raviel.

Raviel is so beautiful that looking directly at her can cause a

stun effect.

Please be a bit more considerate of the questioner.

“Indeed. Is that so?”

That’s exactly it.

“I was distracted by my own appearance.”

Yes. Like the sun that cannot be gazed upon directly.

“Sorry about that. Born and raised in the empire, I’m not accustomed to this culture. In my heart, I initially consider each of you as a baron at least.”

“A baron, you say. Oh. I’m just...”

“An owner of a bakery, right? I know. But aren’t you living a more prosperous and comfortable life than a baron in our empire?”

"....."

‘You and us are different. Indeed, in many ways. Just like how you were different from the people of the outside world.’

"....."

"Among you, there must be those coveting the territory of my empire. Those who yearn for the rights to it. When forces clash, friction is inevitable, and I, as well as the nobles of the empire, are already prepared."

"That means..."

"12 years. For the next 12 years, there will be extreme limitations on private sector exchanges."

"....."

"We are already sending exchange students to the 29th floor's school city. They will learn about public education and get accustomed to your culture, then return to the empire to handle negotiations. Until then..."



.....

“Just wait.”

.....

"I ask of you all as a representative of the empire.”

.....

"What if..."

Hmm.

“What if many people can’t wait? Oh. I’m sorry for not introducing my affiliation first. I am a priest of the Temple of All Gods.”

“It’s fine. Ask your question.”

“Yes. Thank you. As you know, Your Grace... The power of our tower is overwhelming. If we intend to, for example, we could make the empire a colony...”

"....."

“I'm not making this up. Whether jokingly or seriously, there are actually people who think and talk like this. The logic of reality is harsh, isn't it? Isn't that right? So....”

“You're wrong.”

“Pardon?”

“The premise is wrong. You are not overwhelmingly stronger than the empire.”

“...I'm not sure what you mean...? Even without mentioning scientific prowess, if our hunters unite to attack...”

“Why do you think you all will unite?”

Squeeze.

"King of Death will help me."

"....."

"Those who help King of Death will also help us. Just that already makes us as powerful as what you call the 5 great guilds. The Asuras who see King of Death as a father and friend will help, and the races forming the Fire River Council with the Asuras will help too. Look. Where do you see the overwhelming force difference?"

"....."

"That term [tower's force] you mentioned is wrong. You should have said [tower's villains]. If that's the context, indeed, the force you mentioned would be strong."

"....."

"But as strong as they are, we are too."

Raviel.

“There must be cynics among you who coldly say that’s just how the world is. While they spend a day in cynicism, my consort, their enemy, built power through bloodshed. He formed alliances. He established confederations. Regardless of race, nationality, and even world boundaries, he built the current family just to confront them.”

.....

“So if you ask me if the world is inherently like that, I have no reason to go along with your answer. Is that the logic of the world you live in? That’s unfortunate. I choose to make the place where the King of Death is my world. My heart needs his voice to breathe.”

.....

Yes.

Right.

I’m on your side, Raviel.

"What....."

Forever.

"Aren't we all people of the tower? I mean, haven't we been supporting the tower's conquest all this time? We couldn't physically participate often due to the rankings, but that was unavoidable..."

"I am Ukrainian."

Anastasia.

"I came here and founded Black Dragon, which somehow became the top guild in the tower. Back then, many people who never noticed me before started to show up saying 'Let's stand together as fellow Ukrainians.'"

"....."

"If I had followed the logic of [being from the same place], over half of the executives in Black Dragon would have been Ukrainian. But I didn't."

“That's...”

“Right. Things have gotten somewhat better. So now, shall we create a [Tower Nation], invent a [Tower Citizenship], and establish [Our Tower]? They cast us out, but look at them now, watch as we, now thriving in the tower, mock you, the outside world. No, all worlds.”

"....."

“I wanted to, but.”

“I won’t.”

I could, but.

“Tell them to fuck off.”

"....."

“Ah, it feels like I can finally live without the media blackout. I should have asked [Wide-Area Communicator] to set up such

a setting earlier. Really. I need to start getting rid of this nature of living and dying by public attention...”

That’s also a charm of yours, Anastasia.

“Shut up. Anyway, I hate it. I’m sick of it. I am the Black Dragon Witch, the 3rd ranked hunter and a guild master. I’ll take care of my guild members, look after the people around me, and treat those who treat me as a person with respect. How thankful is it that we have no language barriers in the tower? Every morning, I pray with gratitude to some unknown being who demolished the damned language barriers.”

“Ahaha.”

Bambolina.

“I’m from Bulgaria! But I haven’t registered with any public institution, and I don’t even have a passport! Technically, there’s no way to prove my origin. So, maybe I could be from Serbia or Romania!”

" ..... "

“I am just the Heretic Inquisitor. Everyone, believe in your own god, worship with your heart, and be careful not to fall into heresy! If you feel the world is testing you, knock on the door of the Temple of All Gods anytime!”

“And serve them espresso coffee...”

Liǎofàn.

“I'm Chinese. Well, there are some from my hometown in the Celestial Martial Guild. But the strongest always prevail. The weak, whether they are from the continent, islands, or jungle, end up just cleaning the guild building.”

"....."

“But King of Death turned out to be stronger than me, what can I do? As someone said, the world is harsh—”

"....."

“I was born in Venezuela.”



Patricia.

"I still see the scenery of my hometown when I close my eyes. The village I lived in had beautiful trails. There was no glass on the dirt roads. When you stepped on them, you felt the earth beneath your feet. When I went to the city for studies, I often visited the bars at night. Old jazz, worn-out pianos... I miss everything."

"....."

"But that's not all of my heart."

Patricia?

Why suddenly stand up...

"Babylon's 11th District Gourmet Street is the best. The paella they occasionally make there, although lacking saffron, boasts an exquisite taste. So much so that during the recent conquest, I thought of that shop three times in several days. Shop owner, you are remarkable."

"....."

“Respect to the seventeen heroes who opened a jazz bar in the 6th District. Hats off to the chamber orchestra and the eleven quartets. I don't understand why they thought they would succeed in the tower when they failed in the outside world! Marvelous!”

“Bravo!”

“Long live Little Venezia!”

“Who's that? If I catch the one who just mentioned a failed shop, be ready for an inspection raid by the Vigilante Corps.”

“Play the piano again, please!”

“Goddess!”

“Please release a record! I'll buy 10! No, I'll download it 10 times!”

“The 7th District's walking path is a marvel, whoever created it. As I heard, a hunter ranked around 200 secretly digs up the path and makes gardens at 4 AM daily. He's really jobless to not reveal his identity. Amazing. I spent a day there

out of the 30.”

“Agree!”

“I love my homeland!”

.....

"But loving my homeland is like loving music!"

.....

“If I love the tower, it’s only because music never ceases here!”

.....

“We can’t always love like jazz. Songs have their silence. But..., damn it. Fine. I’ve decided to establish a separate guild named [Black Knight] with Black Dragon Witch and King of Death!”

“What?”

“Guild?”

“Really?”

“A music guild. A jazz guild. A new form of music called 'Bloody Opera'... Damn it. If anyone who knew me from the past comes to watch, I'll kill them. I'll throw them in prison.”

“Goddess is returning!”

“The return of Little Venezia!”

“Finally ditching the helmet and armor?”

“I love you, Goddess! I've been waiting!”

.....

Princess.

[The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages listens attentively to your words.]

The voting.

Start it, please.

[The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages asks if you're sure it's okay to proceed.]

Yes.

The tribes that must consent for us to ascend the tower are not only the Mountain Calamity Tribe, but also the Fairy Tribe, Gill Fish Tribe, Vampires, Dream Demons, Pure Humans Race, Earth Spirit Tribe, and Ghost Tribe, and also us humans.

[The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages nods in agreement.]

[The privilege of the pillar is activated.]

[Quests on the 48th and 49th floors are altered.]

[Stage Integration.]

[Sequential Layer Progression.]

The people living in the Aegim Empire too.

The old man who remains in the snowfield, guarding the pillar of his sect.

The girl sitting on the porch of an old-fashioned Hanok, gazing at the sky.

[All characters belonging to 'the tower' are granted voting rights.]

[Regardless of the stage, the exercise of the voting right is equal.]

“Huh?”

“What's this notification...”

[Edited footage of the conquest from the 30th to 47th floors is compiled.]

[The edited footage is played for those with voting rights.]

[The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages sends a message saying 'I edited it decently, so don't worry about secrets being revealed! It's a complimentary service!']

For us to be simply us.

[Currently.]

[The quest on the 49th floor is in progress.]

If fortune accompanies us.

[Voting begins.]

Our next story might start on an even higher stage than before.

---

### Translator's Note:

Hello everyone! I really think I should do these notes often because there's so much I end up wanting to talk to everyone about, but then I think about how I don't want to hinder your immersion in this fabulous story with my nonsense... Anyway, part 1 of the novel is now completed! I gotta say, it's been a ride translating these 286 chapters. From the Hellfire Mansion to Martial Realm, from Sormewin Academy to Shinseo High, from Guru to the Tower Master's World. It's been an insane, incredibly enjoyable experience for me. It's one thing to read a story, but when translating, you truly realize how beautifully presented this story is. The language and connections often made me baffled, making me re-think my own creative skills hahaha.

Leaving that aside, I'm truly glad I took up translating this novel. I'm also glad a lot of you have been actively talking to me and other readers about it in our discord. I hope we all can continue doing that even during Part 2, which I will start translating very soon! Thank you for reading my translations and I hope to see you all in Part 2~



# Chapter 287: 50th Floor (1)

---

The Black Knight's ambitiously prepared first performance was a colossal failure.

"Impossible..."

The Paladin covered her face with a gesture of despair.

Was it because she had practiced the blood fire drama too fervently over the past month? Every gesture, every movement was imbued with dramatic flair; the Paladin's current pose was an artwork titled 'Despair' itself. It was the kind of art that wouldn't sell for even a gold while the artist was alive, only to become wildly popular posthumously, a needless coffin-dweller.

"I wanted to return to music but... Maybe it was my greed."

The Paladin laughed hollowly.

At her feet lay letters, discarded like autumn leaves.

"I'm disappointed, that was the worst, I don't know what sin my ears committed in a past life to have to endure a performance like yesterday's", etc. A salad of curses and contempt was laid out before her.

"I shall retire now. Kim Gong-Ja. No, not as a musician. As a hunter. As a human, I want to retire from life..."

Oh no.

"Yes. The ignorant masses cannot understand us after all."

The Black Dragon Witch?

"Humans are all trash. They don't even remember what they've done. Living like beasts, devouring their own pasts like flesh... Haha. Do we need to sacrifice ourselves for such beasts? Kim Gong-Ja?"

Her eyes dangerously twinkled.

Was she truly corrupted as her alias, the Black Dragon Witch, suggests? Anastasia, the ultimate boss, laughed ominously. Haha. It was a laugh only permitted to the true mastermind, sending shivers down my spine.

“King of Death! You are no longer my master!”

The Heretic Inquisitor laughed brightly.

No, that's not it.

Upon closer inspection, it wasn't the Heretic Inquisitor but a blond Welsh Corgi styled like the Inquisitor's hair, a literal son of a bitch.

A dog was panting heavily, incessantly drooling on my pants.

“I was born with a mission to guide the lowly humanity! Woof! Now I understand why the gods of the universe have been whispering to me. I am the promised savior! Don't worry, woof! You will be specially placed in an exclusive iron cell and provided with high-quality jerky three times a day! Woof woof!”

What kind of dogshit...

No, it's literally a dog, right?

“Hey, King of Death.”

What is it, Liǎofàn?

Wait a moment. Why are you holding my Shiny?

Why are you blushing and acting shy?

“This is really embarrassing to say, but...”

[Shiny declares it will speak for itself.]

Shiny shimmered intensely.

I must admit I named this sword very well.

[Shiny says it and Viper have decided to date.]

What?

[Shiny sings. It says seeing its previous master safe and its current master finding happiness with a partner, it too desires to find its own happiness. Seeing the woeful warrior wandering day by day, it felt that his side must be graced with a sword like itself.]

“I too thought the same, perhaps? The genre of a heroine residing in a sword has a long and storied history. It’s regrettable that this sword isn’t the sharpest 【Japanese Katana】 known for its “sharpness”, but that’s an everyday ordeal I must endure.”

Insane.

Viper was spouting some typical Viper nonsense, and the adolescently sparkling Shiny, at least 10000 years old in actual age and... a sword by appearance.

Among these, I couldn't decide who was the real son of a bitch.

Was it possible that neither of them were, and I, who harbored such thoughts, was the real son of a bitch?

Or perhaps the whole world was, and I was the only one who wasn't?

At the very least, wasn't it clear that the Welsh Corgi Heretic Inquisitor, still rubbing its face against my trouser leg and wagging its tail fervently while barking "Woof! Woof!", was indeed a son of a bitch?

Is my life over?

-Damn it.

I turned my head.

Guardian Spirit was making a face like a bone soup of pork back-bone stew.

-Hey. Hey! No matter how much I have to die and see unsightly things, why do I have to join you in watching your dog dream? Huh? Wake up, you zombie son of a bitch! Wake up already! Open your eyes!

Why?

It's entertaining to watch.

If you don't like my dog dreams, then give me something.

-You devil... Wait. Sorry, I was wrong. My apologies, zombie. No, Gong-Ja. Sir Gong-Ja. I was wrong. So please, don't include me in your dog dreams! Stop it! I won't dance to that! Damn it, stop! Stop it!!

Alright.

Another day begins with the refreshing screams of Guardian Spirit.

---

-You just wait till you get to the 50th floor. Ah, just, ah, I won't give you any advice, I'll just watch you fail! You're so arrogant because you managed to get the Constellation Killer, but that was just luck. The 50th floor is a damn brutal place. Huh? Even if you come later crying and clinging to my trouser leg, I won't give you a single piece of advice.

"Ah. A grown adult, getting sulky. What a sight."

-Just look back at your dog dreams! Hell, it's not even occasionally, but always! I'm tired of that bullshit!

I ignored Guardian Spirit's complaints and descended the stairs.

"Oh. Are you awake, Gong-Ja?"

The Paladin was sitting in the basement.

She was fully armored except for her gauntlets, which were removed as she fiddled with her smartphone.

"Yes. Good morning, Patricia."

"Good timing."

The Paladin smiled and held up her phone.



“I was waiting for you to come down. Look. It’s a sensation.”

“What is it?”

“What else? The blood fire drama, the blood fire drama. The responses to our last performance are starting to come in.”

“Ah...”

I suddenly remembered the dream I had today.

The fantasy of the Paladin retiring after the failed performance resurfaced, and I felt uneasy.

“How is it? Are the reactions good?”

I approached and looked at the smartphone screen. Swipe swipe. As the Paladin moved her finger, headlines flashed across the screen.

“It’s amazing! The internet is buzzing!”

The Paladin couldn't contain her excitement.

“People in the outside world are astonished by our new stage. Can you believe it? Renowned directors are constantly contacting me by email.”

“Heh.”

That's a relief.

It seems the dream I had last night was really just a dog dream.

I felt a sense of relief and started reading the headlines.

『Blood Fire Drama: A Dance Genre That Transcends the Limits of the Body.』

『Dancers, directors, musicians not separated!』

『Germany's Maestro says, 'This is the jazz of the dance world.'』

『A feast of Aura that changes dramatically with every performance.』

『Is the Tower now attempting to surpass the Old World in art?』

The response was overwhelmingly positive.

A satisfied smile overflowed on the Paladin's lips.

“We even got a feature article about us. Really, they didn't care a bit when I was doing jazz, and now they're making a fuss. It's bittersweet...”

That's when it happened.

-Aaaahhhh!

A scream came from the other side of the basement.

The Paladin glanced briefly at the source of the sound, and I followed her gaze. There stood a prison gate made of iron bars.

But that was short-lived. The scream soon stopped.

We nonchalantly turned our heads back and dived into our phones again.

“Wow. I expected it, but the reaction is really amazing. What's this, The Post? The Times? These are famous newspapers, aren't they?”

“They're not just famous. Kim Gong-Ja, aren't you too disinterested in worldly affairs? Not just Anastasia, but I too stayed up all night checking the reactions online.”

“I realized how vain that is... Be careful. Watching others' reactions is a kind of addiction, an addiction.”

“Hmm. Of course, I know... But as an artist, not just the deputy leader of the Vigilante Corps, it's hard to resist. Look. Each of these comments, every line of criticism, is like a drug...”

“Get used to it from now on, renowned director. This will be your daily life.”

“Ha. Our Black Knight Guild Master is becoming quite the flatterer...”

Once again, screams filled the air.

-Aaaaahhhhh!

We kept exchanging pleasantries, ignoring the screams. This time, however, the screams persisted longer than before, continuing without a break.

-Save me, please save me!

-Stop it! Aaaah! Please, no more! I can't take it there anymore...

-I'll spill everything! Yes, I'll tell you everything! Just don't leave me alone!

-Do you know who I am!? Huh! Just you wait, once I get out of here...

We ignored them and continued our chat.

After about five minutes, the screams subsided. In the meantime, we greedily devoured our egos from anonymous journalists and critics on the internet.

Our egos were so inflated they were about to burst, and just when the Paladin and I were starting to realize how stupid we were to entrust our self-esteem to this tiny smartphone, click.

The iron door of the basement cell opened.

“Good morning...”

The one who came out was the Black Dragon Witch.

“...Huh? What? Kim Gong-Ja is here too?”

“Yep. Good morning.”

I waved my hand.

“Any progress?”

“Well... it's so-so. It feels like all the information that could come out has already come out.”

The Black Dragon Witch yawned and staggered towards a pantry shelf in the corner of the basement that looked like a small pantry. Her hand clumsily searched for a coffee filter.

“Ah, just sit down. I'll make it for you.”

“Okay... Thanks.”

The Black Dragon Witch looked visibly tired, with dark circles under her eyes suggesting she had stayed up all night. She took the offered seat from me with a sigh of relief.

“This is why I like married men. They have consideration and manners ingrained in them.”

“That's a biased statement, Anastasia. It's not because I'm a married man, but because I'm me that I can show such consideration.”

“Ugh. What? That's annoying...”

“For example, I know your coffee preference is a hazelnut latte. You like it hot with an extra shot. So now, I'm going to make you a hazelnut latte, not an Americano. Come on, be amazed.”

“...Huh? An annoying angel...?”

The Black Dragon Witch sipped the coffee. "Damn, this is really good..." she muttered begrudgingly, then opened her lips.

“Your prediction was correct.”

I nodded.

“So there were traitors after all.”

“...Yes. In the Black Dragon and Temple of All Gods, there were secret societies.”



Anastasia pulled out a worn notebook from her pocket.

“Their official name is the ‘Seta Learning Society’.”

"....."

“A secret society that believes the Tower is a reincarnation of the fallen Tower of Babel, a miracle granted by God for humanity to reach the heavens once again. They argue that the outside world, already tainted, should be abandoned, and a new kingdom built inside the Tower, that we should devoutly make this place blessed.”

“And what does 'blessed' mean?”

“It’s just a fancier term for terrorism. Crazy kids. Two executive members and eleven regular guild members. It wasn’t a large number, but if we hadn’t noticed now, they might have grown bigger later.”

That’s right.

I took the notebook from Anastasia and flipped through it.

『The Tower is the second coming of the fallen Tower of Babel, a miracle given by God for us to reach the heavens once again...』

『We must abandon the tainted outside world and build a new kingdom within the Tower, as commanded by the Lord, devoutly making this place blessed.』

『The current rulers of the Tower are deluded, and driving out these false rulers is...』

They were whispers of fanaticism.

The hastily scribbled words, looking like doodles, were smudged with fingerprints at the end of each sentence, showing how often the owner had treasured and read them.

“I see.”

I swallowed.

In the world shown to me by the Tower Master, Anastasia and the Heretic Inquisitor died because of this secret society. Perhaps they had been active since this time, which prompted

me to secretly gather information...

“It’s good that we found them now.”

Is a bad hunch always right?

People dissatisfied with the current regime controlled by the 5 great guilds were everywhere, and a combination of cultism and fanaticism lurked inside the guilds like malignant tumors.

-Stop! I can’t take it anymore! Don't send me there! Don’t leave me alone!

And now, the fanatics were screaming in the dungeons below.

The Black Dragon Witch grimaced slightly.

“Thanks to the Dream Demons helping with the interrogations, it was easier. No need for bloodshed... If it were the old days, a head or two would have flown already.”

“How scary were the dreams that made them scream like that?”

“Nothing special? Just dropped them onto a blank white horizon and left them alone for about 30 days in dream time.”

What? That's hell.

Looking around, even the Paladin was shaking her head. Among our members, there was no one lacking in the talent of tormenting others, but the Black Dragon Witch was in a league of her own.

“Anyway, thanks to you, we cleaned house. Truly, thank you.”

Anastasia nonchalantly set down her coffee cup.

“I want to ask how you found out, but... it's not important, so I won't. What matters is that we managed to eliminate a potential threat.”

“That's accurate.”

“Good. Our leader.”

From beyond the iron door, more screams were heard.

The Black Dragon Witch linked her fingers, propping her chin up, and stared at me intently.

“We’ve dealt with the traitors and heretics. Everyone is distracted by the blood fire drama performance, so no one noticed. After such a perfect cover-up, I wonder what our leader is planning to do next?”

Thud.

I closed the notebook.

“There’s only one thing to do.”

And I declared.

“Tomorrow, I will ascend to the 50th floor.”



# Chapter 288: 50th Floor (2)

---

On a rainy morning.

I covered my face with a raincoat and stepped out into the square.

From the hologram billboard installed in the square, suddenly, a strange voice flowed out.

-I ask everyone to please vote carefully.

It was none other than my own voice.

A video recorded two months ago was playing.

'Eek.'

My face suddenly felt hot.

'Why does my voice always sound like that? Damn. It gives me the creeps...'

I quickly fled the scene.

As I left the square, I glanced at the hologram. My face was reflected in it, seriously staring straight ahead, speaking each word clearly.

-Everyone. This vote is not just about whether you trust us, the 5 great guilds.

-Will we ascend to the 50th floor? Or will we give up on further exploration and stay here? In other words, it's a vote that will determine the direction of our entire Tower.

-A completely different world awaits us from the 50th floor onwards.

Next, the scene of Babylon Square was shown in the hologram.



The square in the hologram was bustling with a huge crowd. Residents of the Tower who had just finished voting were ecstatic.

-King of Death! King of Death! King of Death...

-Yes. You have just seen the video from two months ago.

An announcer appeared in the video.

-As you can see, the vote conducted two months ago passed with an overwhelming majority. It was essentially a decisive vote on whether to trust the 5 great guilds and maintain the current system. Professor, the approval votes overwhelmingly outnumbered the opposition, didn't they?

-Yes. It seems the King of Death, er, our second-ranked hunter, has a positive image, doesn't he? The couple is also popular.

-Very popular!

-Yes. So, it was kind of a popularity vote...

-A popularity vote?

-It had to be. Yes. The way the King of Death appeared in the vote, and how that Ivansia Duchess methodically rebutted. Sigh, such things must have moved people's hearts...

-But, Professor. From the 50th floor onwards, hunters from other worlds will join us, right? Other worlds. Different worlds? What about that...

As I moved further away from the square, the sound of the news gradually faded, and my embarrassment slowly subsided.

I sighed and adjusted the hood of my raincoat.

'...Has it already been two months?'

It was the 60th day since the vote was held.

'Time sure flies.'

In the meantime, I devoted myself to organizing the inside of

the Tower.

Dealing with the Seta Learning Institution, the fanatics hidden in the Temple of All Gods and the Black Dragon, was also part of the internal cleanup.

'No more worrying about being stabbed in the back.'

Everything was ready.

There was little chance that our Tower would be divided from within.

I stepped on puddles filled with the smell of clouds and left the city outskirts.

“Welcome, King of Death.”

Sitting in the middle of a desolate harem was [The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages].

“It’s been a while.”

“Two months is nothing.”

“Have you been waiting for me here?”

The street was now uninhabited. Long-neglected roofs failed to stop the rain. Water flowed through the holes in the punctured pipes. [The Princess] crouched down, pressing her index finger against a downspout where water gushed out.

“Yeah. You were going to look for me anyway, right? I anticipated the path the King of Death would take and came out to meet you. It’s raining too. There’s no need to waste time.”

“Indeed.”

I approached behind the blonde [Pillar].

She didn't turn to look at me, still playing with the water in the downspout. As [The Princess] moved her finger, the flowing water split into two following the trail of her finger.

“You're looking for me to ask to open the 50th floor, right?”

“Yes.”

“Fine. I can grant any request. But are you sure? You’re alone now, King of Death. Wouldn’t it be better to be transferred with your reliable companions, especially since you’ve made so many?”

I shook my head.

“If the 50th floor opens, other worlds will be accessible. In reverse, it means other worlds can invade us.”

“Hmmm.”

“All hunters except me will stay here to prepare for the invasion. The Earth Spirit Tribe... the Asuras are fully prepared. If some force underestimates us and invades, well, they’re in for a surprise.”

“You’re cautious as always.”

[The Princess] stood up with a grunt.

“All the others are on defense, and you alone will be the scout diving into the 50th floor. It doesn't matter if things go wrong, you won't die anyway.”

“Yeah, that is exactly what we'll do.”

“Alright.”

She reached out and grabbed my wrist.

“From now on, you have graduated from the [beginner\*] phase.”

\*Novice is now changed to beginner, because it fits better with the new context.

The moment the dampness of her palm transferred to me, the sky above ripped open.

Krrrrrr...

Violet lightning struck down. Once, twice, thunder roared

within the steam clouds. Even the storm clouds couldn't contain the thunder. Krarrrrrr! Krrrrr...! The clouds split into ten, a hundred paths, and purple thunderbolts branched out in the sky like capillaries.

[Beginner's protection is now disabled.]

Thunder poured down over me.

[Beginner's privileges are permanently revoked.]

[The World of the Lone Child formally joins the common route.]

[From this point on, The World of the Lone Child is free to travel to and from the 50th floor.]

[From this point on, different worlds are free to travel to and from The World of the Lone Child.]

It's disappearing.

The intangible walls that have protected us are crumbling.

'A world Yoo Soo-Ha has never breached once.'

I swallowed the rainwater seeping into my lips.

'A world where hunters like the Constellation Killer roam...  
a world conquered by the Sword Emperor.'

Thunder struck down.

Krarrrrrrrr!

It was louder than any other thunderbolt. From the heavens to the horizon, the sky literally split in two. Not just the storm clouds, but even the continuous rain was divided. Krrrrr...! The gap that had opened only grew wider.

Like an eggshell.

[Announcing to everyone.]



The sky was shedding its skin.

[Today, the 50th floor has been opened.]

[Announcing once again to everyone.]

[Today, the 50th floor has been opened.]

Finally, on the other side of the completely split sky, a scene unfolded that we had never known.

The Tower.

A single tower stood like a world tree.

“From now on, whenever you look up, you’ll see that tower!”

[The Princess] stood with me in the rain, looking up at the sky.

"In the mansion where dolls sleep. In the Aegim Empire. In the snowy wilderness filled with warriors, outside the library windows, in the birthplace of the Earth Spirit Tribe.... In any world you've chosen to be a part of, whenever, wherever."

"....."

"Bye-bye, King of Death. Make sure to survive."

[The Princess] smiled, drenched in the rain.

"I'll wait for you on the 100th floor!"

I smiled back.

And just as I opened my mouth to say "Yes,"

[You are entering the 50th floor.]

A blinding white light enveloped my vision.

---

I had visited the 50th floor before.

Using a kind of trick, an unofficial cheat, maybe loophole is a better word.

But I remember the moment I entered the stage, it was quiet around me.

['Warhorse of the Eternal Plains' detects your presence!]

This time it was different.

['The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth' senses the aura of the Constellation Killer from you.]

['The Lonely Seeker' welcomes the resident of the new world.]

['The Lotus Reflected on Water' is observing the sword you possess.]

Before I could even open my eyes, while my mind was still clouded in whiteness, alarms aggressively intruded.

Aliases I had heard before. Some I hadn't, sending messages, responding to my official entrance to the stage.

‘That’s quite the grand welcome!’

Then, Guardian Spirit, who had been silent since the dog dream this morning, blandly commented.

-Obviously, it has to be grand. You, Kim Zombie, must be on the watchlist of almost all the Constellations.

‘Huh? Why? I did cause a commotion here, but that was undone by regression. From their perspective, this should be their first time seeing me.’

-It's technically their first time seeing you directly. Kid, think about what you’ve done so far.

The white blur in my vision slowly faded.

‘What have I done to deserve this?’

-First, you killed the Apostle of Mahos. Then you killed Mutia’s Apostle. You didn’t just kill her, but you harvested her life with your skill and turned her into your subordinate. And he even captured the Constellation Killer. Do you even know how famous the Constellation Killer is among the Constellations? He was considered the craziest of the crazy. And you are the one who captured that lunatic.

‘Eh. The fact that I captured Kim Yul is already known among the Constellations?’

As my sight returned, the scene before me became clearer.

‘That doesn’t make sense. What I captured was Kim Yul, not yet the Constellation Killer’s [puppets] that are still moving around....’

-Right. They might not know everything. But there must be sharp ones. At least one or two would have been watching the Constellation Killer, and they would’ve found out he was devoured by you. Do you get it? Be careful, man.

Thud.

The first sense to return before sight was touch.

I had been transported, and my feet touched the ground.

-You captured the [Demon King of Autumn Rain]. Not just that, you gathered all [Goddess of Protection] and subdued them. The [Holed-Up Head Librarian] became a mere kid because of you. That's what you've done. A newbie who couldn't even climb the 50th floor!

Guardian Spirit chuckled softly.

-Normally, Constellations would kindly guide you and you would scrape through quests for rewards, but you just smashed those quests! And, nobody knows this, but you even met the Tower Master. Huh? Even I find it strange.

Finally, I could see the surrounding landscape.

-It's a strange situation, isn't it? Now, Zombie. No matter if it's their first time seeing such a crazy newbie, wouldn't they be interested? Wouldn't they?

Hmm.

‘Seems like it.’

-Of course, they’d be overflowing with interest.

‘So what? I like getting attention. Don’t worry. Be happy. Okay?’

-Sorry, but that attention is not that kind of attention, kid.

And then.

-Constellations are like game masters, GMs. They create quests. When you get attention from those guys, you’ll see what happens.

I had been transported to the middle of a wasteland.

Where strange monsters should roam, the place was, strangely enough, crowded with dozens of people.

These people, who came out to hunt monsters, and me, who was transported here, our meeting was entirely coincidental,

or so I wanted to believe. But at first glance, it didn't seem so.

"---He's here! That guy!"

Because as soon as those guys saw me, they pointed fingers at me.

"He finally showed up!"

"Everyone, get ready for battle!"

Moreover, because each of them was holding a hideous sword in their hands.

Despite the pointing fingers and blades, it's quite hard to chalk everything up to coincidence.

For me, too.

"What's this now...?"



Without even having a chance to savor the feeling of finally reaching the 50th floor, I quickly drew my Holy Sword. Already surrounded. Over twenty people had encircled me.

[‘Warhorse of the Eternal Plains’ issues a quest to its followers.]

[You are designated as the target of the quest!]

[The quest is now public.]

And then, an absurd text appeared in the air.

+

[King of Death Subjugation]

Difficulty: Unknown

Objective: The King of Death is a human from the newly registered World of the Lone Child. Even before entering the common route, he dared to oppose the ‘Warhorse of the

Eternal Plains'. He slaughtered the Apostle of Mahos.

Warriors!

The 'Warhorse of the Eternal Plains' commands you, brave disciples. Subjugate the King of Death! Take advantage of his arrival on the 50th floor and ambush him!

Be careful.

The King of Death is fearsome and cunning. A heretic who spares no means. He is also a wicked cult leader with hundreds of fanatics under his command. But do not fear, warriors. If you attack when he is still unfamiliar with the common route, you will have a chance of victory!

The warrior who kills or captures the King of Death will receive the Apostle's blessing from Mahos.

\*However, you cannot participate in this quest.

\*You are the [target of the quest].

+

"....."

I felt dizzy as common sense flew out the window.

‘What? Fearsome and cunning?’

A heretic who spares no means?

‘Who is that!?’

I don’t know such a person.

Is this some kind of error or misunderstanding?

-It’s no misunderstanding. You’re a member of the Demonic Cult, zombie. To those who don’t know you, you’re exactly like a heretic.

But am I supposed to be a wicked cult leader with hundreds of fanatics under me?

-That's quite a reasonable assumption. Vice-lord. According to that Viper guy, you're actually the big bad Heavenly Demon of this time. H.E.A.V.E.N.L.Y D.E.M.O.N. Even just the name sounds bad.

No.

What kind of nonsense is that!

“Don't let your guard down!”

A hunter, a resident of a different world who accepted this ridiculous quest, shouted.

“Mahos himself warned us to be extra careful with this guy! Don't be fooled by his human appearance! He's a devil among devils, a novice who can catch us off guard! Draw your swords!”

“Draw your swords!”

“Attack!”

The hunters forming the encirclement charged at me, all yelling in unison.

I raised my Aura to prepare for battle, but I couldn't help but scream out.

“Wait! I'm not a bad guy! If anything, I'm more of a good guy! Everyone, this quest is a lie! How can you blatantly lie in a quest like this? Hey, everyone. Everyone? I'm not the bad guy the quest is talking about!”

-Useless.

Guardian Spirit giggled.

-Quests are at the GM's whim. Remember the quest the [Demon King of Autumn Rain] gave you? It's no wonder that the Constellation Killer went around killing Constellations.

‘Then what do I do here?’

-Fight.

Guardian Spirit smirked.

-Welcome to the 50th floor's world of manipulation and distortion! Sir Gong-Ja!

Damn it.

# Chapter 289: 50th Floor (3)

---

"Expose your neck! You wicked heretic leader!"

The hunters swung their swords.

Upper left. Upper right. From behind. Blades aimed at my life came from three directions at once. Clang! In a panic, I raised Shiny to parry the most urgent strike first.

"I'm telling you, I'm not a bad guy!"

"Truly a cunning heretic's silver tongue."

The apparent leader among them snorted contemptuously.

"Don't listen to his words, everyone. Mahos said his tongue is more dangerous than his sword. He said that the heavens turn

upside down once he starts his rhetoric, and the earth gets deluded. Truly, a tongue born of the devil! Beware, he might charm us unwittingly."

"But who exactly is that!?"

The hunters I confronted swallowed hard.

They looked at me with eyes full of fear.

"He's terrifying...!"

"He just has a simple and innocent face. Behind that naive facade, such wicked evil lurks... How frightening!"

"Are you all blind or what? Huh?"

Even amidst the battle, the fight continued.

The skills of Mahos' disciples were, well, not particularly awe-inspiring. If it had been in the old days, I might have struggled, but frankly, their Aura control was far inferior to



mine.

['The Lonely Seeker' is interested in your realm.]

['The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth' doubts if you are really a beginner.]

Three, six, twelve - even when they attacked in formation, it wasn't too tricky.

Unlike ordinary martial arts, Aura is a martial art of dominating space.

As long as I had enough Aura to dominate space, no matter how many enemies there were, it only got a bit more bothersome. I was just stunned by the absurd quest content, but I was not really in trouble.

"What is this...! Is this truly the prowess of someone who just arrived on the 50th floor!"

The Mahos disciples seemed shocked by my performance. They continuously changed formations, employing various techniques, but I remained unshaken. As their attacks piled

up, the disciples grew more anxious.

"It's impossible. He must have made a pact with the devil!"

Not a devil, but I do have a ghost as a pet.

"How could he have reached such heights by normal means! He must have walked the path of evil arts!"

Well, I did improve my skills with some abnormal skills...

"Call for reinforcements! This heretic leader controls the dead. He summons the spirits of those he killed from hell and uses them as his soldiers!"

"Hah!"

"He was called the King of Death for a reason! Truly evil!"

Hmm.

Sort of right but not entirely correct either...

"Hurry up. He can't cast his summoning spell right now as we're fighting him, but if there's even a moment's gap, he will! We must subdue him before we all die!"

.....

Really?

'Sword Emperor.'

-What?

'I just realized something.'

I easily twisted and countered the twenty simultaneous Aura assaults from the disciples. I countered each Aura strike, turning it back on the disciples.

"This can't be!"

The disciples were astonished.

'What if, and I mean just hypothetically, what if, to others, I really look like a bad guy...?'

-Is that even a question?

Guardian Spirit replied as if it was obvious.

-You totally give off the vibe of an absolute evil boss.

'Why!?"

-Look, Zombie. Think again why I call you a zombie.

'Because you're a psycho with a twisted personality...?'

-There are many reasons why I call you a zombie, but one of them is to mock your lich-like nature.

'Lich?'

-Yes, lich. An undead sorcerer. Gaining power by sacrificing their own life and using the corpses they killed as subordinates – that's a lich. To those who don't know you, you're just a minion of evil.

I was stunned.

'That's ridiculous! I'm a hero! I've been certified as a hero since the 11th floor. Isn't that right, Shiny?'

[.....]

[Shiny acknowledges that you are indeed a true hero.]

Wait.

Shiny hesitated for a moment before answering. Am I imagining it?

['Warhorse of the Eternal Plains' recognizes your

extraordinary skill.]

['Warhorse of the Eternal Plains' expands the quest range.]

[Warning! The scope of the quest involving you is expanded to the entire city!]

As I was subduing Mahos's disciples one by one, an ominous alarm rang. It was a message I had never heard before. But I could tell it wasn't good news for me.

"There he is!"

As expected, hunters began pouring in from the city direction.

"There's the lich!"

"Capture the devil's minion!"

"Oh, Mahos! Protect us!"

Surprisingly, all the hunters knew how to use Aura. Whether their level was high or low, they each used light-body techniques and approached rapidly. Dozens of hunters were leaping around with movement techniques, like a swarm of jumping cockroaches.

It was a scene scarier than any horror movie.

'Here, knowing how to use Aura is a basic for hunters!'

Even more terrifying was the sight of dozens more people following them.

"Oh dear."

I managed to suppress a laugh.

Of course, I could easily defeat them using [Ghoul Reincarnation].

But.

'If I use [Ghoul Reincarnation] here, I'll definitely be labelled the Lich King for real...'

I sighed inwardly. I might escape the immediate danger, but it would cause more headaches later.

There were probably forces watching this fight from afar.

If I flaunted the might of controlling the undead in such a situation, I would indeed be marked as the evil boss of the 50th floor.

Eventually, I came to one solution.

'Let's run!'

It was a very simple answer.

'Why fight these guys when there's no benefit for me? There's no need for unnecessary battles.'

-Giggle. Wise decision.



I focused my Aura on my thighs, hamstrings, calves, and soles. Then, taking advantage of a brief moment when the Mahos disciples were catching their breath, I leapt high from the ground.

"What!?"

"The lich is escaping!"

Sorry to say it, but the encirclement formed by Mahos' disciples was frankly weak. From my perspective, who developed the Demonic Formations Art with Uburka, it was just a cooperative attack filled with numbers. They practised the same martial art but didn't share the same mind, so despite dozens of them cooperating, their Aura movements were disjointed.

'After all, our Earth Spirit Tribe enjoyed the Blood Flower Drama for generations, hundreds of years, to learn the Demonic Formations Art. It's hard for ordinary hunters to mimic such formations.'

Feeling proud of my people, I left the battlefield.

"Chase him!"

The Mahos disciples clumsily pursued. But by the time their leader started to say 'Cha-' and finished with 'se!', I was already far away. It happened in an instant.

Among them, a few hunters of decent skill pursued me. But only for a moment. Within six seconds, I heard their cries of astonishment fading behind me.

"Good heavens! How can anyone be that fast...!"

"It's no use! Contact the other branches! We'll lose him if this continues..."

Their voices of astonishment faded away into the distance.

'Maybe I should move more cautiously.'

After shaking off the pursuit, I didn't stop. I darted back and forth across the wasteland, running as if entering the city, only to change direction abruptly. I visited each entrance to the city from all directions - north, south, east, and west.

'This should keep me from getting caught.'

I even took off my coat and tucked it under my arm. Although it was a temporary measure, I messed up my hair to change my style and fixed it with Aura.

'Okay.'

From a distance, it would not be easy to recognize me just by my appearance. Unless it was my comrades who knew me well, the disciples of Mahos would have no clue.

'Is this good enough?'

Twenty minutes passed.

['Warhorse of the Eternal Plains' sighs.]

['Warhorse of the Eternal Plains' acknowledges the failure of the quest.]

It seemed my prediction was correct as new messages were updated.

[The quest involving you is changing!]

[Difficulty is being adjusted.]

[Linked quest is proceeding.]

[The quest is revealed.]

I glanced at the text appearing before me.

+

[King of Death Pursuit Order]

Difficulty: A+

Objective: Sadly, the King of Death has broken through the encirclement and fled. The brave warriors surrounded and pushed him to the brink, but failed to catch him as he used his reserved power to escape in the end!

If the King of Death enters the city and hides, the 50th floor will face a great calamity. He is more toxic than a pandemic and more vicious than the black plague. He is a villain beyond any human-made remedy.

Hurry and find the King of Death, and inform your comrades!

Warriors, only you can protect the peace of the city and uphold justice! Other forces have already noticed the King of Death's potential and are attempting to approach him. If the wicked ones collaborate with the King of Death, a tremendous calamity will ensue!

\*However, you cannot participate in this quest.

\*You are the [target of the quest].

+

What should I say?

I could nitpick endlessly, but I'll refrain for now. Anyway, it's clear that I'm increasingly being portrayed as a villain straight

out of a legend...

"Seriously, what kind of nonsense is this?"

I ripped one knee off my pants. Rrrrip! I rolled up the torn pant leg and wrapped it around my neck like a scarf. Adjusting the scarf to cover up my mouth, I managed a decent disguise.

"Why are you tormenting an innocent person? Is this how all Constellations behave?"

-Their tendencies are different, but their characters are similar.

"What do you mean?"

I entered the city.

[Your body begins to be eroded by Void Poison.]

[Your current erosion progress is Lv.1.]

[The Void Poison is neutralized by your Aura!]

[Erosion has stopped.]

At the city entrance, there were slums and bustling markets.

I easily blended into the crowd.

The noisy sounds of people talking, buying, and selling enveloped me, allowing me to comfortably chat with Guardian Spirit.

-Remember, I said Constellations are like game masters. They are literally GMs. Each one has its own distinct temperament.

"Masters..."

-And those who serve the Constellations can be seen as players. The master opens a session and issues quests, and the disciples of that Constellation decide whether to participate or not. Is this quest suitable for my level? Can I really accomplish it?

Before long, I spotted a familiar place.

An open-air pub.

There was no building, no walls, just tables, chairs, and a bar where the owner stood. The very same outdoor pub where I had an unofficial chat with the Constellation Killer, using a cheat to visit the 50th floor.

-But as I said, each Constellation has its own unique tendency.

"What about Mahos?"

I asked as I sat down at the bar.

-Mahos is a combat enthusiast.

Guardian Spirit answered promptly.

-His quests are simple. An enemy appears that must be defeated. If not defeated, the world is in danger. So, defeat it.



Oh, it escaped? Chase it. Oh, you defeated it? Here's your reward. They're damn simple.

Makes sense.

Hearing Guardian Spirit's explanation, I got a rough idea of what kind of Constellation the 'Warhorse of the Eternal Plains' was.

-That blondie you caught... Goldencup, right? At the Apostle level, quests get more complex, but those cases are rare. Most disciples are basically combat fanatics.

"Hmm."

-But these simple-looking quests are surprisingly popular. Actually, they might be the most popular ones. Mahos, if nothing else, ensures solid rewards. A fight worth the difficulty and valuable items. With these two, it's easy to lure disciples.

I ordered an iced tea from the owner and sipped it.

"I understand what you're saying, but why do the

Constellations do this?"

-Haha.

Guardian Spirit smirked knowingly.

-Because it's the easiest way to receive worship.

"Huh?"

-You've never served a Constellation, so you don't know. Think from their perspective. Constellations are deliberately creating quests and rewards for you hunters. It's just to make your life more interesting.

I tilted my head, not understanding Guardian Spirit's point.

The Guardian Spirit opened his mouth as if he knew I wouldn't get it.

-Think about the Holed-Up Head Librarian. From your perspective, he unnecessarily threw you into a doomed world

for his own amusement, watching you struggle and suffer, right? But think the other way around. The Head Librarian collected 'worlds' to give you quests.

"....."

-Even for Constellations, do you think that's easy? Scouring worlds in ruin, selecting apocalypses suitable for you among them. That's hard work.

"That's....."

I was shocked.

I had never thought about it that way.

-Zombie, do you think Constellations go through all that trouble just because they think hunters are cute? To see you suffer and die? Generally, Constellations are way stronger than normal hunters. They could kill you with a gesture.

"...That makes sense."

-So, in a way, Constellations are 'dedicating' themselves to you. Well, each one has its reasons for issuing quests, but the primary goal is the same.

Guardian Spirit explained.

-Worship.

Worship.

-You'll understand if you ever serve a Constellation. Completing quests and receiving rewards, you gradually feel like you're becoming a [hero].

"....."

-Your life becomes fun. You feel like you're no longer just yourself but someone meaningful in this world. Someone immensely superior, a Constellation, is creating events just for you and acknowledging your existence... Hah. It's addictive, like the high of an RPG.

...I see.

I had never walked the path laid out by Constellations, so I fundamentally differed from the hunters who surrounded me in the wasteland.

-That's why the bond between Constellations and their disciples is incredibly strong. Disciples naturally worship Constellations that recognize and reward them. They adore and love them. This worship is akin to the purest form of faith, fueling the Constellations' existence...

At that moment,

Boom!

The glass on the table shook, the ground trembled, and other tables around me spilt trays and dishes.

I instinctively looked in the direction of the explosion.

# Chapter 290:

## Forsaken Believers

### (1)

---

Kwaaaang!

As the explosion rang out, the tavern patrons were thrown into disarray.

"What the, what's going on?"

"Damn it. It's starting again...!"

The customers neither evacuated nor hid under the tables. They simply grabbed the glasses and appetizers on the tables with both hands, wary of them toppling over. Here, on the 50th floor, an explosion was just a part of daily life.

「 Ah, ah. Mic test. Mic test. 」

Amidst the chaos in the hall, a voice echoed from the sky.

Including me, people looked up to find the source of the voice.

「We apologize for the inter-floor noise from the Magic Tower.」

Magic Tower.

That place, along with this open-air tavern, was one of the familiar locations on the 50th floor.

When I previously tried to capture the Constellation Killer, witches from the Magic Tower also participated. Their base, the Magic Tower, composed of five spires, stood tall in the sky.

It was like the fingers of a giant of the earth reaching for the sky.

'A power that has ruled over this 50th floor for over a thousand years... Was that it?'

I glanced at the Guardian Spirit.

'Isn't that place an enemy of yours?'

-Nah, nah. I don't really have any feelings towards them.

The Guardian Spirit claimed nonchalantly.

-It's just that they unilaterally hate me. Really. On the contrary, I think I'm quite aggrieved.

'...But didn't you destroy one of the original six towers? How is that an aggrieved person's behavior?'

-Now, look. Those kids always look so gloomy. They're always holed up in their tower, doing research, almost to the point where you can smell mold. I just made a little hole in the tower to suggest they ventilate once in a while. Thinking about it, I should be thanked. I even did a remodeling for free. Anyway, the richest folks on the 50th floor have no sense of decency. Tsk tsk tsk.

'It seems to me that you just have no sense of morality....'



The voice sent from the Magic Tower resounded throughout the city. People drinking outdoors, vendors laying out their stalls, vagabonds playing dice in broad daylight, everyone paused their daily activities and blankly gazed up at the five towers.

「I will be the spokesperson for the Magic Tower. Well, it's nothing much. Today, terrorists who don't know their place tried to mess with us, so we have to make this announcement.」

「The explosion sound that just scored a goal in your eardrums was the result of those terrorists' doing. Hey, hey. Bring them here. Not there. Tsk! That's right. There.」

At that moment, voices other than the spokesperson's sharply cut through.

「The Magic Tower is imprisoning our comrades!」

「We are followers of Hamusutra!」

I flinched.

They were followers of Hamusutra?

「 We are all officially enrolled Librarians! The Magic Tower is illegally oppressing and imprisoning us! 」

「 Everyone! If we don't unite and rise up now, someday you too will end up like us.... 」

「 Ah. Ah. Okay, that's enough. Phew. 」

A sigh from the spokesperson was heard.

「 Anyway, those without a master have such loud voices. Now, have you all grasped the situation? The disturbance this time was completely caused by losers abandoned by their Constellations. Just so you know.... 」

「 Shut up! We were not abandoned by Hamusutra! 」

「 Do you know the difference between the strong and the weak? The strong only have to be quiet when they want, but the weak have to be quiet even when they don't want to. 」

Kwajik!

A strange tearing sound burst from beyond the sky.

「Ugh! Urk...!?」

「Yes, as you can see, these guys are weak. It would be fortunate if they were just weak, but they even tried to damage our Magic Tower security system. The result? Well... I have a tooth in my hand right now. Do you get what I'm saying?」

「Please don't mess with the Magic Tower. That's the message I'm trying to convey.」

The surroundings buzzed.

「Oho? Trying to intimidate me? Listen here. When I say shut up, it doesn't just mean close your mouth. It also means shut your eyes.」

Kwazook, tzeeeuuk! Keeeiii....

The ominous sound stretched towards the cloudy sky. With each twist of the sound, gasps, groans, and someone's screams intertwined. The moans were cut into seven parts and scattered across the sky of the 50th floor.

"....."

"....."

Silence descended upon the open-air tavern.

The Hunters each looked around cautiously, trying to ignore the screams coming from the sky. They all realized this was a sort of public execution. Only the tavern's owner grumbled, "Tsk, they're ruining our business again," while cleaning the bar.

「 Ah. Ah. Testing the mic once more. 」

「 If you happen to see old followers of Hamusutra while walking around, or in places that aren't common path, please report them. Those kids are trouble, you know? There's a small reward, but think of it as contributing to the city's security.... 」

「Ugh, this is bothersome. Anyway, you've all got it, right? In my hand right now are eight teeth – front teeth, canines, molars, all combined. These teeth could belong to your friend or to you.」

「May fortune be with you.」

The voice abruptly cut off.

The sky was enveloped in silence as always. But the people of the 50th floor city seemed to find the silence in the sky burdensome. After about 10 seconds, the bustling noise of daily life hesitantly returned.

"Those damn things. Catching rat-like believers again...."

"The Librarians are really pitiful. Hey, where did Hamusutra disappear to?"

"Well, it's obvious. He was probably killed by the Constellation Killer, right?"

"Ugh. This is all because of one guy, the Constellation Killer. So many people are suffering."

It was a conversation I couldn't help but be interested in. I turned towards the table next to me.

"Excuse me. I'd like to ask something...."

"What is it?"

An elderly Hunter frowned.

A hunter with curly hair and an eyepatch over her left eye.

Not just her, but all the Hunters at the same table, regardless of gender, were had curly hair and eyepatches.

"....."

Overwhelmed by their striking visuals, I momentarily lost my words.

Stammering, I asked as politely as possible.

"...Uh, well. I haven't been up-to-date with the 50th floor happenings lately... I've only just returned here after three months. What exactly is going on with the Magic Tower?"

"Uh? You haven't heard about Hamusutra's disappearance?"

The curly-haired Hunters stared at me.

It was extremely uncomfortable.

"I think I've heard something like that...."

"Oh my, the rumor is that the Constellation Killer killed him!"

The curly-haired Hunter group seemed eager for someone to listen to their chatter. They noisily talked among themselves, tearing into bread appetizers that looked like something out of an Indian feast.

"From a while back, the faith in [Great Librarian of All Knowledge] abruptly ended. The Constellation was always indifferent to its followers, never responding to prayers, but now it feels like it doesn't even exist. Here. This friend used to

be a follower of Hamusutra."

Curly-haired Hunter A poked the rib of curly-haired Hunter B.

B grimaced and chewed on a piece of bread, clearly uncomfortable with the topic.

".....Keep it down. It's not the case anymore."

"Heh. Hamusutra might have had few followers, but their loyalty was really high. And then suddenly, it disappeared, right? I understand why the Librarians are in despair."

"....."

I sensed an ominous premonition. Something big, something I never anticipated and didn't even know about, had happened because Hamusutra lost the power of a Constellation.

"That... Was the [Great Librarian of All Knowledge] originally popular...?"



"Hmm? No, not really popular."

Curly-haired Hunter A asserted.

"[Great Librarian of All Knowledge] was too unfriendly to hunters. Other Constellations guide you through small quests and naturally lead to the final quest, right?"

"Ah. Yes...."

Is that so?

I've never worshiped a Constellation, so I wouldn't know.

But to curly-haired Hunter A, it seemed unthinkable that I didn't worship a Constellation. He spoke as if it was the most natural thing.

"But the [Great Librarian of All Knowledge] was different. It just throws one goal like [Save this world from destruction] and leaves the rest up to you. Tsk tsk. It's irresponsibly frustrating."

"....."

"There's no reward or hint during the quest. Normally, if a hunter faces danger, a Constellation gives a chance or two, but this one just mercilessly lets you die! To put it nicely, it's high freedom, but to put it differently, it's just neglecting its followers. How could it be popular?"

".....That's exactly why I liked Hamusutra. It's different from ordinary Constellations that just throw quests. Hamusutra gave us a world where we can be active. Get it? It prepared everything and didn't interfere with us players. How great is that!"

"See? Such a fanatic."

A chuckled.

"But it's over now. As I said, the responses just disappeared!"

"....."

"Their followers are really foolish. If your master dies, you should quickly choose another Constellation to serve, but

Hamusutra's followers are so loyal, they won't switch faith. Instead, they're banding together to survive.... How could those spider-like Magic Tower folks let them be? 'Ah, hunters without the backing of a Constellation,' and they capture them to enslave."

"Shut up! Hamusutra isn't dead! He's just laying low to avoid the Constellation Killer's pursuit!"

Hmm....

"Wow, scary. Should I shut up just because you say so? The Magic Tower people said it. The strong don't need to be quiet. I've been serving [The Lonely Seeker] for over 20 years, soon to be an Apostle. And you? You lost your beloved master and switched faith like a loser, didn't you?"

"You bastard!"

"Uh... Excuse me."

I interjected between the two Hunters' quarrel.

"What if the Constellation Killer isn't the one who killed

Hamusutra?”

"Hmm?"

“What?”

The Hunters looked at me as if I was spouting nonsense.

I was clearly being looked down upon as a beginner.

Carefully, I continued.

“What I mean is... the reason for Hamusutra’s disappearance isn’t clear, right? It’s possible that someone other than the Constellation Killer killed him. Or maybe, just maybe..... he didn’t die at all.”

"He didn’t die?"

Curly-haired Hunter A asked with a mocking tone.

"The aura of the Constellation has completely disappeared. Despite the followers' calls, there's no response. If he's not dead, did he run away or something?"

".....Maybe..... he fell and became human."

"What, fell? Human?"

A laughed loudly. Even B, who had been arguing with A, looked incredulous. Actually, all the curly-haired Hunters watching our conversation chuckled.

"Ha! This guy is definitely a newbie."

"Fell? I've never heard such a thing in my life."

"Listen, young man. A Constellation is a Constellation, and a human is a human. Especially Hamusutra, a renowned Constellation among Constellations. Maybe dead, but where did you hear such ridiculous urban legend?"

"....."

It's true though.

Hamusutra really became human and is working part-time at a cafe.

As a part-timer, he's so popular he's getting a lot of tips from customers...

“Of course, it could be someone other than the Constellation Killer. Another Constellation could have done it. But that's unlikely! So far, no one has claimed to have killed Hamusutra. What a great feat that would be, who would hide it?”

“Right. Hunters wouldn't miss a chance to brag.”

“Constellations have no reason to hide it either. The Constellation Killer, that crazy guy, is the one to blame.”

"Hmm....."

I asked one last question.

“What if, just maybe, the Constellation Killer isn't the culprit? What then?”

That's when it happened.

Curly-haired Hunter B's eyes flashed menacingly.

"We'll capture that bastard and kill him!"

Bang!

B, unable to contain his anger, slammed the table.

“How dare! Someone other than the Constellation Killer harm our heavenly Librarian, our precious Master! He'll be condemned to the void and fed to the monsters! That villain! I'll tear him limb from limb, nail him from head to toe!”

B's eyes, once a follower of Hamusutra, blazed with fury. A deadly aura. The other Hunters joined in, agreeing fervently.

“Hamusutra fanatics are formidable. Their love for their

master is real. Heh. If there's a real culprit, all the universe's Hamusutra followers, all the stage's Hunters will swarm and kill him."

"Yeah. The extermination squad will have thousands!"

"That's only because the Constellation Killer is a universe-class lunatic that everyone's keeping quiet. If it's not him? Oh, then it's real trouble. I don't even want to think about it."

"A storm of blood will rage!"

The Hunters, except B, laughed heartily.

As if they had heard an amusing joke.

Of course, I didn't find it amusing at all.

-Zombie, do you understand now?

"....."



-Everything I told you is nothing but the truth.

The Guardian Spirit grinned at me, sweating bullets.

-You really are the real evil boss. You crazy cult leader, fucking sharp tongued bastard.

Right.....

At least I now know there's one thing I need to resolve on the 50th floor.....

# Chapter 291:

## Forsaken Believers

### (2)

---

-Hmm? Followers...? Ah, yes, there were some.

Hamusutra spoke through the communicator.

I heard the sound of exertion, "Eutcha, eutcha," likely from moving boxes in the cafe.

"There were some?"

I leaned closer to the communicator.

"You have followers. Isn't that a bit negligent?"

-Oh, that's a harsh accusation.

Hamusutra replied indifferently.

-Gong-Ja, I never asked them to become my followers. They chose to be followers themselves. They called themselves Librarians and volunteered to be my hands and feet, but honestly, it was bothersome.

Hamusutra's tone carried a strong sense of annoyance, like trying to shoo a persistent fly buzzing around a dining table. It starkly contrasted how he addressed the Constellation Killer or me.

-More importantly, are you sure you want to chat with me with this precious one-time communicator? As far as I know, this is one of the secret tools the [Wide-Area Communicator] made. Of course, I'd be very pleased if you think a conversation with me is worth that much, but...

"No, it's not like that. Let's get back to the main topic."

-It's not that then... Hmm, about the followers, why bring them up now?

I explained the current situation. Initially, Hamusutra listened nonchalantly, but his tone became more rigid as the story progressed.

-Uhhuhm.

The noise from the other side of the communicator ceased. He had stopped moving boxes to focus on my story.

-Indeed, this is a bit troubling, even for me. Certainly, when I joined hands with you to fall, I didn't pay even a speck of attention to the Librarians...

That statement could make his followers cry.

"I'm also very troubled. It feels like I inadvertently caused harm to innocent people because I dragged you into becoming human."

-Uuuuum... As I said, the Librarians chose to be my followers themselves... If they abandon their faith in me now and switch to another Constellation, there shouldn't be any problem. It's a burden they should carry themselves...

Hamusutra sighed, resigned.

-But knowing your character, you won't just let this pass. Alright. Although embarrassing and shameful, can I entrust you to handle what I neglected?

"Of course."

I nodded.

"I didn't contact you to blame you. It's about Hamusutra's followers, after all. I just wanted to seek your consent and permission. I'll handle it myself, so just keep a note of this debt in your heart."

-Damn. It's a pity! If I were still a Constellation, I would have sent the message [Your favorability with the Great Librarian of All Knowledge has significantly increased] right now!

Why is he regretting such a thing...

Moreover, Constellations actually enjoy sending messages...

"Never mind the message. Is there some kind of token?"

-Token? Sorry, I don't understand. What kind of token do you mean?

"If I go to rescue the Librarians trapped in the Magic Tower. It would be easier if I had something that clearly shows I'm on the same side. Like a mark of Hamusutra. A password or something."

-Ah, I see, I see...

Hamusutra pondered.

-There's no convenient item like that... But there is a way that might work.

"What is it?"

-Among the Librarians trapped in the Magic Tower, there might be a Hunter you know.

Hamusutra said.

-His alias is [Assistant Writer].

"....."

What kind of life must one lead to earn the alias [Assistant Writer]?

I was dying to dig into this person's life and history, but the communicator I was using was time-limited. I reluctantly held back.

-[Assistant Writer] is a Librarian who quit climbing the tower on the 50th floor and is renowned among them. He must be over 600 years old. If the Magic Tower spiders started capturing Librarians, they wouldn't have left [Assistant Writer] alone. Among the followers, he was as revered as my Apostle...

So he's like the leader of Hamusutra's followers. I nodded.

"So if I gain the trust of this Hunter, that's the key."

-Exactly. [Assistant Writer] has entered Revelations twice for quests. I remember the ending of the first Revelation. It was a solo quest... Only [Assistant Writer] entered.

Hamusutra continued.

-Only I and [Assistant Writer] know the whole story of that quest. It's a secret shared between the two of us. All scenes and dialogues were unseen and unheard by the audience.

"....."

-I'll now tell you a line from that secret story.

A line that only Hamusutra could know in this world.

I listened intently to the words Hamusutra uttered.

---

The next day, I immediately put the plan into action.

The reason for staying overnight was to save a [Save Point].



In case I died, I wanted to return on the 50th floor, not the 1st.

"Alright. Let's get moving."

I headed out into the streets.

The chase had happened yesterday.

Although only a night had passed, several things had occurred in that time.

['Warhorse of the Eternal Plains' encourages quests among the followers.]

['Warhorse of the Eternal Plains' emphasizes the danger of the evil heretic cult leader!]

First, Mahos hadn't given up on me. Instead, he increased the quest rewards, desperately trying to catch me.

'How cute.'

I smiled slightly.

By now, Mahos's followers must be vigorously expanding their search network. Sorry, but it'll only get harder as time goes on. The teachings of the Demonic Cult aren't called the doctrine of shadows for nothing.

And it wasn't just Mahos who was anxious.

[‘The Lonely Seeker’ offers you a one-shot quest.]

[‘The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth’ offers you a one-shot quest.]

[‘The Lotus Reflected on Water’ is paying attention to your faith.]

[‘The Incarnation of Love and Lust’ offers you a one-shot quest.]

Almost all the Constellations with some power on the 50th floor had sent me messages. They seemed intrigued by how easily I had evaded Mahos's followers yesterday.

-The strength of a follower directly affects the reputation of the Constellation.

Watching my rising popularity, the Guardian Spirit snorted.

-Zombie, you're indeed a highly desirable recruitment candidate.

"That's nice to hear. But what's a [One-shot Quest]?"

-Well, as the name implies, it's short. It's a simple quest.

Explained the Guardian Spirit.

-Constellations don't just randomly invite someone to be their follower. They consider compatibility, personality, level, etc. Only after assessing all that do they usually send an offer. A [One-shot Quest] is like a trial to see if you're a good match.

"Huh."

-But a Constellation personally offering a one-shot indicates

deep interest in you. Anyway, no need to choose right away. It doesn't matter if you never choose.

Hmm.

What should I do?

As I pondered, the Guardian Spirit started talking about the old days.

-Actually, I never chose one forever! Kyaa. It felt so good to ignore the love calls from numerous Constellations right in front of them. You don't know how satisfying that is. Sure, the Constellations treated me like a thug afterward, but so what? To serve a noble, they should send a thoroughbred, right?

"Good day, esteemed Constellations. I sincerely appreciate your invitation to the quests."

Right after hearing the Guardian Spirit's words, I decided on my approach.

-Huh..?

"Currently, I believe some of you might be secretly observing me. I'm a bit occupied at the moment. I'll carefully review all the one-shot quests you've suggested and then respond respectfully."

-Hey, why are you doing that? I told you to ignore them!

The Guardian Spirit was puzzled, but my proactive approach immediately elicited responses.

['The Lonely Seeker' is satisfied with your response.]

['The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth' is surprised to find you're more normal than expected.]

['The Lotus Reflected on Water' smiles.]

['The Incarnation of Love and Lust' increases the rewards for the one-shot quest!]

As expected.

"Thank you very much."

I expressed my gratitude again.

-You're strange. Hey, I told you. Constellations are all perverted lunatics. Why are you being polite to them?

'Sir Sword Emperor, I've learned something while living as a hunter.'

-What's that?

'First, no matter what I do, as long as it's the opposite of what Yoo Soo-Ha does, I score a hundred points.'

-I've heard that several times. I wonder how that guy is doing... But you said first, so what's the rest?

'Second, no matter what I do, as long as it's the opposite of what you do, I score fifty points.'

-This damn kid?

'Thank you for being my second role model.'

The Constellations were clearly cautious about me.

As soon as I responded with a bit of courtesy, proving I wasn't a psycho or an old fogey, they shot messages my way.

['The Lonely Seeker' asks if you're genuinely planning to oppose the Magic Tower.]

"Yes, I am."

['The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth' is curious about your relationship with Hamusutra.]

"Well, that's hard to say right away. I know what kind of being Hamusutra is. I'll tell you more about it once we get to know each other better."

['The Lotus Reflected on Water' asks if it's okay to continue observing you confronting the Magic Tower.]

"Yes, of course. When it's time for me to act alone, I'll ask you to divert your attention then, but until that moment, feel free to watch as much as you want."

['The Incarnation of Love and Lust' wonders if the person you've been talking to yourself since yesterday is your imaginary lover!]

"What? What the hell... No, sorry. I'm married. I have my love."

The messages in my head instantly became a cacophony of noise.

At least one of the Constellations turned out to be an extraordinary lunatic, but regardless, they were excitedly chatting among themselves, using me as a medium.

Compared to yesterday, their attitude towards me was much lighter.

['The Lonely Seeker' complains that the Magic Tower is blocking all quests on the 50th floor.]



Amid the small talk, there were useful pieces of information.

[‘The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth’ agrees.]

[‘The Incarnation of Love and Lust’ laments that many followers can’t progress beyond the 50th floor due to the Magic Tower, even with extensive campaign quests.]

[‘The Lotus Reflected on Water’ neither agrees nor disagrees.]

[‘The Lonely Seeker’ advises that infiltrating the Magic Tower is almost impossible.]

Indeed.

The Constellations seemed not too friendly towards the Magic Tower.

‘I remember the Guardian Spirit mentioning that a Constellation is imprisoned under each of the five spires of the Magic Tower.’

There was a time when the Guardian Spirit explained this about the Magic Tower.

'The Constellations are captured alive and their energy is extracted.'

If that's true, it's no wonder the Magic Tower isn't on good terms with the Constellations.

I moved closer to the Magic Tower, pondering in my mind.

-Now, zombie.

Before me lay ruins.

-Listen carefully to what I say.

It looked like a giant made of stone and wood had fallen and decayed. Moss and mushrooms covered the heaped rocks, and unidentified insects scuttled among the debris. Hunters swarmed the 50th floor, but this place was deserted and rarely visited.

-This is where the sixth spire of the Magic Tower once stood.

About 150 years ago.

The remnants of the old spire that the Sword Emperor himself had toppled.

-Only fools would try to infiltrate the Magic Tower directly. It's been famous for its ironclad security since old times. Even if you just [watch] the Magic Tower, you'd be detected in 23 seconds. After I wreaked havoc, the security must have become even tighter.

However, the Guardian Spirit added.

-That's only true for the other five spires I didn't destroy.

Thud.

I followed the direction indicated by the Guardian Spirit.

-Even those perverted Magic Tower folks wouldn't bother

securing [an already destroyed spire]. Don't you think so?

Navigating through the debris was challenging. But the Guardian Spirit remembered this ancient event as if it just happened.

Following his instructions, I cleared away large rocks.

['The Lonely Seeker' is puzzled by your enigmatic actions.]

I kept clearing, but the debris piled up like a mountain.

Non-stop, I wielded my aura, digging like a mole.

-The spires of the Magic Tower are connected by secret passages.

Gradually, I was below ground level.

-Ordinary hunters obviously don't know, and even the Magic Tower's own spiders usually don't. Only the real top brass know about these passages. I deliberately didn't touch the

secret passages when I caused havoc in the old days. I planned to use them again when I came back to destroy more. Sadly, I died on the 99th floor before I could complete the big picture.

The Guardian Spirit chuckled.

-How about that? Hitching a ride with you for my comeback?

Crack!

The ground I had focused my aura on split in two. Instead of solid ground, a loosely gaping crevice appeared.

I concentrated my aura further, widening the gap enough for a person to fit through.

-Then let's take advantage of it.

I readied my blade.

Before crawling into the underground entrance, I carved something into the rock.

The Sword Emperor has returned.

Until just 150 years ago, this was the dominion of an absolute powerhouse who had conquered the tower.

At that moment, my mind was bombarded with messages.

['The Lonely Seeker' is shocked by the characters you carved!]

['The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth' is surprised by the area it didn't know about.]

['The Lotus Reflected on Water' probes your intentions.]

Good.

I stored my aura.

The underground passage was dark, but it brightened easily when I shone Shiny.

-Zombie. You might be a bit lacking, but you're something like my disciple, aren't you?

'Let's assume that's the case.'

-Then, having reached the 50th floor, shouldn't you at least demolish one tower, just like me?

'What are you talking about?'

I grinned.

'At least two should be demolished to uphold the name of the Demonic Cult.'

Then, I leaped into the underground passage.

# Chapter 292:

## Forsaken Believers

### (3)

---

The secret passage was pitch dark.

"Shiny, light up. What are you waiting for?"

[Shiny feels delighted to hear a command after a long time.]

[Shiny feels a severe sense of self-loathing for being happy about such a thing...]

Since integrating with all the sister swords and becoming a complete entity, Shiny has grown quite emotional. Yes, like a cheese pizza topped with camembert, cheddar, and gouda.

[Shiny points out that you forgot Parmesan cheese!]



Shiny shone brightly as if craving cheese pizza.

Despite being neglected for 150 years, the passage was relatively intact. Occasional rockslides were blocking the way, but that was nothing a slash of aura couldn't handle.

-Don't even look towards the northeast.

The Guardian Spirit occasionally offered advice.

-If you do happen to look, make sure to break eye contact before 23 seconds. Their security system activates even underground. Ah, and don't let your aura accumulate in your eyes. See that slightly different colored stone on the floor? Never step on it.

“Okay. Is this the right way?”

The Guardian Spirit knew exactly where to go and where not to look. There were traps every 12 seconds or so, but I avoided them all.

-Turn left at the first fork.

“Hmm. This way seems right... I just have a feeling.”

The Magic Tower's stronghold was as tempting as a Quattro Cheese Pizza before me.

-Oh, and there's a monster trap ahead. Just go around the side and wall run.

“Hey, you're right again. I must be lucky. I felt something ominous about the right path at the last fork.”

All the while, I kept talking to myself.

Of course, it's not because I'm crazy.

-Aren't you?

“Hey, what do you take me for?”

-I take you for whatever you actually are, zombie.

Contrary to the Guardian Spirit's wicked imagination, my babbling was meant to confuse the watching Constellations as if I was simply lucky to bypass all these obstacles. As if I had some fortune or detection skill that made it so easy for me to evade traps, I kept on rambling.

[‘The Lonely Seeker’ is speechless at your progression speed.]

[‘The Barren Lady’ wants to pat you on the back.]

[‘The Incarnation of Love and Lust’ thinks about slapping your butt too!]

[‘The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth’ seriously doubts the skills you possess.]

Okay. Although some strange folks exist, these Constellations are taking the bait well.

I swiftly navigated through the secret passage. I could feel myself getting closer to the heart of the Magic Tower. The further I walked, the stronger the presence of something like aura but stickier and more noxious, like a toxic fog.

-Stop.

Abruptly, I halted at the Guardian Spirit's command.

-This part is crucial.

The floor illuminated by Shiny showed nothing unusual.

However, the Guardian Spirit spoke as if a red starting line had been drawn.

-The Magic Tower's mages, known collectively as [spiders], have bio-etched insignias on their bodies. These insignias serve as a kind of ID, allowing them free access. From this point, anyone without the spider's etching will be recognized as an outsider and trigger an alarm.

“Hmm. It seems like if I walk carelessly from here, I’ll get into big trouble...”

-But it’s also [detection magic]. There's a delay before the magic actually activates.

“Looking at it, it doesn’t seem like an instant-reactive trap...”

I casually acted while the Guardian Spirit chuckled at my performance.

-Six seconds.

The Guardian Spirit pointed forward with his left hand.

-You just need to get past it in six seconds.

"....."

-Actually, I'm not sure if it's six or seven seconds. Anyway, last time I ran through in six seconds, no alarm was triggered.

I turned my head. The passage stretched far into the darkness, too deep for even Shiny's light to reach.

I picked up a stone and threw it with all my might, like a baseball player, infused with aura...

"Hm."

The stone shot straight out. Except for the sound of it cutting through the air, there was nothing else. Only after a long while did I faintly hear a thud as it hit something.

The end of the passage didn't seem close at all.

-It's a bit far, huh?

The Guardian Spirit snickered.

-Heh. Starting to get an idea of how awesome I was back then? I was like a comet streaking across the sky. My red hair fluttered, just like the tail of a comet.

"....."

Listening to him, I surveyed the passage.

‘So you crossed it in six seconds, huh?’

-Of course.

The Guardian Spirit shrugged nonchalantly.

-It felt like a leisurely walk, but it took six seconds.

Alright.

This will be fun.

“Constellations, I may not be a magic expert, but I have a nose for magical scents. It seems like the spiders ahead have laid a rather nasty trap.”

I put Shiny back in its sheath and began stretching my thighs and calves.

“I’ve just arrived on the 50th floor, and you’ve shown interest in me. So I want to give you a chance to judge what kind of person I am.”

[‘The Lonely Seeker’ is intrigued by your words.]

['The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth' knows what lies ahead but remains silent.]

As I put Shiny away, darkness enveloped everything. The cold air filled with a strange, ominous magic, making the darkness seem like squirming tentacles.

After finishing my warm-up, I took a deep breath.

'I'm running.'

Movement technique.

The technique I learned from my master was an improved version of what originated from the Kunlun Sect.

'Run!'

The secret isn't just wrapping aura around the legs and feet.

I also form a small, sponge-like orb of aura under my soles.



I don't step on the ground directly. Instead, I step on the small aura mass, exerting force on my entire leg, and then explode that tiny orb.

It's a continuous process.

Naturally, a slight mistake could cripple your legs. Not only do I have to wield aura to prevent damage to bones and muscles, but I also use the explosive force of aura as propulsion.

‘Six seconds, you said?’

Facing the Guardian Spirit's challenge, I concentrated aura more intensely under my feet than ever before. Like a child pressing mud into a ball, I layered aura, creating a [spring] ready to explode at any moment.

‘Let me show you a 5-second run.’

Then, I launched forward.

Perhaps 'shot out' would be more accurate for such speed.

-Oh-ho.

1 second.

In the vast darkness, I heard the Guardian Spirit's whistle. Smiling, I focused solely on creating and stepping on the [aura springs].

The reactions of those other than the Guardian Spirit were even more intense.

['The Lonely Seeker' is astonished by your aura manipulation!]

2 seconds.

The wind slashing past my cheeks was sharp. I wrapped my entire body in aura. The sticky magic, like a spider's web, attempted to block my charge.

Of course, I tore through the web-like magic and advanced.

[‘The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth’ is certain you're no novice!]

3 seconds passed, yet the end of the tunnel was still not in sight. However, the intensity of the web-like magic was increasing. My form was definitely getting closer to the Magic Tower, and at a very rapid pace.

‘4 seconds.’

I ran even faster. I compressed the aura springs under my feet more forcefully, more fervently. I started to feel that [pushing any further would be harmful], but it didn't matter.

‘5 seconds!’

Finally, I sensed a solid wall blocking my path. A dead end. The end of the secret passage. An entrance was revealed.

If I reduced my speed now, I could cut it close to 6 seconds and gently stop in front of the entrance.

‘Not yet,’

But I just kept running.

‘5 seconds!’

At that moment, BOOM! My body crashed into the dark barrier.

Rather than colliding, I basically demolished the wall.

Despite covering my entire body in aura, the impact was inevitable, so I tumbled on the ground.

"Ow, uh, owowow..."

Rumble.

The barrier I broke through crumbled, bricks falling apart. Amidst the rising dust, I slowly stood up, massaging my thighs.

No alarm for intruders sounded.

"Ah. Thank you, Constellations. It seems I've safely passed through the secret passage. My thighs are just... Ah, I pushed myself a bit too much."

[‘The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth’ is at a loss for words.]

[‘The Lonely Seeker’ begins to pity the Magic Tower for having you as an enemy!]

The Constellations were clearly dumbfounded in their messages.

[‘The Incarnation of Love and Lust’ realizes you're crazy and is delighted!]

[‘The Incarnation of Love and Lust’ eagerly recommends not just a single quest but an entire campaign for you!]

[‘The Incarnation of Love and Lust’ is ready to promise you an enormous quest reward!]

Ignoring that one who had been like that since earlier.

'Now, Sword Emperor. What do you think? Don't you believe that the difference between 6 and 5 seconds represents an insurmountable wall separating the ordinary from the extraordinary? In other words, I am a meteor surpassing a comet. Comets may look stronger, but in English, comets are 'comets,' and meteors are 'meteors'. In most RPGs, Meteor is a higher level spell than Comet, reflecting the general perception of the world...'

I was turning to tease the Guardian Spirit when it happened.

Snap.

I accidentally locked eyes with someone whose identity I couldn't discern.

"....."

"....."

Probably.

The figure in front of me seemed to be cleaning this underground area.

Looking around, I saw that the end of the secret passage turned out to be a sewer.

The smell of cheese missed its eating time emanated from various places. It was evident that this was a neglected area, and therefore, anyone who had to clean such a place was surely not a high-ranking official, nor a child of one, not even a friend of such a child's, but simply, the lowest of the low.

"Uh, uhuhuhuh, uhuhuh...."

The mage boy, obviously a low-ranking one, holding a broom, looked at me with terror-stricken eyes.

He twitched his toes as if to move (he was barefoot) but did not. Or rather, could not. He was completely paralyzed by fear.

"Intruder... intruder... there's an intruder...!"

"Hello."

I gently grabbed the boy's shoulder.

Politely smiling the whole time.

“Nice to meet you.”

“Eek!?”

The boy clammed up.

From his perspective, I was a bare-bodied person who just smashed through a massive wall and appeared unscathed, albeit a bit stiff.

Though I must have been covered in dust from head to toe, my human-like appearance, even with a gentle smile, was unlikely to be very appealing.

“I seem to have lost my way.”

Nevertheless, I always tried to be kind to anyone. Still smiling pleasantly, I spoke to the boy in the softest voice I could muster.



“I'm not quite sure where this place is. Could you perhaps guide me?”

“This, this place is... the Magic Tower...! The Magic Tower's second division...”

“Surely, this isn't the Magic Tower, right? Imagine, just getting lost and ending up here, only to be treated as an intruder. And the Magic Tower folks having to swiftly eliminate the intruder, and since the intruder wouldn't want to die, they would have to silently kill the witness who discovered them. Surely this isn't such a horrifying Magic Tower?”

“Eek...!?”

The boy dropped his broom.

“No, no! This isn't the Magic Tower! Absolutely not! I don't know where that is! Please, just... I didn't see anything... Ohh, I didn't see it...!”

“Ah. That's good to hear.”

I genuinely felt relieved and nodded.

I wanted the boy to know that I was satisfied, so I gave him another smile. The boy finally seemed reassured and swallowed hard with a "gulp."

He must have realized I was harmless.

"I'm looking for the followers of Great Librarian of All Knowledge - Hamusutra. I have some business with them... Sorry to bother you, but since this place isn't the Magic Tower and is just a slightly complex location, could you guide me?"

"Uh, those followers... are under strict surveillance. I... I'm just..."

"Ah."

Squeeze.

"We should help each other out in life."

I gave the boy's shoulder a more comforting pat.

“You can at least guide me, right?”

“...Yes, uh....”

The boy was trembling.

Tears welled up in his eyes.

Surprisingly, most of the human body is made of water, which occasionally gets expelled through the eyes.

".....I'll guide you... just... please spare me....."

“Ah, see? There's still kindness in this world!”

I patted the boy's back.

“Thank you. Nameless spider. I'll surely repay you later. Ah,

of course, once I safely escape from this place that is definitely not the Magic Tower. Let's both make it out safely!"

"Huuuh... yes..."

"What's your name? I'm Kim Gong-Ja, mage. And you?"

"Cha, Charumu... my name is Charumu.... Huuuh..."

For some reason, the boy shed more tears.

I was pleased that things were going smoother than expected. Then, a beat too late, I remembered I was in the middle of boasting to the Guardian Spirit.

'Ah, right. Anyway, Sword Emperor. I was one second faster than you. One second leads to ten, then a year, and eventually a century. So, essentially, I'm a hundred years ahead of you, right? It proves that the Demonic Cult's movement technique is the best.'

-.....

‘Do you admit it? Mr. Six Seconds. Huh? Having fallen a hundred years behind someone who made a 5-second record.’

-Yeah....

For some reason, the Guardian Spirit looked incredibly disillusioned.

-Right... Viper isn't your rival for nothing...

‘What?’

-Nothing. Just go be the best...

Perfect.

Everything is perfect.

Now, off to heroically save people!

# Chapter 293: Sword Emperor's Return (1)

---

He was overwhelmingly superior to be considered just another hunter like them.

-Hey, you losers! Sometimes you need to get some air.

-Staying cooped up all day like you guys isn't good for you.

It was excessively repulsive to even consider him a human being like themselves.

-Here, consider this a favor! I'll give you a free remodeling today! Haha.

The elder of the Magic Tower clenched her teeth. She had numerous subordinates under her command. So far, six constellations had kneeled before them, and six worlds had submitted to their rule. The 50th floor had long been their domain.

But why.

-Why can't we catch that damn gorilla!

-Because I'm a damn strong gorilla, that's why.

The elder was infuriated. "Ah, fuck," she muttered involuntarily.

If he had been a warrior of some dignity, she could have accepted defeat. If he had a clean character deserving of respect, if not admiration, she would have willingly handed over the throne of the 50th floor.

-I can't do that!

But she couldn't accept defeat to a bastard like him.

-No, I won't! Sword Emperor, you bastard! It's better you just kill us instead!

-Oh. Then let's do this. From now on, every time you call me

a bastard, I'll take down one of your towers. Deal?

-What? What nonsense...

The Sword Emperor swung his sword casually. All the hunters fighting on the 50th floor realized something. Even if the Sword Emperor was a bastard, what came out of his mouth was far from nonsense.

The spire, boasting its majesty for over a thousand years, was neatly sliced off.

-Aaaaaah!?

The elder was going insane.

-No! Stop it! My research! My experiment materials! No, no, the Constellations! At least protect the Constellations sealed underground! And you, you bastard.....

-You alright? Call me a bastard one more time, and another tower goes down.



-B..... Ba..... Bird.....! Fuck, bird!!

-Oh. Right. The universe is vast, so somewhere, there might actually be a species of bird called 'fuck bird'. I'll accept that.

The elder seemed on the verge of losing her mind. No, she actually had lost it. If only she could smash her fist into that smug face of his, she would gladly lose all her 200 years' worth of research data.

A thousand-year-old great tree. A demon. A monster. She had many aliases, but now, she was nothing more than an ordinary madwoman before the Sword Emperor. He had the knack for driving his opponents insane.

-I'll kill you!

The elder vowed.

-I will kill you for sure! I'll leave the ruins of the tower you destroyed as an eternal mark! And when you return to the 50th floor, fuck bird! I'll catch you and imprison you in the ruins underground! Forever! I'll stake your heart!

-That's why you guys are going to fail.

The Sword Emperor clicked his tongue and slung his sword over his shoulder.

-You should think of chasing me but you're already thinking of my return.

-What?

-I am the Sword Emperor. The unrivaled warrior of the World of Thousand Swords. And, I will be the first orthodox warrior to conquer the 100th floor of the tower in all creation!

Then, something astonishing happened.

The hunters on the 50th floor, who were watching the battle, felt something from the Sword Emperor's declaration.

Maybe they were too complacent in reality? Weren't hunters supposed to climb the tower? Hunting newcomers on the 50th floor, dominating the world of beginners, and living comfortably - wasn't that wrong?

Yes. There was a deep meaning behind the Sword Emperor collapsing the spire of the Magic Tower. Even if they ruled the 50th floor, they were not eternal victors! Anyone can become a traitor. The Sword Emperor had taken up his sword to teach us, the common people, this noble intention. Oh, praise him. From now on, we are followers of the Sword Emperor, disciples of the Sword Emperor Sect. We shall all follow him...

"Excuse me, Bird Sir."

-Huh? What now? It's just reaching the climax.

"Stop your bullshit and just show me the way."

It was all an old story of the Guardian Spirit.

---

While listening to the Guardian Spirit's old tales about the Magic Tower, specifically his useless brags, I delved deeper into the interior of the Magic Tower.

Infiltration was easier than expected.

-That's because the external surveillance is too thorough.

The Guardian Spirit, who seemed in a good mood for visiting a place related to his past after a long time, willingly answered questions I didn't even ask.

-There are few cases of successful infiltration up to this point. There are too few intruders, so they rarely have a chance to reevaluate their internal security. And right now, you're being guided by an insider.

“Eeeeeek.... The big spiders will kill me if they find out....”

As the Guardian Spirit said, an insider of the Magic Tower was faithfully guiding me.

His name was Charumu, right?

The mage boy trembled as he walked, his long bangs obscuring his face, but he seemed to be very timid.

"I've betrayed the Magic Tower... If caught, no, I'll surely be flayed alive. The big spiders will see how pretty my mana is, then thinly slice my small intestine, marinate it in a potion, and grill it on a torture plate... I'm scared...! They'll record my pitiful screams in a harmony and play it as an acapella song every time they torture me...! Scared, scared, scared....."

"....."

This boy, he's so detailed in his imagination yet he's cooperating with me?

He's more like a hero who lost his fear rather than just timid.

"Ah... wait, please stop...."

Just when I was slightly taken aback by his unusual behavior, the mage boy, holding his staff, suddenly stopped.

"There are guards stationed up ahead..."

Was the weight of the staff, longer than his height, too much for him? He trembled.

"If we go further, they'll notice..."

"There are guards?"

“Yes, yes...”

At my inquiry, the mage boy shrunk. He nervously twiddled a strand of his bangs.

“They’re not very strong, but they guard and monitor the disciples of Hamusutra... A sensitive spider was chosen as the jailor. And, you mustn't recklessly kill the jailor. If he dies, an alarm will automatically sound throughout the Magic Tower...”

“Hmm. I see. It is indeed a bit tricky.”

I stroked my chin. What to do? Approaching and knocking them out before they notice would be simple, but I wanted to avoid dangerous methods.

Seeing me pondering, the mage boy, Charumu, hesitated.

“There is a way...”

"Uh?"

“I’ll distract the jailor... You must be a great master, right? If the jailor is busy with me, you can surely finish the job...”

Huh.

He was clinging to me, begging to be saved just moments ago, and now he’s offering proactive suggestions.

I tilted my head.

“Really? That would make it easier for me. Are you sure?”

“Not at all. Not at all... \*sob\*. But now, my life is bound with yours... If you succeed, I live. If you fail, I die too.”

“Hmm.”

Even the lowest mage is still a mage.

He surrendered just minutes ago, but as soon as his fate was decided, he started thinking fast.

As I was pleased with the boy's proactiveness, he continued mumbling.

“If you fail, my intestines will be skewered and crisped over a flame fueled by dog shit from the Cerberuses... \*sob\*. My small intestine will be skewered with yours... In a way, we're already bound by an intestinal connection...”

"....."

What kind of connection is that?

It's quite disturbing....

Besides, this boy, he's definitely not normal.

Honestly, it's scary.

"Then... I'll go first."

The mage boy walked away, dragging his cloak behind him.



[The 'Lone Seeker' watches your stealthy movements with interest.]

[The 'Eyes That Dwell in the Labyrinth' predict that your companion will betray you.]

[The 'Incarnation of Love and Lust' gives generous points to the boy hiding behind his bangs.]

After a few steps, the mage boy turned a corner. Splish, splash. For a while, only the sound of his bare feet squishing in puddles echoed from around the corner.

Shortly after.

"Hey! Stop! Who's that?"

A strange voice addressed the boy.

"Come any closer and I'll shoot..."

"I-I'm sorry! Please don't kill me!"

"...What? It's just a bug."

I pressed myself against the corridor wall, eavesdropping on their conversation. The owner of the voice seemed to relax upon recognizing the mage boy, a distinctly condescending tone in their voice.

"What's a bug like you doing here, huh?"

"I-I was cleaning the sewers... and lost my mop. Could you, um, maybe lend me a spare one...?"

"A mop, huh? Haha."

The voice chuckled.

"There's a mop right there."

"Where, where?"

"You. You're the mop. Look at that cape you're wearing. Just roll around on the floor to clean it. A bug whose very existence

is a mop. You lost something and came all the way here to borrow?"

Thump!

A sound of a hit echoed.

"Ouch.....!"

"Mop bug, bug mop. Perfectly poetic. Hey, I was bored watching the prisoners. I couldn't even punch them once; the big spiders strictly forbid torturing prisoners for fun. They get to enjoy all they want!"

Thump, thump. Familiar sounds of beating continued from around the corner.

"Yikes, ugh. Sob...!"

"I took this job as a guard hoping for some fun, but it's just a waste of my precious time. I need to research too! It's obvious how my colleagues are getting ahead! This is troublesome, you see!"

"I'm sorry.... Sob! I'm sorry...."

Okay.

The attention is more than diverted; it's glued.

I immediately sprinted around the corner.

In my first step, I entered the hallway; in my second, I passed the guard who seemed to be a mage.

"Huh?"

Detecting me, the mage uttered a dumbfounded sound. He didn't look much older than Charumu. He was kicking the fallen Charumu when he froze in his tracks.

"What the----"

On my third step, I was behind the guard. Tapping the back of his head with a finger, I poured aura into his spine. Forcing aura into his vertebrae, he gasped, "Huh!?" and fainted.

Thud.

The guard collapsed next to the mage boy who was being beaten. The crisis was resolved in an instant.

The mage boy, curled up like a hamster, then looked up.

"Ah...."

"Good job. Thanks to you, it was easy to subdue him."

I patted the mage boy's head once and searched the fallen guard. Clink. An old bunch of keys came into my hand.

"From now on, I'll make sure to take good care of your identity."

"Really...?"

"Of course. It's a person's duty to take care of their own. You betrayed the Magic Tower to join me and even actively helped like this. Of course, I'll save your life. I'll help you settle down

properly in the world."

"Really...? For real...? Can you swear by the Constellations you believe in? I mean, uh, of course I believe you but... just..."

"You've been deceived too much."

I smiled.

"I don't particularly worship any Constellation, but to someone important to me... Alright, I swear on the name of the House of Ivansia. And just so you know, it's a big deal."

"Aaaaah....."

The mage boy covered his face with his hands and sobbed.

"Thank you... Thank you, intruder... Thank you..."

"Ah, it's nothing."

Feeling strangely pleased, I turned around.

A typical prison unfolded before me. It was too dark to see inside the cells, but I could sense the presence of prisoners.

Among them, there might be the [Assistant Writer] Hamustra mentioned.

"Well then, the guard is out cold. Let's slowly free the disciples..."

That's when it happened.

Screeeeeeeech!

A grating noise ripped through the entire prison, maybe even the whole Magic Tower. It was a sound that instinctively made people flinch. I reflexively raised my aura to protect my hearing and looked around in confusion.

"An alarm? Is this an alarm? What's going on..."

Then I saw it.

The mage boy stabbing the guard with a dagger.

"....."

"Huff, huff. Haaah..."

The mage boy was covered in blood. The guard, who had been unconscious, was obviously dead without having resisted. The boy, smeared in blood, wiped his sweaty forehead with his hand.

"I finally killed him..."

I was stunned.

"Excuse me."

"Yes? Intruder...?"



"Why did you kill the guard?"

"What...?"

The mage boy blinked, not understanding my question.

"Because he deserved to die, didn't he?"

"....."

"He was 30 years younger than me yet flaunted the favor of the big spiders. I've been cleaning sewers for 131 years, 10 months, and 21 days, and he already had a guard position... If that's so, sob, it's unforgivable..."

"....."

"Also, he beat me... A lot. He deserved a little death... It's unavoidable retribution..."

"But..."

I barely managed to speak.

"You told me not to kill the guard on our way here, right? You said if the guard dies, it triggers an alarm. So I should be careful."

"No? No...?"

The mage boy tilted his head.

"I said [you] shouldn't kill the guard..."

"....."

"I had to kill him..."

Right.

My instincts are never wrong.

Whenever I felt some guy was crazy, he was 100% crazy.

Not once did it turn out to be, [Hey, relax! Actually, he was normal!] No such cliché ever happened. It's always been like this, it will be like this in the future, and it is like this right now. Crazy. Why did I trust a guy like that? Did I trust him because there was nothing else, not even a bald chimpanzee?

"Ah, of course the alarm went off... But now the chances of us being bound by the skewer connection have increased. Considering it a small price to pay for a bit of justice in this world... isn't that cheap?"

Screeeeech! Screeeeech!

The unsettling alarm continued nonstop.

The Guardian Spirit spoke to me, lost in my sage time.

-I told you. The 50th floor is full of crazies, right? Why do you treat the words of a heavenly senior like dog shit and ignore them? Doing so, you become dog shit yourself, zombie.

You're the craziest of them all, you nutcase.



# Chapter 294: Sword Emperor's Return (2)

---

-But do you really have time to curse at me now?

The Guardian Spirit laughed slyly.

-The alarm has been sounded. In a blink of an eye, the spiders will swarm us.

"Damn it. Followers of Hamustra!"

I ran towards the prison, holding the bunch of keys.

"If you are a disciple of Hamustra! The [Master of the Great Library of All Knowledge] is the greatest Constellation in the universe! If anyone is there, make even the slightest groan!"

"Uuuugh..."

Weak groans emanated from various places.

My aura-enhanced hearing didn't miss even the faintest sounds. Twelve places in total. I began fumbling with the bunch of keys to find the right one, but then---

"There's no time for this!"

I threw the bunch of keys on the ground and drew my holy sword, slashing through the iron bars. Clang, clang, clang! The bars, as if enchanted, were incredibly sturdy, but they snapped like straws under my surging aura.

"Come on! Anyone who still has the strength to stand, hurry..."

-Rooooooooar!

That's when it happened.

A sinister roar echoed from afar.

I couldn't tell what kind of monster was howling. One thing was certain; it wasn't howling to announce the dawn.

[The 'Eyes That Dwell in the Labyrinth' find your predicament amusing.]

[The 'Lone Seeker' is keenly observing how you'll overcome this situation.]

[The 'Incarnation of Love and Lust' is excitedly imagining your future as a captive!]

This is insane.

"Everyone, just follow me! Let's escape!"

I cut the restraints of the disciples.

"W-Who are you...?"

Some, severely tortured, couldn't even stand up. For them, I stimulated their acupoints to circulate aura and poured potion into their mouths.

"Drink this!"

"Gulp, gulp....."

"Don't throw up! It's damn good for you!"

I handed out a bottle of potion to each disciple. It was a special medicine from the Apothecary, now invaluable due to scarcity.

The loyal Apothecary had said, 'For you, I'll offer it at a friend's price...' Thanks to that, I could generously distribute it in a situation like this.

"Oooh?"

"This, this taste...!"



"Incredible. Such efficacy from such a tiny dose..."

Apothecary's skills seemed to be recognized even on the 50th floor.

‘Truly, she’s my friend.’

-That girl was quite a nut too. Come to think of it, isn’t this Charumu kid somewhat similar to her?

‘Keep it down, will you.’

Most of the Hamustra disciples had taken the potion.

But 'most' is not the same as 'all'.

"Wait. Who are you to tell us to follow you?"

The woman, who looked suitable in glasses and had a sharpness in her eyes, spoke up. Her disheveled hair from imprisonment made her look fiercer.

"I am also a follower of Hamustra."

I said.

The woman frowned.

"I've never seen a librarian like you. I won't leave until you explain what your intentions are..."

We didn't have time for this.

"Just focus for a moment."

"What?"

I accelerated my aura to stretch the perception of time. On this elongated timeline, I looked around carefully.

The Hamustra disciples were watching the woman with anxious faces.

Not as colleagues or subordinates, but clearly as someone superior. They seemed eager to flee but hesitant to move without her permission.

‘As expected.’

I realized immediately.

‘This person is the [Assistant Writer].’

Wasn’t it said that she is almost treated as an apostle among the Hamustra disciples?

To lead the disciples, I needed to gain her trust first.

‘If she’s an apostle-level person of a Constellation, she should understand telepathy, right?’

I spoke while maintaining the stretched timeline.

"The [Master of the Great Library of All Knowledge] personally asked me to take care of you, [Assistant Writer]."

My words flowed out at a speed impossible for ordinary people to mimic. To a human of lower realm, my sentence would sound like a single word, ■, an incomprehensible buzz.

As expected, the [Assistant Writer] was capable of understanding telepathy. She knitted her eyebrows.

"The Master asked you...?"

"Yes. To take care of his disciples. The believers who stayed loyal to him. His current situation..."

"I can't believe it. We are far from the top of the Master's [Favorite Character Ranking]. You're telling me he sent you to rescue us? That's a [convenience-driven, incoherent plot development]."

Favorite Character Ranking, character breakdown, convenience-driven plot development... What are these?

That Constellation and its apostle, I thought, but again, we didn't have time for this.

"I knew this would happen, so I brought proof."

"Proof?"

"The Master said there's a phrase only you and the Master of the Library know. A phrase you heard from someone when you entered the apocalypse."

I whispered into the Assistant Writer's ear.

"[I am looking at your face right now.]"

"....."

The Assistant Writer's eyes widened.

"[Someday you too shall die. If you think of my face when you close your eyes, then both of us will die looking at each other. The same. Looking at each other. The same. I'll be here, waiting only until you close your eyes.]"

".....Enough, no. I understand."

The Assistant Writer made a difficult expression.

"That's enough..."

She seemed sad, angry, and surprised all at once.

For a moment, scars that everyone accumulates in life seemed to surface on her face.

"Yes, you must be the person sent by the Master. It's hard to shake off the feeling of implausibility, but well, I'm not exactly the [protagonist] anyway..."

She shook her head bitterly. Then, her eyes regained focus.

She spoke.

"I'll handle the disciples. What's the escape plan?"

"Originally, I planned to sneak out quietly..."

In the stretched timeline, the alarm echoed strangely.

"But with this mess, let's just push through with force."

"Can we really do that?"

"The quicker this conversation ends, the higher our chances. We're talking telepathically, but we don't have much time. So hurry..."

"This man is indeed sent by the Master!"

The Assistant Writer shouted to the surrounding disciples.

"Everyone, follow this man's orders! Damn these spider bastards! Let's escape!"

"Yes!"

The disciples responded eagerly, as if they had been waiting for this command.

-Rooooooar!

The monster roared eagerly, as if it had been waiting for just that command. Finally, it rounded the corner and burst into the prison.

Consequently, the disciples' initially spirited response of "Yes!" turned into a twisted, panicked "Yeeeees!?" by the end.

-Oh. A chimera. Haven't seen one of those in a while.

The monster didn't waste time sizing us up or anything like that. If there's one advantage beasts have, it's living in the present moment.

And this monster's present moment was drooling from its maw as it charged toward us.

-That's a hybrid of a manticore and a slime, a mutant bred by mixing the two.

Thump! Thump! The ground shook with each stride of the monster. Where its eyes should have been, there were none. Instead, a sticky green liquid continuously oozed from its eye sockets.



The Guardian Spirit clicked his tongue.

-Ugh. Perverts. They're the same as they were a hundred years ago.

“I'll lead the way! Just follow me!”

I charged forward.

“Ah...! In-Intruder! That is...!”

Charumu tried to say something with a swallowed groan, but I didn't listen and charged ahead, guessing what he might be trying to say.

‘It must be something like, “It's a lifeform that can't be killed without a special method!”’

Monsters inhabiting the 50th floor are usually special.

For example, to kill a [Creature that Dies When Split in Half], you need to split it precisely in half, and to kill a

[Screamer], you must overwhelm it with sound, not slashes.

This chimera, a monster emerging from the Magic Tower, is one from the highest difficulty dungeons on the 50th floor. It won't die just from being cut recklessly.

‘So...’

I slid, skidding under the chimera's belly, and before it could react, I plunged the tip of my sword deep into its underbelly.

‘If I obliterate it down to the last speck of dust, that should do it!’

The sword flashed brilliantly. Red lightning seemed to shoot up, and then the next moment, Boom! The beast's belly burst open.

But it wasn't just the belly. The chimera's innards, body, spine, head, even the slime oozing from its eye sockets – its entire being exploded instantly.

“Eek!?”

The mage boy screamed. I had used the holy sword like a syringe, pumping aura into it like crazy.

The monstrous infusion of aura beyond any logic caused the creature to explode while still alive.

“Phew.”

I exhaled, having expended my aura.

I didn't just settle for bursting the chimera's body; I burned its skin, bones, and even the last trace of its existence. For a brief moment, ash-like dust fluttered in the air, but even that was incinerated.

I had literally erased the monster's existence.

“Okay!”

I sprang up and looked back.

“There's no need for a special strategy when you can just

obliterate it! Let's go, quickly!”

The mage boy, the Assistant Writer, and the disciples stared at me blankly.

“What are you waiting for? Let's go!”

“Ah, yes. That's right. Let's hurry!”

The Assistant Writer was the first to snap back to reality. She grabbed and pulled at the shoulders of other disciples, sometimes kicking their behinds to urge them on. The disciples then joined in, following me as we fled.

[The 'Lone Seeker' is speechless at your aura manipulation.]

[The 'Eyes That Dwell in the Labyrinth' are amazed you're not exhausted and still in good shape.]

[The 'Incarnation of Love and Lust' is already preparing a long campaign just for you.]

Yeah, yeah, thank you, thank you!

But such stories are for later!

“That chimera was a pet especially beloved by the big spiders...”

The mage boy, panting heavily, still managed to follow me. Despite struggling to run, he kept trying to look at my face, seemingly shocked by the recent events.

“The chimera’s heart, being like slime, circulated endlessly within its body... unless it was precisely stabbed, it wouldn't die...”

“Ah, I see. So my method was the right one.”

"....."

The mage boy opened and closed his mouth but then shut it, focusing on running.

-Roar! Roar!

Monsters appeared non-stop in the corridors, as if springing from nowhere.

“If you don't want to die, move, you weirdos!”

Not slowing down, I swung my sword. Whack! Splatter! Every monster that my sword touched exploded like a balloon.

For about 3 seconds, monstrous creatures of terrifying appearance kept emerging, but I was eradicating them at a rate of one per second, clearing the path ahead.

“Hyaaaah!”

In roughly 40 seconds, I had exploded about fifty monsters.

Then, I felt something off.

I had been tense infiltrating and now cautious escaping, but I wasn't tired at all. Sure, the monsters were terrifying. But

wasn't it enough to just smash them with brute aura?

‘Isn’t this easier than I thought?’

It wasn't as difficult as I had imagined.

Maybe, just maybe.

‘Have I become much stronger than I thought?’

Pause.

I halted my steps.

“Huff, huff... huff...!”

“In-Intruder, just a little... slower, please...”

The sounds of panting followers came from behind. Strange. I had only enhanced my legs with aura and ran, yet my

companions, all hunters who had made it to the 50th floor, were struggling to breathe.

"....."

I looked up, still holding my holy sword.

We were still underground in the Magic Tower.

Beyond that wall would be the city on the 50th floor.

‘Let’s give it a try.’

I gripped the sword handle and activated a skill.

‘I relinquish all memories of the hunters I met at the open-air bar.’

Woosh!



The holy sword wrapped itself in red aura. [The Torn Goddess's Salvation]. A skill that grants temporary power in exchange for memories. Channeling a skill inherited from the Constellation Killer, I swung my sword at the corridor ceiling.

With just a single slash a blood-red storm surged. The stone wall crumbled amidst roaring thunder, overpowering the screams of the disciples behind me. I swatted away falling rocks, heading for the disciples' heads, and looked upward.

[The 'Eyes That Dwell in the Labyrinth' are in shock.]

Before long, the ceiling was cleanly punctured.

"Oh."

Through the gap in the ceiling, dark clouds loomed. The 50th floor was always cloudy. But even that gloomy sky was brighter than the underground corridor's ceiling.

It felt like looking up through a hole from the bottom of a well.

"This works?"

"....."

The disciples gaped at me in awe.

"Line up one by one. I'll lift you up. What are you waiting for? If the spiders catch up, it'll be a headache. Let's line up orderly and with decorum."

"Intruder..."

The mage boy, trembling, opened his lips.

"What, what exactly are you...?"

I shrugged my shoulders and replied.

"The boss of evil."

# Chapter 295: Sword Emperor's Return (3)

---

“Who are you... What the hell are you?”

The [Assistant Writer], a disciple of Hamusutra, abruptly asked.

“Apart from the fact that the Great Librarian of All Knowledge chose someone... What was that insane aura just now? A skill? How did you learn such a skill?”

“I'm just a newbie who arrived on the 50th floor yesterday.”

“Don't lie to me. There's no way a newbie like you exists in this world.”

“All groups are desperately looking for experienced newbies like me.”

The Assistant Writer's face twisted like a sweet potato.

I shrugged my shoulders.

“Let’s get out of here first. I’ve been feeling a chill on the back of my neck. Seems like some annoying guys are following us.”

“...Alright.”

The Assistant Writer reluctantly swallowed her words. She seemed to be holding back from asking various questions due to the situation.

The other party members also hurriedly moved their feet.

-Uoooooh! Guooo!

The beasts poured out through the escape route we had just crawled out of which was a hole I had made.

The real chase had just begun.

“Ahhh!”

“R-Run...! Hurry!”

The disciples screamed. They were running so hard that they seemed unable to properly scream. Perhaps their physical strength had dropped considerably from being imprisoned for a long time.

“What a shame.”

I clicked my tongue in sympathy.

“Come here. I’ll help you. How do you plan to survive in this harsh world with that kind of stamina?”

“Y-Yes?”

I didn't wait for a response. Instead, I grabbed the nape of one of the disciples. I lifted him up effortlessly.

It wasn't difficult. A life of imprisonment takes away various

things from a person. Those who lost their dignity over a long period were that much lighter.

“Uh? Eh?”

“Relax. Don’t you understand? If you tense up, you’ll get hurt unnecessarily.”

"Uh, uhm....."

“Shut your mouth so you don’t bite your tongue.”

I put more strength into my right arm as I continued to run.

“Hrmpf!”

And then, I threw him.

“Eh?”

I literally threw him.

Like a shot put athlete in the Olympics.

I threw the disciple I had lifted with my right hand, wrapping him in an aura barrier, forward.

“----Ah.”

The disciple flew. In the slow, extended time. Above all, in the air.

Like an elegant flamingo dancing over a zoo lake.

The disciple flailed his arms and legs in desperation, but as in life, he grasped nothing but thin air. All that existed were nitrogen and oxygen.

“Eeeyyiiiiiieeek!?”

And so, one of the most novel screams I've ever heard in my life existed there too.

I clicked my tongue.

“I told you to shut your mouth, and yet you scream like that.”

Kooooom!

The disciple flew splendidly and crash-landed. Some might call it a crash rather than a landing, but in the grand scheme of life, there was no significant difference between the two.

“Now, let’s move on to the next one.”

“Huh?”

I grabbed the nape of another disciple. It was simple. The disciples were dumbfounded, looking up at the sky as their comrade performed his flamingo act, unable to escape my grasp.

“It’s dangerous, so shut your mouth.”



“Huh? .....Yes?”

“Hrmmmpf!”

“Ahh, ack, haa, aaaaahhhhhhh!?”

What followed was a repeat performance.

I picked the weakened disciples one by one and threw them far away. Then I ran up to them, sprawled on the ground, and threw them again.

“S-Save me... please save us...!”

“This is all for you to survive.”

Thanks to this, the disciples, despite their lack of strength, could sit still and move quickly. The beasts couldn't keep up with our speed and gradually fell further behind.

It was a truly divine dribble.

[‘The Lonely Seeker’ is at a loss for words at your actions.]

[‘The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth’ realizes you are out of your mind.]

[‘The Incarnation of Love and Lust’ has taken a liking to you from now on.]

Local broadcasting is so noisy.

-Ah, ah! Mic test! Mic test!

How far had we run? Finally, a familiar voice came from the direction of the tower.

It was the spokeswoman of the tower who publicly tortured the disciples of Hamusutra yesterday.

-What the hell, who are you?

The spokeswoman was fuming. Her voice came directly to me through telepathy. I was also ready to reply via telepathy.

-What kind of crazy bastard are you? Can't you hear meee?

“Good day. You're working hard, miss. The weather is nice today.”

-You really are crazy, huh!?

She was talking to herself too much.

-Do you know who you're messing with? Eh? Eh?

“Well, I don't know much since you haven't introduced yourself. Don't you think introductions are a very important part of etiquette in a world where people live?”

-Where did this insane lunatic come from... We are the tower! The tower! We have the power of Millennium Magic! The supreme tower! The force that monopolizes this great Monopolized Poisonous City on the 50th floor!

So the city's name was Monopolized Poisonous City.

“That’s right. Nice to meet you!”

-Can’t you return them right now!?

“Ah, sorry, but that seems a bit difficult... I listened to your broadcast yesterday. It seemed a bit too much. Life is precious even if we live well together, so why bother the kind disciples of Hamusutra? Seeing that, I felt sorry and am helping them escape.”

-Oh, wow. Really, such a crazy guy.

The spokeswoman kicked something furiously, the sound transmitted through telepathy.

In the midst of provoking the other party appropriately, I continuously searched for a way to escape. I was trying to buy as much time as possible.

If we return to our tower like this, we could easily escape.

‘But most likely, we’d be caught.’

I shook my head.

The Magic Towers have been reigning over this city for more than 1000 years. Even if they get beaten, they would chase us to the end for revenge.

Of course, to counter the invasion of other worlds, the Sword Saint and the Black Dragon Witch would be fully prepared, but still, it was best to avoid unnecessary battles as much as possible.

-Which Constellation's lackey are you? Eh? Which one?

“I don’t serve any Constellation. If I have to say, I always carry my beloved in my heart.”

-Ah! Catch that bastard and beat the crap out of him! Anyone will do, just please!

That's when it happened.

“...Over there.”

The Assistant Writer, who had been keeping up with me, spoke next to me. While all the other disciples had regressed to flamingos, only the Assistant Writer was able to run on her own feet, keeping up with my pace.

“It doesn’t matter which world you’re from, it’s dangerous to run there. Not everyone from that world can be as strong as you.”

“I was just thinking the same thing.”

“There is a secret hideout where our comrades are hiding. I’ll guide you there. ...It’s a place we’re not supposed to reveal to outsiders, but since you’re someone who received that person’s message.”

The Assistant Writer muttered.

“Gray, embrace us.”

At that moment, the voice of the tower echoed in my head.

[A certain skill affects you.]

I tilted my head. I couldn't feel any effect with my senses.

However, it seemed different from the perspective of others, as the spokeswoman of the tower immediately became enraged.

-Damn it! Assistant Writer! How dare you do such a shoddy trick...!

The telepathy changed. Until just now, the telepathy that was directly hitting me, now started to ring from the sky instead of my head.

I wondered what was happening.

"It's a skill that hides the presence of aura."

The Assistant Writer explained from beside me.

"The Magic Tower identifies people by their aura to send telepathy. Aura is like a person's fingerprint... From now on, even the Constellations won't be able to talk to us."

“Interesting.”

Indeed, the Constellations who had been noisily broadcasting in the local channel also suddenly fell silent.

In short, the Assistant Writer had activated a kind of [Stealth] skill.

“But it can’t hide our physical presence... Thank you. I could use this skill with peace of mind because you helped us escape this far.”

“That’s impressive. It’s quite a convenient skill.”

“In my opinion, the truly impressive one is you...”

The Assistant Writer gave a bitter smile.

“This skill won’t last long. Follow me, Mr. [Protagonist] of this story. I’ll take you to our hideout.”

-We’ll kill youuuu!



The spokeswoman's voice raged behind us.

-You may be a lunatic, but let's see if you can keep your nerve after being caught by us! Yess! I'll tear your nails out and shove them into your eyes, and Charumu! You, I saw you there!

"Hic..."

The mage boy following us in silence hiccuped.

-You know how it ends for traitors. Ahaha! But you'll realize how ignorant you were because, uh! Because you will set a new record for the worst punishment ever given to traitors!

"Ugh... Huh..."

-Expect it!

Bang, a noise sounded. The spokeswoman seemed to have slammed the table.

-You will all receive the worst massacre! No! The worst

eternal hell! Definitely! Without fail!

---

We successfully shook off our pursuers.

“This is the place.”

The Assistant Writer led us to an underground cave.

“As you know, the 50th floor is eroded by void poison. The land itself has a strong magical nature. The deeper you go underground, the stronger the disturbance becomes, so the tower's spiders can't accurately locate us. It's a natural fortress.”

As the Assistant Writer said, the secret hideout extended deep underground, without a single light.

“Is there only one entrance?”

I lit my fingertip with aura to use as a light. The disciples carefully descended the passage using my light.

“No. There are several. I know of 14 exits, and probably there are more than 23 times that I don’t know about.”

“That’s incredible.”

“Well, that's necessary in case we're invaded so everyone can escape on their own...”

The Magic Tower also knew about this hideout and occasionally invaded it. However, the underground cave was unimaginably vast and had countless entrances, making a complete sweep virtually impossible.

"....."

There were eyes watching us from the dark depths of the cave.

“...They are the librarians...”

“Why did they come back? How did they return?”

“Shh, don’t show any interest...”

They were ragged-looking people. It seemed they had set up dwellings in a corner of the cave, with cluttered living tools scattered around. There were also dirty tents spread out to avoid the dew dripping from the ceiling.

As we walked down the cave passage, there were people like that, with their belongings strewn about.

“...This is a communal refuge.”

Noticing my curiosity about their identity, the Assistant Writer informed me.

“A communal refuge?”

“Yes. Not only librarians like us, but almost all hunters who lost their Constellations live here. The toxicity is strong, so it's hard to live long... But it's better than being captured by the Magic Tower and be subjected to human experimentation.”

Indeed.

I noticed that there were small shrines included in the cave dwellers' tent homes.

Some even arranged a modest altar with a deity statue on it.

“Outside, they call us [escapees]. Well... Even though we're in similar situations, there's no sense of solidarity. Rather, they hate each other. They served different Constellations, and each thought their own was the best.”

“I can understand that.”

“Is your world the same? Well, all worlds are similar. This way, please. Each Constellation's followers have strictly divided areas, so it's dangerous to enter the wrong one.”

As I followed the guide, looking around.

“...Hmm?”

Something strange caught my eye.

I rubbed my eyes, thinking I saw it wrong. After wiping away nonexistent eye gunk, I looked again, enhancing my vision with aura.

"....."

But my vision was normal.

In one corner of the cave.

There was another passage leading in a different direction from where we were walking. What I noticed was on both sides of the passage. Sculptures carved like the Four Heavenly Kings in Seokguram\* were there.

\*For more info, check <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seokguram>

The sculpture had a very familiar face.

"Huh?"

The Assistant Writer, walking ahead, stopped and looked back.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing... I’m just seeing things right now...”

"What is it?"

The Assistant Writer also looked where I was staring.

She tilted her head after seeing [something].

“Huh? Why?”

As if it were a very familiar, everyday sight.

“That’s just a normal [Sword Emperor] statue.”

"....."

I was stunned.

“Careful, intruder.”

If the mage boy hadn't been right behind me, I would have collapsed.

“That, that, Sword Emperor statue? Sword Emperor staaaatue?”

“...Why are you so surprised?”

“Why. Why. How come, why is there a statue of something like the Sword Emperor!?”

I grabbed the Assistant Writer's shoulder and shook her. I couldn't help it. The Assistant Writer looked at me as if I were crazy, then shook off my hand.

“Why? Well, because the Sword Emperor is also a Constellation. Of course, there are people who serve him.”



“Yeees?”

“I don’t know why you’re so surprised... The Constellation of the Sword, commonly known as the Sword Emperor, is quite famous. A hundred and fifty years ago, when he was still human, he once brought down the a spire of the Magic Tower. Though, like our Librarian, it is said he didn't make disciples... But there are always followers everywhere.”

The Assistant Writer furrowed her brow.

“Especially, followers of the Sword Emperor are often seen as fools obsessed with martial arts. I’ve seen them a few times passing by, but I recommend not getting involved with them. How should I put it... It feels like they live in a different world.”

"....."

Creeeak.

I slowly looked at the Guardian Spirit.

The Guardian Spirit looked at me as if to say, what are you

staring at now?

-Why?

‘Explain this to me.’

-Flip your card over.

‘Card? What damn card?’

-My card, you idiot. The one you took from that gramps Marcus.

I summoned the card.

I flipped it over.

+

[Sword Constellation]

Rank: A+

Effect: From another world, he cleared his world's tower up to floor 99 but failed on the 100th. Unsatisfied, he was unable to give up on his earthly desires, and has become a spirit.

He cannot physically affect anything in this world, but is able to communicate with the holder of this skill.

Be awestruck by his skill and experience, and ask him for guidance!

\*Only the holder of this skill is able to feel his presence.

\*Skill copied from Marcus Calenbury.

+

What is this?

-Look at the card's name, Mr. Zombie.

I looked.

-Is [Sword Constellation] visible to your eyes or not?

"....."

-Then am I a Constellation or not? You brain-dead zombie.

This is insane.

Why didn't you tell me?

-You didn't ask.

This insane son of a...

-And I did tell you.

‘When?’

-When you invaded the Magic Tower today. When I told you a secret passage to sneak in. I told you a story from the past.

[Yes. The Sword Emperor had a deep purpose when he brought down the tower's spire. Even if it's a power ruling the 50th floor, there's no eternal victor! Anyone can become a traitor. The Sword Emperor took up his sword personally to teach this noble intention to us, the common people. Oh, praise him. From now on, we are the disciples of the Sword Emperor, followers of the Sword Emperor Sect. We will all follow him...]

-But you told me to shut up and just lead the way.

"....."

-I always speak the truth, you brain-dead zombie. But in the eyes of a sage, only sages are seen, and in the eyes of a zombie, only zombies are seen, you always dismiss my truth as nonsense. Even now, realize that I am a true senior with a proper personality.

So.

‘You’re telling me there really is a Sword Emperor Sect in this world, with followers who serve you? For real?’

-That's correct.

This world is crazy.

# Chapter 296: The Legend Himself (1)

---

Witness A.

First testimony.

“T-The Sword Emperor? He’s famous, of course...”

The mage boy, with his bangs covering half his face, stuttered.

“I personally witnessed the Sword Emperor demolishing the sixth spire... It was incredible. Just by swinging his sword, the tower, coated in all sorts of magic and thick armor, crumbled to pieces... Ah! It might have been the first and last time Elder was that enraged. Umm... I was really pleased because there were many detestable people in the 6th Branch who all died... Though as a result, my lineage got wiped out, blocking my path to promotion, and eventually, after several decades, I ended up cleaning sewers for 131 years, which was shitty...”

Witness B.

Second testimony.

“...I don't know why you're asking this.”

The librarian with an irritable gaze sighed.

“The Sword Constellation... Commonly known as the Sword Emperor, is so famous it would be strange if someone didn't know about him. He's probably ten times more renowned than the current Constellation Killer. Anyway, he was the only person to have ascended beyond the 99th floor. Frankly, I think he cleared the 100th floor... Huh? Why was such a psychopath famous? ...What are you talking about? Why have you been making a face like you've eaten shit?”

Witness C.

Third testimony.

-I never really wanted to be a constellation, you know.



The world's rascal rambled.

-I don't know since when, but faith started gathering around me. And somehow, I ended up becoming a constellation. Well, that's a story for later. Anyway. The conclusion is that I'm an incredibly awesome guy. The true savior, you see, zombie. Even without trying, I'm worshiped as a god.

Since the witness is utterly useless, the above testimony is classified as bullshit.

“This world is rotten...!”

“Why have you been like this since a while ago? ...Ah, but you were also personally chosen by the Librarian. It's natural you have some quirks.”

The [Assistant Writer] muttered as I plunged into despair in real-time.

This is the hideout of the Hamusutra disciples.

After descending the underground cave for quite a while, we reached the secret hideout. There were no decent buildings or

furniture. Just some mats laid on the cave floor and simple canned food stocked.

But just being here seemed to reassure the disciples, as they exclaimed, “Ah...”, “Thank goodness,” “Thanks to the King of Death, we could survive that hell!” and so on.

“Thank you so much! Our lives are all indebted to the King of Death!”

“Ahaha... You’re too kind.”

Normally, I would have calmly accepted their gratitude. But now, an earthquake of magnitude 5 was happening at the corners of my mouth. The Sword Emperor Sect. The fact that a religion worshiping the Sword Emperor existed in this universe shocked and terrified me to the point of nearly losing my sanity.

I barely held onto my sanity and spoke.

“Well, then everyone can return to their own worlds now.”

"....."

The disciples looked at each other at my perfectly normal words.

“Um, King of Death. The thing is...”

“We have no world to return to,” said the Assistant Writer.

“The tower has colonized and turned it into a colony. In the old days, there were rebellions, but that’s a story from hundreds of years ago. Now, only traitors who collaborate with the tower to enjoy wealth and power remain. Even if we wanted to return... there’s nowhere to return to. Nor do we want to.”

“Wow.”

I was somewhat surprised. A colony.

I had suspected to some extent, but the tower really could conquer the towers of other worlds.

“That’s why people like us can only stay on the 50th floor.”

The Assistant Writer leaned her hand on her forehead and sighed.

“We can't escape to lower floors. There are plenty who would capture us and offer us to the tower. Nor can we advance to higher floors.”

“Why? If you clear the quest, you can go directly to the 51st floor, right?”

“...You really are a newbie who just arrived here.”

The Assistant Writer looked at me as if I was a marvel.

“You really don't know anything. Well, you might just have remarkable acting skills. Until a moment ago, I thought you were a recluse who had concealed your identity and come down to the 50th floor.”

What is she talking about?

“Uh, intruder.”

The mage boy spoke from beside me, his face troubled.

Then the boy's words completely exceeded my expectations.

“Since 150 years ago, there has been no hunter who cleared the 50th floor...”

What?

“Well, to be precise, no hunter not affiliated with the tower. To clear the 50th floor, you must either be a part of the tower or at least not be their enemy.”

“Really? ...For 150 years? How is that possible?”

“The tower is blocking the quests.”

The mage boy fiddled with his wand anxiously.

“Until now, there was a responsible person for each stage you passed through. The responsible constellation... But beyond the 50th floor, there's no such helpful guide. You have

to find a constellation on your own, serve it, gain its recognition, and bring its quest... only then can you pass.”

“No, wait. That’s strange.”

I furrowed my brows.

“Then constellations just need to give out quests, right? I received countless whispers from constellations as soon as I arrived on the 50th floor. They all wanted to run quests with me. How can the tower monopolize the quests?”

"....."

The mage boy pulled his hood further over his head. I almost forgot about his dramatic betrayal, but he was also a part of the tower, until just two hours ago.

“Those are minor quests.”

The Assistant Writer answered in place of the mage boy.

“Kill this person. Help that person. Such quests can be given out anytime. Rewards can also be given. But to compose a quest that can be recognized as [Clearing the 50th floor], it's complicated to go around the tower.”

“It's a bit hard to understand, isn't it? Hmm. But you're also a messenger of the Librarian, right?”

The Assistant Writer scratched her cheek.

“First off, whether you like it or not, the tower is the force that rules the 50th floor. You know that, right?”

“Yes. More or less...”

“Then you can understand that it's tricky to compose a quest that allows bypassing the tower and claiming to have passed the 50th floor, right? It's like if a novel threw in lots of foreshadowing about the final boss for 497 pages, only to casually dismiss it in the next 3 pages with ‘Actually, it's not necessary to defeat the final boss’ ‘Yeah, yeah, it's okay to ignore it’ like a comedy sketch. The novel would be trash, right?”

A typical metaphor from a disciple of Hamusutra...

“So, even from the constellations' perspective, to create a 50th floor breakthrough quest, they inevitably have to use the [tower] as a material.”

The Assistant Writer spread her fingers.

“Firstly, you get recognized by the tower. You serve the tower for a long time or maintain a consistent camaraderie to become [a member of the tower] or [an honorary member of the tower]. Thus, you build achievements like [You have gained solid support from the force ruling the 50th floor]. ...This is the current [regular route]. Hunters who climb up this route steadily appear one or two per year.”

"....."

“Secondly, you directly fight the tower and subdue it. ...This is the [irregular route].”

“And there hasn’t been a hunter who cleared the irregular route in the last 150 years... That’s what you mean.”

I stated, understanding.



The Assistant Writer nodded.

“Yep. It’s not an easy task.”

The Assistant Writer snapped her fingers.

Then, pages appeared out of thin air, rustling. Each page, glowing faintly like fireflies, circled around the Assistant Writer.

“These pages are my skill. [Rejected Contest Entries].”

"....."

“It’s not a name I came up with. Don’t look at me like that. I’ll gouge out your eyes.”

This lady was quite a character.

“...Anyway, I can peek at [failed quests] of others with [Rejected Contest Entries]. And these are all traces of those who failed to break the 50th floor through that [irregular

route].”

Rustle.

The torn pages fluttered as if they had wings.

I grabbed one of the closest pages and looked at it.

+

[Liberation War of the Monopolized Poisonous City]

Constellation: Warhorse of the Eternal Plains

Difficulty: SSS

Objective: Warriors! The moment of uprising has finally arrived. For the past 20 years, the demons of the tower have oppressively ruled Monopolized Poisonous City. The guardian of the sword may have disappeared, but how can there be only one hero in this world? Now, it's time for you to wield the sword.

Stand up. Fight! Topple the remaining five fingers of the tower, rescue the constellations groaning in their grasp, and walk proudly beyond Monopolized Poisonous City!

Result: Failure

Reason for Rejection: Decisive defeat of the allied forces. Most of the [Warhorse of the Eternal Plains] executives were massacred. The constellation subsequently acknowledged the failure of the quest publicly. A humiliating truce was made, agreeing not to issue quests targeting the tower for the next 100 years.

+

Plop.

I caught another piece of paper.

+

[Love Saves the World]

## Constellation: The Incarnation of Love and Lust

Difficulty: SSS

Objective: Are you at peace, beloved lovers? I am at peace. But there are those in Monopolized Poisonous City who are not at peace. (Dramatic)

It's the ruler of the tower, the Tower Lord, the Elder. (Surprise!)

It's said that the Elder has never opened her heart to another in a thousand years. As a human, wouldn't she feel loneliness? (Curious) I believe that beneath that frozen ground lies a stunningly beautiful flower.

Someone, please show the Elder the greatness of love, the beauty of the world! It's an extremely difficult task, but I believe our wonderful lovers can do it! (Thumbs up!)

Result: Failure

Reason for Rejection: All disciples of [The Incarnation of Love and Lust] who approached the Elder were executed.

Those who touched the Elder's shoulder had their fingers chopped off 230 times, and those who attempted to kiss the Elder had their lips split into 23 pieces. The constellation subsequently acknowledged the failure of the quest publicly.

+

"....."

I flipped through the torn papers.

Some quests were written seriously, others lightly, each with the unique tone and taste of the constellations. But each one invariably contained one word.

Failure.

"....."

[Failure], [Failure], [Failure].

The [Irregular Route Quests], which were actively conducted

until 100 years ago, gradually decreased from a certain point. Rather, they drastically decreased. Eventually, they were updated once in 10 years, once in 20 years...

And then they disappeared.

“The last Irregular Route Quest was issued 31 years ago.”

The Assistant Writer snapped her fingers.

Like a lie, the floating pages disappeared into thin air.

“We actively encouraged participation in the quests, but now even that doesn’t work. Since our Librarian disappeared, we’ve been too busy taking care of our own lives... Now, this city, the 50th stage, is literally a place where time has stagnated.”

“...Why?”

I had to ask.

“Why would the tower do such a thing? What profit do they

gain from this?"

"A lot."

The Assistant Writer replied immediately.

"By enforcing this [Regular Route], they fill the floors beyond the 50th with their loyal forces. This way, the tower monopolizes the progress of the tower, not the constellations. And permanent monopoly always brings immense profits."

"But..."

"You're right."

Did she understand what I was about to say?

The Assistant Writer nodded silently in agreement.

"It's boring."

"....."

"Deadly boring. Boring to death. Tedious. Stale and suffocating."

Complaining about the so-called regular route, the Assistant Writer sighed.

"Ever since the tower began ruling Monopolized Poisonous City, apart from the brief time when the Sword Emperor wreaked havoc, there's hardly been any fun. That's why we librarians resist the tower."

The Assistant Writer looked around with a bitter smile.

Less than ten disciples were healing their bodies injured from their imprisonment. All of them looked shabby. Their expressions conveyed just surviving.

"...Now 'we' is just this much."

Is that so.



‘I understand.’

I looked up.

To others, it might seem like I’m lamenting at the empty air, but I saw the Guardian Spirit.

‘Why you destroyed the tower.’

-Hmm.

‘It wasn't just for fun to create chaos.’

-Well, seeing the Elder’s face contort was quite fun.

The Guardian Spirit lay horizontally in the air as if the sky was his bed.

-I didn't expect that after I disappeared, not a single new talent capable of defeating the tower would emerge. Well, I was a bit extraordinary.

‘Why didn’t you destroy everything instead of just one spire?’

-Of course because I’m not a nanny spoon-feeding kids.

The Guardian Spirit spoke nonchalantly.

-If the tower guys are bastards, what are those who can’t defeat those bastards? And what about those who wag their tails as dogs of the tower to pass the 50th floor?

"....."

-You might not feel it because you’re doing well, but these guys are hunters. Hunters who climbed up to the 50th floor. Strong people. They’re long past their beginner days; they should take care of themselves.

"....."

-I’ve done my duty by just taking down one spire.

Indeed.

That was a very Guardian Spirit-like statement, so I nodded. Perhaps the Guardian Spirit and I were not that different.

Whether to leave them to be responsible for themselves or to help them stand up and take responsibility.

Only that last attitude might be the difference between him and me.

“Assistant Writer.”

"Hmm?"

“I have a favor to ask.”

That one difference made me speak.

“Please summon one disciple of each constellation, including the Sword Emperor Sect.”

“...That’s something I can do, but why?”

“I am a hunter. A hunter has certain things to do.”

I knew what I wanted to do.

“I will ascend to the next stage.”

# Chapter 297: The Legend Himself (2)

---

Disciples from various constellations began to gather in the cave hideout.

“Assistant Writer? You were alive? That's surprising.”

“Hearing about the chaos in the tower yesterday, it was your doing, wasn't it?”

Disciples serving different constellations. Among them were those who had lost their constellations long ago, and some who hadn't lost them but were on the run from the tower.

They were the non-mainstream hunters of the 50th floor.

“Wow! Impressive! The tower has issued an extermination order.”

A woman in a reversed hood tapped the Assistant Writer on the shoulder.

“How badly did you piss off those spider bastards to get an extermination order? I’m envious. Hey, Assistant Writer, you should ditch that constellation like Hamusutra and come to us. We’ll treat you well!”

“...The fact that I haven't twisted your wrist off is the last bit of courtesy I have as the person who invited you. Be grateful for my rational and elegant manners.”

The disciples chattered and found spots to their liking. Some sat on flat stalagmites, others lay down, and some placed their rag cushions...

At first glance, they looked like a ragtag bunch.

It was a scene akin to a flea market.

"Hmm."

But my senses had been sharp since a while ago.

‘These hunters... are strong.’

-Well, they're all ragamuffins chased by the tower.

The Guardian Spirit crossed his arms.

-Otherwise, they wouldn't have evaded the tower till now. Either they're clever, lucky, or just strong. Having even one of these traits makes them strong.

‘Each person gathered here is at least at Paladin's level.’

I looked around. In our world, one of the top ten, maybe even five, would be the average here.

‘50th floor is indeed not to be underestimated.’

The hunters I met in Monopolized Poisonous City were not weak, but somehow lacking. At best, they were at the level of, ‘Oh, you know how to use Aura? Not bad.’

However, the disciples gathered now were different.

‘There seems to be an uninvited guest hidden too.’

I glanced subtly into the depths of the dark cave.

Even a hunter who hid their presence and quietly observed was among them.

It was truly a lineup worthy of the 50th floor’s reputation.

“First of all, thank you all for gathering today, even though you probably don’t have money for today’s meal.”

The Assistant Writer stood up.

She walked to the center of the meeting. The disciples looked at her, but they were either not paying attention or pretending to be disinterested.

“There are people here I haven’t seen in 10 years. Some we can no longer see. I...”

“Hey, writer lady.”



The woman who had tapped the Assistant Writer's shoulder earlier raised her hand. She was chewing something.

“Sorry to interrupt your passionate welcome, but...”

“...What?”

“I’ve been very uncomfortable since earlier. It probably isn’t just me. Don’t misunderstand. I’m not complaining about not having chairs or cushions, we know you can’t afford it.”

The woman laughed and turned her gaze...

Directly at me.

“What’s with that guy?”

"....."

“My gut is rumbling. The rat tails I ate yesterday feel like they’re coming up my throat. Writer lady, imagine if you were invited to a friend's house and they had a penguin wandering

around without even a cage. Would you be able to eat?”

Despite her tone, the hunter's eyes were not smiling.

The noisy air quieted down.

I realized then. The reason the disciples weren't focused on the Assistant Writer wasn't because they were rude. They were, in fact, paying attention to [me].

Just as I was surprised by their capabilities, they had sensed me as well.

“...Yes. I was about to introduce him.”

The Assistant Writer sighed.

“Let me introduce him. This person is...”

“Hello. Nice to meet you.”

I stood up. As my body moved, some disciples reached for their waists, ready to draw weapons at any moment.

It couldn't be helped. We were strangers. To convey friendliness as much as possible, I smiled broadly.

“My name is Kim Gong-Ja. Thank you for calling me a penguin. I've always been curious about the feel of a penguin's skin since I was a child.”

“Kim Gong-Ja? Hey, that's not a title but a name. We're not joking around here. Tell us your title.”

“Yes. My title is King of Death.”

".....!"

The air in the cave tensed palpably. It was not a metaphor. Several disciples who had been conserving their energy suddenly surged their aura.

“King of Death? The one Mahos put an extermination and pursuit order on?”

“He devoured numerous worlds and turned countless humans into undead, that heretic cult leader!”

“Assistant Writer! Why did you invite such a lich to the meeting?”

Uh-oh.

Why is it turning out this way even after I kindly answered?

-You're actually enjoying this, aren't you?

‘That’s an unfair accusation. Please stop the slander.’

I wasn’t intentionally enjoying it. It's just that discovering the undefined joy in seeing people scream at the sight of me being a terrifying villain was incidental.

“Hah...”

I unfastened my Holy Sword from my waist, still in its sheath. Startled! The wary disciples flinched.

Showing them I had no hostility, I slowly set the sword down at my feet. I then showed them my empty palms.

“Look.”

Still smiling broadly.

“I don’t bite.”

"....."

“The [Warhorse of the Eternal Plains] may have declared me a public enemy, but Mahos doesn’t truly consider me an evil lord. He just opportunistically used me, and he did that for you.”

“For us? Mahos?”

The hunter asked.

“He’s like a ruffian among constellations. For us, really? What do you mean?”

“Assistant Writer told me. If you’re not part of the tower, you can’t ascend to the 51st floor. That’s the current situation here. But you don’t want to join the tower, nor... do you have the power to break it.”

"....."

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean any offense. It’s just that from the constellations’ perspective, the situation must be frustrating. Maybe Mahos thought I could be a kind of [breakthrough].”

Why did Mahos become hostile as soon as I reached the 50th floor?

Because I snatched his apostle, Goldencup? Was it just for that reason he decided to fight? Maybe, but if he truly wanted me dead, he wouldn’t have gathered some randoms for a surprise attack.

Hunters gathered in the cave hideout, showing they were the [real deal].

"Mahos wants to make me the new boss."

"....."

"To replace the tower."

I spoke with certainty.

"...Indeed."

The hunter closed her eyes.

She looked at me with half-opened eyes, "So, to make you the [new boss] and then subdue you. I see. It's just like the Constellation Killer, basically turning you into a [seasonal event boss]."

"Yes. That's my guess. If you have no teeth, you use your gums."

The other disciples murmured in agreement. "Aha," "I see..." They seemed to understand our conversation.

I quietly smiled, looking at the cave ceiling.

[‘The Warhorse of the Eternal Plains’ remains silent.]

Sometimes silence is an affirmation.

“Okay, King of Death. That’s a very plausible point.”

The hunter stood up.

“But why tell us? It’s hard to say that’s wise. You’ve just given us more reason to see you as an evil lich.”

She smirked, fiddling with the hilt of her dagger.

“It is probably easier to defeat you than to break the tower, right? I was getting tired of living like a beggar on the 50th floor! I feel like joining Mahos’s quest.”

It was a clear provocation.

“Of course. That’s also your choice.”



I laughed heartily, spreading my palms.

“But, is it really easier to kill me than to bring down the tower?”

“What?”

“You, being skilled hunters, must have killed many enemies. You must be accustomed to the line between life and death. But, everyone.”

I smiled amicably.

“Killing someone is realistically a very difficult thing, isn’t it?”

“...What are you trying to say?”

“It’s simple. Mahos didn’t consider me a [replacement for the tower] without reason. Maybe I really am [as hard to subdue as the tower]. Just me, alone, replacing the entire tower. Can you really defeat someone like me?”

The hunters, including the casual one, gasped.

I humbly smiled, scratching the back of my head.

“You haven’t even caught Constellation Killer yet.”

Provocation needs provocation.

That's the lesson I've learned.

“Huh.”

The hunter smirked.

“That’s good too! Let's see if you're really on par with Constellation Killer—”

“No. Stop it, [Berserker].”

At that moment, someone emerged from behind me. A man

wrapped in bandages from head to toe. He made no sound of footsteps or breathing, only his voice flowed without any trace.

The disciples were startled, having just noticed his presence. Even the hunter frowned.

“...[Paparazzo]? What’s this? How long have you been hiding like a cockroach?”

“I’ve been here before you all came.”

The bandaged hunter, Paparazzo, muttered.

“Looks like my skills haven’t rusted yet. No one here detected me.”

“Hah? Obviously. Who can find you when you’re hiding?”

“He did.”

Paparazzo pointed at me. His hand, from the nails to the

back, was completely wrapped in bandages.

“He's been aware of me and cautious since earlier.”

"....."

“He aroused my competitive spirit. Throughout your conversation, I constantly looked for an opening to snap his neck. But even when he put down his sword, there was no gap.”

“That's...”

“It means he's stronger than us. Clearly.”

The hunter, [Berserker], gritted her teeth.

“Really at the level of the tower? Hey, don't be kidding.”

“I don't know how strong exactly. At least, he's a step ahead of us. I'm not so foolish that I'll fight a stronger opponent and lose my life. I think you're the same.”

Berserker glared at me again, her eyes scanning me from head to toe. Eyes filled with killing intent, competitive spirit, and most importantly, suppressing her pride.

Yes.

That was a gaze I liked.

“It’s okay.”

I smiled brightly.

“I won’t kill you!”

"....."

To my consideration, Berserker clenched her fists. She huffed and puffed, then slowly moved her hand away from the dagger.

‘Oh?’

She's not going to attack? I was a bit disappointed.

I was looking forward to seeing the martial prowess of a 50th-floor strongman.

Ignoring my disappointment, the Guardian Spirit chuckled.

-You really know how to make a scene for your initiation.

Thanks to one intruder, the imminent explosive situation was avoided.

"....."

"....."

However, the atmosphere in the cave hadn't changed. In fact, it grew tenser. Even the previously relaxed disciples began to clearly guard against me after hearing the conversation between [Berserker] and [Paparazzo].

Many disciples swallowed hard.

"Ugh."

This was awkward.

I had tried to approach softly to avoid this atmosphere.

I scratched my cheek. Not everything in the world can be solved with words and smiles. It's important to think positively.

"Well. It's good that we avoided any bloodshed. It's definitely a good start!"

"....."

"The reason I asked the Assistant Writer to invite you all here is simple. It's hard for me to bring down the tower alone... Although I could summon my own forces, that wouldn't be meaningful. It would just be like the [Sword Emperor's Return]."

"...What do you mean?"

“Just showing [victory] is not enough.”

I clapped my hands.

“I’m more interested in you all winning than just me.”

“What?”

“Assistant Writer.”

I turned to the Assistant Writer.

“You said you're not the [protagonist of this story].”

The Assistant Writer remained silent.

Repeated silence can also convey intention, so I understood various things.

She wouldn't have said that just as self-deprecation. That



statement carried weight.

But...

“Why does it have to be that way?”

“You....”

“Not just to the Assistant Writer.”

I looked around at the disciples again.

I said,

“The Constellations that have been forgotten on this 50th floor, the ones losing power and possibly their status, please contact them. As disciples of these Constellations, I believe you have a way to communicate.”

The disciples looked at me with suspicious eyes.

I hadn't done anything yet.

Still undeterred by their prejudice, I kept smiling brightly.

“Please gather [all your quests]. I will unify them and help you all reach the 51st floor!”

"....."

The hall fell silent.

From behind, the Assistant Writer muttered lowly,

“...Hey, haven't you heard that your smile is suspicious? If you talk like that while smiling, everyone will think you have a dark heart, only care about power, and treat human lives like flies, you son of a bitch.”

That's a harsh thing to say.

Raviel likes my smile, you know.



# Chapter 298: The Legend Himself (3)

---

The man's hair was disheveled, and dark circles hung under his eyes. With emotionless eyes, he gazed at me.

"Greetings. I am a disciple of the [Warhorse of the Eternal Plains], honored to have received his flag."

The man spoke.

"Pleasure to meet you. I am the King of Death."

"I know. Ordinarily, our paths would never cross. Never. But [Holed-Up Head Librarian], [Berserker], and [Paparazzo] requested me."

The black-haired man surveyed the surroundings. The deep underground cave. The hunters who had gathered at my request were standing at a distance, giving us wary looks and pondering whether listening to me had been wise.

"It's rare for the three of them to ask something together. I enjoy rare events."

"Thank you for accepting the invitation."

"Don't mention it."

The disciple of Mahos curled his lips slightly.

"I should be thanking you. After this conversation, I will capture you. For the first time in a long while, I will pleasantly complete a quest assigned by Mahos."

"So, why did you want to see me? If you're here to surrender, I welcome it anytime."

I smiled.

"I want to understand all of you."

---

"Understand? Us?"

The petite girl frowned. Her golden hair was tied in two buns on either side of her head. They looked warm enough to touch even in the coldest winter, but there was no need to do so. Her voice always seemed to be fueled by anger, 365 days a year.

She was a disciple of [The Incarnation of Love and Lust] - Babbit\*.

\*Baravit has been changed to Babbit, due to context clues and some reader's corrections.

"Yes. I want to deeply understand the Constellations you serve."

"You're funny. It's already a joke to say that a person can understand another person, and you, a mere human, want to understand Constellations? If [Holed-Up Head Librarian] hadn't asked, I wouldn't have set foot in this stinking cave."

As she was about to launch into a tirade, the disciple of Babbit squinted. She waved her hand in annoyance, as if to shoo away a mosquito.

"Ah! Stop it. It's noisy. I'll talk to him myself!"

It seemed Babbit was continuously sending her messages. Truly favored by her Constellation, she spoke to Babbit more freely than ordinary disciples could imagine.

"Sheesh. Really, Babbit, what do you see in someone like him..."

"I will bring down the Magic Tower."

"....."

"But merely doing it alone is meaningless. Your quests, the Constellations you serve, I will intertwine them all to strike at the Tower."

"What are you talking about..."

"To do that, I need to properly understand the nature of the Constellations."

I looked straight at Babbit's disciple. She sat nobly, her red cape spread over a damp stalagmite, serving as a cushion in her own small territory.

"Being a disciple like you, you must communicate more openly with your Constellation. I want to converse with your Constellation through you. More vividly, more accurately. Deeper."

"....."

"What does Babbit like? What kind of quests does she prefer?"

I poured the tea for the disciple.

Through the red liquid of the tea, the girl's expression was reflected.

"What is Babbit like to you as a Constellation?"

---

"The disciples of the [Warhorse of the Eternal Plains] are like an army."

The man spoke.



"An army?"

"Yes. Ordinary disciples are like soldiers. A disciple like me is a general. We only think about the victory in battle and the spoils of war. To us, every battlefield is merely a [dungeon]."

He took a sip of his tea. His eyes widened, and he looked down at the teacup. "...Delicious." After blinking a few times, he returned to his expressionless state and looked at me.

"Where was I? Right. Our quest is to clear dungeons. When we topple the tower and plant our flag, only then can our quest from Mahos be considered complete."

He smiled faintly.

"You're planning to gather various quests from different Constellations and clear them all at once? That's ambitious and brave, King of Death, but it lacks practicality."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because Constellations are too different from each other."

The disciple of Mahos spoke with certainty.

"We must destroy the tower. However, for instance, [The Incarnation of Love and Lust], Babbit would propose a completely different quest. And that would be irreconcilable."

"....."

"Meet with Babbit's disciple first. Then you will understand what I mean. You'll see how impossible your plan is."

---

"We need to win over the tower's Elder."

Babbit's disciple finally spoke.

"We, or rather Babbit, place the utmost importance on human relationships, dismissing everything else as unnecessary. For us, clearing the 50th floor isn't about demolishing the lifeless tower structure, but winning the heart of the Elder, the leader of the Tower and mother of all spiders."

She asserted confidently.

"But that's impossible."

"Why is it impossible?"

"The Elder of the Tower has never opened her heart to anyone."

Babbit's disciple drank her tea. "What? Damn, it's good." She vented her irritation and then sighed.

"Our Babbit's power is the [Pink-Hued Rom-Com]."

"....."

"Don't look at me like that. I didn't name it. I'll give you a smack. Anyway, with [Pink-Hued Rom-Com], it becomes easier to fall in love. Let me give you a demo."

She put down her teacup and joined her hands together. Closing her eyes, she prayed. Pink light flowed from her hands, enveloping the ground within a five-meter radius with a soft glow.

Aside from that, no other peculiar sign was noticeable.

"Now."

When she opened her eyes again, they were filled with seriousness.

"I'm ready. Go ahead."

"Me? Go ahead with what?"

"I don't know. Just do anything. Stand up or keep talking, whatever. No matter what you do, you'll immediately understand the nature of this power."

"Um... then."

I picked up the teapot. The girl's teacup was empty.

Just as I was about to pour her a second cup...

"Oh?"

I stumbled.

There was nothing on the floor that I could have tripped over, yet I somehow misstepped.

I quickly tried to secure the teapot, but then I stumbled a second time. Like an acrobat failing a tightrope walk, my body swayed.

"Whoa? Whoa!"

Splash!

I ended up falling over, along with the teapot.

The person I had fallen on was none other than Babbit's disciple.

"....."

"....."

I blankly looked down at the disciple, who in turn stared back at me. Indeed, I had fallen onto her, unintentionally assuming a push-up posture.

What laws of physics or mechanics had come into play here?

"As you can see."

Unlike me, Babbit's disciple was utterly unfazed, behaving as if the situation was as natural as spilled water from an overturned cup.

"In the realm of Babbit's power, whatever you do, however much you struggle, people inevitably become closer to each other, whether in physical or emotional terms."

"Ah..."

That does ring a bell. I think the Heretic Inquisitor showed it to me once.

Right. Babbit was the Constellation that turned everything into a love-comedy event.

“For instance, even as you fell, you were mindful of the teapot until the very end. Because of that, I wasn't splashed with hot water. Instead, you ended up dousing yourself with tea.”

Drip. Drop.

Red tea trickled down my face, soaking my hair. Droplets running down my jaw exquisitely missed Babbit's disciple's cheek, landing right beside it.

“Now I've come to understand that you're someone considerate of others. I didn't want to know that. I didn't want to get closer to you, yet here we are, physically and emotionally closer.”

“Wow.”

“Exactly. To add, right now, I have a man's face drenched in red tea in front of me. Statistically speaking, men are four times more attractive when wet.”

There's a statistic for that?

“.....So annoying.”

Babbit's disciple irritably pushed me away. She stood up and shook off her cloak.

“See? Do you get it now? Our Constellation is obsessed with love, plain and simple.”

"....."

“No, if it was just love, I'd find it cute. But Babbit doesn't just adore love. [Hatred], [Regret], [Obsession], [Possessiveness]. She loves all intense emotions that humans can have towards another. And she's convinced that the person to clear this 50th floor isn't the tower itself, but the Elder who leads it.”

The disciple smiled.

“Can you handle it?”



It was a mocking smile.

More at the situation itself than at me and more at herself than at the situation.

“When a person lives for over a thousand years, King of Death, you don't say [I've lived for a thousand years]. You say [I've been dying for a thousand years]. The Elder of the Tower is a big shot who's been dying for that long. Do you think you can extract even a shred of emotion from her, whether it's affection, hatred, obsession, or regret?”

Clatter.

The disciple took out a gold coin and placed it on a flat stalagmite. Then, she brushed past me, her cloak trailing behind her.

"That's for the tea. Keep it."

"Wait a moment, please."

I grabbed her cloak.

Tug.

The weight of her body pulled against my grip.

"What?"

"It might be impossible to gain the Elder's affection, but drawing out hatred is feasible."

".....You seem to misunderstand. The hatred Babbit speaks of isn't just an extension of annoyance."

The disciple flicked my hand away with a snap.

"True hatred, akin to the weight of love. A lifelong dedication to despising someone, cursing them, letting that hatred become a part of you – only such profound emotions are recognized by Babbit. Do you have what it takes to extract such deep hatred from someone who's lived a thousand years? Do you possess something worth hating for a millennium?"

I nodded affirmatively.

"Not in me."

"See that..."

"However, I can still draw it out."

I looked intently into Babbit's disciple's eyes.

Her eyes were the same red as her cloak. The cloak was like a fortress, an extra layer for those who couldn't feel secure in their own skin. Her eyes were similar, with twin concentric circles settled in her crimson irises.

"I have a master who's the most hated person in the world by the Magic Tower's Elder."

"....."

"Even if others can't, my master can provoke the Elder's emotions. No. He can drive the Elder mad."

[‘The The Incarnation of Love and Lust’ listens intently to

your words.]

"Entrust me with your quests. Share them with me. It might be impossible alone, but with my master's name, anything is achievable."

Silence fell.

Babbit's disciple slowly parted her lips.

".....Who is your master?"

---

"The Sword Emperor."

I replied.

"....."

The unchanging expression of the disciple of Mahos finally cracked. He froze, his teacup raised. Only after the steam from the tea thinned did the black-haired man manage a short

snort.

"A man who died a hundred and fifty years ago? That's absurd."

"A hunter who reached the 99th floor. A legend. Do you really believe he left no trace and just died? There are countless ways to leave a legacy. Reincarnating as another person, wandering as a ghost, or even hoping for a successor to carry on his will..."

"....."

"I can prove that I am the Sword Emperor's successor."

I smiled.

"Imagine. If I were truly his successor, provoking the tower's Elder would be possible. The Elder, in unprecedented fury, would reveal her emotions towards me. I can accomplish the quest set by the 'The Incarnation of Love and Lust'."

"Not just that. The emotion the Elder will show towards me is hatred, a bottomless, abyssal hatred. She will issue a kill

order and deploy all of the tower's forces to wage war against me. If we win that war..."

".....So the quest given by 'Warhorse of the Eternal Plains' can also be accomplished at the same time."

The black-haired man, a disciple of Mahos, bowed his head in thought.

['The Warhorse of the Eternal Plains' listens intently to your words.]

"Entrust me with your quests."

I continued.

"I'll show you evidence that I am the Sword Emperor's successor in a while. The Constellations will recognize it. What you need to consider now is whether my proposal is realistic or not."

One by one, I spoke to the representatives of each Constellation.

"I can bring down the Magic Tower."

I would weave all the quests of the Constellations into one.

I named this operation:

The Grand Campaign.

[‘The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth’ listens intently to your words.]

[‘The Lonely Seeker’ listens intently to your words.]

[‘The Last Sword Left in the Wilderness’ listens intently to your words.]

[‘The Bell That Rouses the Dead’ listens intently to your words.]

I nodded affirmatively.

"Spread the word that the Sword Emperor's successor has returned to this land."



# **Volume 13 – Chapters 299-324**

# Chapter 299: Grand Campaign (1)

---

On the day the Sword Emperor revealed himself on the 50th floor, all the constellations of that era whispered.

[The Warhorse of the Eternal Plains invites you to join.]

[The Ruin-Harvesting Cow recommends you a long campaign.]

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth invites you to join.]

[The Incarnation of Love and Lust proposes the role of Apostle to you.]

[The Lotus Reflected on Water invites you to join.]

[The Lonely Seeker...]

Starting from the renowned constellations and extending up to the lesser-known ones.

It was certain. This human would shine under any constellation! By sewing together quests offered by the constellations, the Sword Emperor was bound to grasp the most dramatic love, victory, and life in this world.

-Hmm.

But it was evident in his eyes. The Sword Emperor's eyes were clear. Those eyes would accept the bitterness of any wound unflinchingly.

-Interesting.

He didn't consider himself a human too precious to be wounded, nor did he arrogantly think that he didn't need to be. He simply strived to become stronger, monstrously so, in his heart.

-But, I refuse.

While surrounded by the beckoning starlight, the Sword

Emperor smiled slyly.

-I choose none! No constellation! I will ascend to the 100th floor, witness its landscape first, keep it to myself, and stay silent about it. I won't tell you anything!

With his hair redder than the sun, the King of Swords laughed.

-If you're curious about what's up there, stand up and follow me! Friendship isn't about climbing a mountain together. Only those who have climbed the same mountain can truly share friendship!

The Sword Emperor became a star himself and vanished.

The 99th floor.

The place where he fell as a meteor was just one step away from the ultimate stage.

No one could find his remains. It was impossible to reach the 99th floor. Even those who arrogantly claimed to be his followers couldn't approach it.

Was he really dead or was he still on the 99th floor? Or perhaps, he had reached the 100th floor and vanished without a trace.

The Tower revealed nothing. The rumors spread all over the tower and ran rampant .

-.....

There was someone else who had reached the second highest stage after the Sword Emperor - A mage. She ventured up to the 90th floor but as soon as the Sword Emperor's presence disappeared, she turned away.

-Idiotic bastard.

She was the elder of the Magic Tower.

---

I've learned much while climbing the Tower, but if I were to choose the most pragmatic realization, it would be this:

It's hard to solve everything with just words.

"Damn!"

Chaang!

With an unpleasant metallic sound, a spear flew through the air. It was held by the Apostle of Mahos, a man with black hair.

I whirled my Aura, sending the spear flying far into the distance.

“Kuh...!”

“You're strong.”

I flexed my shoulder muscles. They were starting to cramp up.

The man tried to control his Aura and bring the spear back. But in a battle of Aura, it was difficult for him to best me.

My master, even while being consumed by the zombie virus, could manipulate her muscles, intestines, bones, and heart

through the art of Ki Telekinesis.

I am her successor. My training journey has been different from others.

‘Well. This isn’t the first time a duel like this has happened.’

I spoke leisurely.

“It’s no flattery but you really are strong. Probably among the top five if you were in our world.”

“How presumptuous...! I haven’t even used the power of Mahos yet!”

“Same here. I haven’t called the legion of my family yet.”

I sheathed my Holy Sword.

“When I call my family, things get amazing.”

“What?”

“The sky turns upside down, and the earth flips over. It sounds like a lie, right? It's true. If you knew who the shadow of my family is, you'd probably have a heart attack.”

It's the Constellation Killer, you know.

“...Even if it's a lie. If it's true, why don't you call such a powerful army?”

“They're guarding the house.”

I shrugged.

“What if someone invades from another world while I'm away? Those kids are guarding the house so I can roam around freely now. They are all as strong as me.”

"....."

The Apostle of Mahos bit his lip hard.



[You have passed the test.]

[The quests for your subjugation and tracking have been lifted!]

[The Warhorse of the Eternal Plains acknowledges you as a temporary disciple!]

[From now on, you will share the main quests with the Warhorse of the Eternal Plains.]

Okay.

The Apostle seemed hesitant to accept the outcome of the fight, but the Constellation he served had cleanly conceded. Mahos recognized me becoming a [temporary disciple] and participating in his quests.

This meant I could directly participate in the quests led by Mahos, even though I wasn't officially serving him.

A rare case. An exception.

“What a disgrace. Get out already.”

Pushing aside the Apostle of Mahos, another hunter emerged.

“Greetings! I am one of the Apostles of [The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth], known as [The Jester].”

The hunter, true to her name, was dressed as a jester. Her face was covered in red and white makeup, the thick layers obscuring any emotion she might have shown.

“I heard you intend to become a disciple of all the Constellations existing on the 50th floor.”

“Just a temporary disciple, though.”

“Haha. How interesting!”

Despite saying it was interesting, the Jester’s face told a different tale. Behind her, more than ten hunters were waiting. All of them, regardless of their strength, were Apostles of various Constellations.

They had come to test me on behalf of their Constellations.

“Since Mahos has tested your [strength], I shall test your [luck]!”

Crrrrk.

The Jester brought a table over.

Then, she placed 13 [cups] upside down on it.

“A labyrinth is ultimately about wandering to find the right answer!”

The Jester smiled.

“No matter how twisted the maze or how sinister the dungeon with traps is, if you boil it down, it’s just like these 13 cups. Come on, come on, King of Death. Among these cups, only one contains a candy that you can eat first.”

The Jester tapped the cups, tuk, tuk, tuk. Clear glass. Inside

each cup was a candy that children would love.

“In other words,”

“The other 12 contain candies that shouldn’t be eaten.”

“Haha! Exactly! You got it right!”

The Jester beamed a pleasant smile, the kind that makes her feel refreshed but leaves others feeling sour.

“Each and every one of them is extremely poisonous!”

“These unremarkable glass cups may seem ordinary, but they are relics. An item bestowed upon me directly by [The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth] in recognition of my clowning around! Ordinary aura cannot penetrate them, nor can any skill discern what’s inside!”

Right. I know that.

“Alright! Alright! King of Death. As a challenger seeking the

favor of all constellations, although it's just a trivial display of talent, join me in my little prank...."

"I'll gladly accept."

I immediately picked up the fourth cup and ate the candy inside.

"Eh?"

The Jester, who had been grandly bullshitting, was taken aback. Ignoring her, I nonchalantly chewed and swallowed the candy.

"It's mint-flavored. I prefer yogurt-flavored candies."

"....."

"Do you know about yogurt candies? They're sweet and have a slight milk-like flavor, delicious really. They often have them at barbecue places. Those are truly delicious."

Silence ensued.

The Jester slowly covered her face with both hands.

Her face looked utterly shocked.

“How can this be...! Holy shit! Oh my God! How on earth...!?”

I chuckled lightly.

“Does this mean I’ve passed the test?”

“I-I don’t know! How can a mere jester like me judge someone born with such incredible luck? Terrifying, truly terrify-”

“It’s not over yet.”

She hesitated.

“What do you mean?”

“You said it yourself. Among these, there is a candy that [can be eaten first].”

I removed the sixth cup.

“Which means there is also a candy that [must be eaten later].”

And without hesitation, I ate the candy inside.

"....."

“So, I’ve eaten two now. How many are left?”

“...One left.”

“Okay.”

I deliberately looked at the remaining glass cups with a wide grin.

‘How come defeating Mahos's Apostle seems less challenging than this?’

These tests weren't new to me. While they might be a first-time experience for others, I had already faced them several times.

‘I needlessly died nine times already.’

I've been experiencing the same day for the tenth time.

If it were a battle of skills, maybe, but in a test purely based on luck like this, even I have no control. The first few times, I died screaming after eating candies laced with deadly poison. Then, even after I guessed right and was elated, I died an hour later.

The candy that was [safe to eat first] also contained poison, necessitating the sequential consumption of other candies to avoid death.



“Which one has the tasty candy, I wonder? This one? Or this one? Hmm. It’s tough. Both look delicious...”

Unaware of my time loops, the Jester just stared at me blankly.

“How...? Neither skills nor Aura can detect it...”

“Ah.”

I picked up the first cup.

“It’s this one.”

"....."

“This candy was practically begging me to eat it, claiming it was totally harmless. So noisy. I feel sorry for it, so I have to eat it.”

I unwrapped the candy and chewed it. The poison from the first candy was neutralized by the second, and the second

candy's poison was completely detoxified by the third.

Normally, the Jester would have watched me slowly suffering from the poison and gloated, 'Hahaha! Are you in pain? It must be tough! Come on! Come on! Hurry up and choose! Your own answer! Your own correct answer, pick it with your own hands!'

"Is it over now?"

"....."

But now, having cleared the mission in less than a minute, she just stood there with her mouth agape.

I gave her a bright smile.

"I often hear that I have good luck."

[You have passed the test.]

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth acknowledges you as a

temporary disciple!]

[From now on, you will share the main quests with The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth.]

Indeed.

[You have passed the test.]

[The Lonely Seeker acknowledges you as a temporary disciple!]

[From now on, you will share the main quests with The Lonely Seeker.]

The Guardian Spirit refused all offers from the Constellations.

He climbed the Tower stoically, nobly, but solitarily.

Yet, he failed.

[You have passed the test.]

[The Last Sword Remaining in the Wilderness acknowledges you as a temporary disciple!]

[From now on, you will share the main quests with The Last Sword Remaining in the Wilderness.]

Why he failed remains unknown.

One thing is clear: even a hunter as formidable as the Sword Emperor failed the journey alone.

The path he trod is not the right path.

It's nothing but a dead end.

I'd rather believe that the Sword Emperor failed not due to inability or lack of strength, but due to the fact that he simply chose the wrong method.

No.

I believe it.

Therefore,

[You have passed the test.]

[The Bell that Rings for the Dead acknowledges you as a temporary disciple!]

[From now on, you will share the main quests with The Bell that Rings for the Dead.]

I will walk a path entirely opposite to the one he chose.

-.....

If the Guardian Spirit walked the path of the righteous, I will walk the path of the demonic.

If the Guardian Spirit ascended alone without creating any alliances, I will build forces. I will gain favor with the Tower's residents. I will unite the great guilds. I will accept the love of

a lover, the loyalty of a retainer, and form a family.

I will establish a lineage.

[You have passed the test.]

[You have passed the test.]

[You have passed the test.]

The Guardian Spirit served no Constellation.

Therefore, I will serve [all Constellations].

“...Good.”

As the evening sun set, the queue of more than ten Apostles had been reduced to just one.

“I have to admit. We, or rather I, underestimated you.”

The last remaining Apostle wore a cloak redder than the sunset.

[The Incarnation of Love and Lust].

The Apostle of Babbit, a girl, stared at me intently.

“You've proven yourself strong and lucky. Even if it's not purely by luck, you must have a skill that makes your success seem fortuitous.”

The girl took off her cloak, dropping the heavy fur onto the ground.

She then pulled out a water bottle.

“But do you truly understand [love]?”

Swoosh!

Babbit's Apostle drenched her own head with water. Dew slid down her lustrous blonde hair. The setting sun was ablaze, and

the light that painted the sky red also slipped into the droplets on the girl, quietly coloring her cheeks.

“You and I. Let's see who can make the opponent's heart flutter first.”

Babbit's power unfolded, enveloping the surroundings in a pink hue.

The girl, as if her previous stoicness were a lie, wore a sorrowful smile. The corners of her eyes drooped, and all arrogance and pride vanished from her face.

[Come closer].

The Apostle's smile, her slow gestures, her gaze, all beckoned me.

“I'll say it in advance. I'm sorry.”

The sunset was falling for her.



“You’re going to like me.”

"....."

I shook my head.

“I have many identities, like everyone else.”

I slowly approached Babbit’s Apostle.

“The leader of a cult, the head of a family, the director of a troupe, a father to someone, a friend to a race, and now, adding to this list, I will be a temporary disciple of Mahos, Babbit, and many others. And as I climb the Tower, more titles will attach to me, but...”

I stood firmly in front of the girl.

The Apostle, drenched in water, looked up at me.

“The first identity I hold will always remain unchanged.”

I smiled.

“I am the man of the most beautiful being in this world.”

"....."

“She has no heart, so I gently offered her mine.”

Before being a hunter, I was someone in love.

And then.

[You have passed the test.]

[The Incarnation of Love and Lust acknowledges you as a temporary disciple!]

[From now on, you will share the main quests with The Incarnation of Love and Lust.]

That day, I made contracts with numerous Constellations.

# Chapter 300: Grand Campaign (2)

---

"The Magic Tower has officially started tracking us down."

Thud.

A bundle of papers was placed on the old table. It was a document brought over by the [Assistant Writer]. She wiped her forehead and looked at me, exhaling deeply.

"The city has formally issued a decree of extermination. A hefty reward has been promised to anyone who captures the escaped prisoner from the dungeon - Hamusutra's followers. For those who catch or provide information on the 'unknown rogue' who helped them escape, the reward is twenty-eight times greater... It seems they've found the mark you left at the entrance of the secret passage."

"That's good news."

I quickly skimmed through the documents.

The papers were filled with information about the Magic Tower, especially about the leader of the Magic Tower, the so-called Elder.

"I was anxious about when they would discover it. It seems that they are quite slow in their actions."

".....What exactly did you write there?"

"The Sword Emperor has returned."

I smiled.

"I just wrote those five words. Nothing much."

"....."

The Assistant Writer was agape with shock.

"You're really crazy, you know."

"What is common sense, Ms. Writer? It's probably the average of living in this world, the norm of life. And this world is, on average, a complete mess. Being called crazy, being abnormal, in other words, is the opposite of this mess. It can be considered normal."

"Right. You lunatic."

It's strange.

Why does no one take my serious words seriously?

Massaging her forehead, the Assistant Writer sighed deeply. Her sigh would've bore a hole in the floor of the cave if it could.

".....I admit that you're extraordinary. You've earned the trust of the Head Librarian and persuaded numerous Constellations. You might be the first in history to have [Simultaneous Membership] with double-digit Constellations."

"Thank you for the compliment."

"But you shouldn't provoke the Magic Tower recklessly."

The Assistant Writer said.

"The two words most hated by the Magic Tower in the universe are 'Sword' and 'Emperor'. The Elder of the Magic Tower considers herself the antithesis of the Sword Emperor. In story terms, an archnemesis. A sworn enemy."

"I know."

I snapped my fingers.

Swish.

Letters appeared before my eyes. A quest window. A window I had received dozens of times before, but the hologram I was seeing now was different.

The characters looked as if they were written by hand, shimmering and adorably sparkling.

+

[Grand Strategy! Shake the Elder's Heart★]

Constellation: The Incarnation of Love and Lust

Difficulty: SSS

Objective: Oh my! Someone claiming to be the successor of the Sword Emperor has appeared in the world. His alias is the King of Death! A warrior who has just reached the 50th floor is causing a stir!

Is he really the heir to the Sword Emperor? Or could he actually be the Sword Emperor himself...!? (Thump)

If the King of Death really has a connection with the Sword Emperor, my goodness, The Elder of the Magic Tower won't sit still! Because the only person who ever drove a stake into her cold heart was the Sword Emperor! (Dramatic)

Will the King of Death restart the heart of the most sinister spider?

If so, what music will the beating of that heart play? Love? Hate? Or perhaps love-hate? (Wink) Any rhythm will do. All I,



Babbit, expect from the King of Death, is the sound of the Elder tearing apart!

Shatter the Elder's heart.

To all followers serving Babbit. Support the King of Death with all your might.

Prove that you are worthy to step beyond the 50th floor.

\*Currently participating in the quest as a [Temporary Follower].

+

I nodded.

"I claimed to be the heir of the Sword Emperor because I know. Right now, the Magic Tower must be treating me as a very suspicious person."

I tossed the bundle of papers down.

Before the last vote, [The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages] had told us about the history of the Magic Tower and its members.

However, there was no information about the Elder who rules the Magic Tower. No knowledge of when she was born, why she settled at the 50th floor, or why she prevents other hunters from ascending further.

The situation was the same for the hunters who resided on the 50th floor. None of them knew about the Elder of the Magic Tower. The documents provided by [Paparazzo] contained plausible speculations and inferences but no truth.

"They won't believe that the Sword Emperor has really returned. Not yet."

But there was one truth known to everyone.

That the Elder of the Magic Tower hates the Sword Emperor.

"'Not yet,' you say...?"

"Yes. Not yet."

To shake the Elder's heart, I need to use the existence of the Sword Emperor appropriately.

"I am the only one who knows certain information privy only to the Sword Emperor and the Elder. For example, hmm... Right, the words the Sword Emperor said to the Elder when he destroyed the spire."

"....."

"If I release this information, the Elder will realize immediately. Ah, this guy is truly the heir of the Sword Emperor. I must crush this guy as soon as possible."

In the past, when I was with the Constellation Killer, I used words left by the Sword Emperor. Not a single word was different. As soon as the Elder of the Magic Tower heard my words, she became enraged and attacked us.

-Zombie. Just so you know, I have a lot more things to say that will piss her off.

'How reassuring.'

-Right?

'Yes. Your character is so reassuring.'

In other words, I have several trump cards to lure the Elder.

Perhaps, in this world, only the Sword Saint and I know of these cards.

".....How do you have such information?"

The Assistant Writer looked at me suspiciously.

"Do you have a skill to read people's pasts? Or are you really the successor of the Sword Emperor?"

"That's not important. What's important is that I have the means to provoke the Elder. And right now, I need to [appropriately] agitate her."

I lightly tapped the documents.

"Appropriately? What do you mean?"

"It's not enough to just anger the Elder. The [Incarnation of Love and Lust] is very clearly demanding in the quest - overturn the Elder from her roots. Therefore, I will—"

I narrowed my eyes.

"Slowly but gently, shake the heart of the Elder."

「 Could the Sword Emperor really have returned? 」

「 No. It can't be. 」

「 The evidence is insufficient. 」

「 But, what if he really did return? 」

"We can't just instantly reveal that the Sword Emperor has returned. It's too weak. The impact is too weak. The truth, when found by oneself rather than handed down from the heavens, creates a bigger ripple in a person's heart."

"....."

"Do you understand, Ms. Writer? We need to show the Elder at the perfect place and moment that the Sword Emperor has returned. To do that..."

"We need a script."

The Assistant Writer spoke softly.

She wore the same expression as me. Eyes scheming a plot. The gleam of someone trying to pull another person in scheming to steal their heart.

The same look carried by the eyes of Hamusutra.

"What do you want from me?"

Now we're getting somewhere.

"First, spread rumors on the streets of the city."

"Heh."

"The Magic Tower has not officially recognized the return of the Sword Emperor. The Elder probably thinks, 'Some madman is impersonating the Sword Emperor to provoke us.' But if rumors of the Sword Emperor's return start circulating publicly..."

"It'll start to bother her. Even if she doesn't want it to."

The Assistant Writer's eyes sparkled.

"Good. What's next?"

---

Hey, King of Death. What's going on?

What is it, Mr. Berserker? You seem flustered.

What do you mean what is it? The Magic Tower folks are going crazy. Just yesterday, they were sitting back after issuing the extermination decree, and now they've suddenly formed a search party and are stirring up the streets!

---

"Just rumors of the Sword Emperor's return won't shake the Elder's heart. It'll just mildly annoy her. We need to go further. We must target the blind spot in the Elder's heart."

"Tell me."

The Assistant Writer rapidly moved her quill.

"I'm writing it down now. Tell me all of your strategies. I'll adjust anything that seems off."

"We'll touch on the resentment and anger accumulated by the the hunters of the 50th floor."

I enjoyed the sound of the quill scratching on paper.

"The Sword Emperor is not just a hunter, he is a symbol. The Elder blocked the 50th floor, creating a blockade, however, the Sword Emperor broke through it and moved beyond... The rumor of the Sword Emperor's return is an attack on the Elder. [We hate the current situation under the Elder's rule over the 50th floor. We're sick of it. We want someone like the Sword Emperor. We want the Sword Emperor to return and shatter these nightmarish days.]"



"Indeed. That's it... I get what you mean."

Blind spot.

The Assistant Writer's hand moved even faster.

"Like, directly telling the Elder, 'You are wrong,' with the rumors?"

"Exactly."

"Sigh."

The Assistant Writer didn't look at me. Her eyes were fixed on the words her pen was writing. Laughter seeped into the paper from the Assistant Writer.

"Alright. The return of the Sword Emperor is just a pretext. A tool to mobilize and incite the hunters dissatisfied with the Magic Tower's rule."

"Yes."

I nodded.

"And at the same time, it's a blade aimed at the Elder's heart."

Look, Elder.

I died.

I fell pathetically on the 99th floor.

But why do hunters still remember me, even though I died long ago? Why are they so enthusiastic about me?

It's simple.

I was right, and you were wrong.

"The more the city buzzes with rumors of the Sword Emperor, the higher the resentment against the Magic Tower."

Even though you're alive, you can't defeat me, who's already dead.

Even though I'm dead, reduced to a mere ghost, I am stronger than you are now.

"If the Elder thinks of the Sword Emperor as just annoying... She won't react much. If it's just a rumor she'll leave it alone, thinking it'll die down. But, if the Sword Emperor still occupies a place in the Elder's heart. If she truly loathes him to the bone, she will definitely react."

"....."

"Excessively. An overreaction, almost neurotical."

How about that?

".....How can you be so sure?"

"Hatred is like that."

Do you still want to kill me?

"The Elder will react violently. She must."

---

The Magic Tower folks have lost their minds.

They were always crazy, but this time they've gone too far.

Just for mentioning the Sword Emperor's name, they threaten to throw everyone in prison. This is madness. It's just idle talk in the taverns. Why are they reacting this strongly? Did they hit a nerve?

At this rate, even those without a clue might start believing that the Sword Emperor has really returned.

Strange, even for a rumor we started.

---

"I've learned something since coming to the 50th floor."

"What's that?"

"From this stage onwards, we have to play the game of incitement and fabrication."

[A quest has been issued by The Incarnation of Love and Lust to their followers.]

"Whether the rumor about the Sword Emperor's return is true or not doesn't matter to ordinary hunters."

[A quest has been issued by The Last Sword Left in the Wilderness to their followers.]

"They all serve the Constellations."

[A quest has been issued by The Lonely Seeker to their followers.]

"The words of the Constellations are truth, and the content written in the quest is reality. If the quest window hints at the return of the Sword Emperor, regardless of its authenticity, the hunters will act under the assumption that 'The Sword Emperor has returned.'"

[A quest has been issued by The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth to their followers.]

"Just like how I was hunted down as an evil lich."

[A quest has been issued by The Warhorse of the Eternal Plains to their followers.]

"Spread the rumors throughout the city. When the Magic Tower starts oppressing hunters aggressively, issue quests through the Constellations. And in every quest, hint at the return of the Sword Emperor."

「 Is he really the successor to the Sword Emperor? 」

「 Lately, there are rumors in the Monopolized Poisonous city that the Sword Emperor has returned. 」

「 It might be hard to remember, but in the past, when the spire was destroyed.... 」

「 Warriors! 」

「 Why is the Magic Tower oppressing you so harshly? 」

「 Perhaps he is the Sword Emperor himself. 」

"That will decide the major trend."

"....."

The Assistant Writer's quill stopped abruptly. She slowly raised her head, and our eyes met.

I pulled out a handkerchief from my pocket. The soft touch wrapped around my fingertips. A comforting sensation. The only spell that could calm my mind.

Then I said,

“Then, a coalition against the Magic Tower will be formed.”

---

# Chapter 301: Grand Campaign (3)

---

-We don't know who you are. Consider it a blessing that we don't! If we knew who you were, we would've cut your arms and legs into tiny pieces using a nail clipper, smashed your eyeballs with a hammer, and then... Yeees! Your family, friends, no, even the place you were born! Your world that dumped a piece of trash like you here without even properly separating the garbage! Everything! We will shred everything! Oh! Look forward to it! I really wonder if your precious vocal cords will still sing like a nightingale even when split into 23 pieces....!!

Click.

The Assistant Writer turned off the recorder. It was a magical recorder, not a mechanical one. A magic item that perfectly captured the skill [Storing Human Voices].

"This was the official statement broadcasted over the Monopolized Poisonous city yesterday."

"The official statements I know of usually have a different



vibe."

"We might consider this normal, but... King of Death. Because of you, the spiders of the Magic Tower are seriously pissed off."

"Do you regret it?"

"What?"

"I'm just asking, Ms. Writer. Do you feel that the decision to work together with me was a bit hasty?"

"What are you talking about? I'm obviously—"

The Assistant Writer dropped the recorder.

Crunch.

Her high heel stomped on the magic device.

"Obviously, I'm having the time of my life."

The Assistant Writer's twinkling eyes were smiling mischievously.

"I never understood why the Head Librarian chose a man like you as his emissary. But now I think I get it. You, with a face that looks clueless about the ways of the world, know how to play with people's hearts."

"That's harsh. I don't play around. I always live seriously."

"Ah, sure you do. That makes you even more despicable! You're the best."

I can't tell if that's an insult or a compliment.

Kwaaaa... Aaaah....

A distant explosion was heard. The vibrations traveled along the cave ceiling, causing droplets to fall from the stalactites. The cold water dripped onto our scalps. We both shook our heads like cats.

"Damn it."

"It seems the Magic Tower has sent another search party to the cave."

"Yeah, we'll be discovered here soon. Let's move quickly. It would be cliché to film a chase scene in a cave, befitting a horror flick!"

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth guides you to a safe zone.]

[The Lonely Seeker distracts the intruders.]

We fled under the protection of the Constellations. Kwaaaang... Kooong... The explosions grew more distant as we hastened our steps.

The Magic Tower has been aware that we are hiding in the underground caves for a while now. The current vibrations are caused by the tower's spiders casting magic spells in their frantic search for me.

'They must be desperately looking for me.'

'But the caves in the Monopolized Poisonous city are bizarrely vast.'

We quickly moved to our next hideout.

'Even if one entrance to the cave collapses, a new one appears the next day. It's as if this underground world is a giant monster, constantly alive and moving.'

A terrain difficult to search.

Moreover, numerous Constellations and countless disciples are aiding us.

In a head-to-head confrontation, the Magic Tower might have the upper hand, but in this game of hide-and-seek, they're at a disadvantage.

"What's the next plan? Huh?"

The Assistant Writer asked with excitement.

"Hmm."

Ever since the Grand Campaign started, the Assistant Writer has been very enthusiastic. I would outline the grand strategy, and she would adapt the rumors to the local circumstances. Fabricating, spreading, and reproducing them to steer the situation our way.

'Just like a disciple of Hamusutra.'

Is this also my responsibility?

I forced a bitter smile.

"Next, we need to meet the members of the Sword Emperor's sect."

---

We do not recognize you.

---

"The Sword Emperor's sect?"

The Assistant Writer smiled.

It wasn't a soft smile. It certainly wasn't one filled with kindness.

Humans smile even when testing others.

"A bunch of maniacs obsessed with swords. I can't even call them a sect. It's just a group of people who individually worship the Sword Emperor gathering for practice. Their daily routine is simple - breakfast, practice, lunch, practice, dinner, practice, sleep, and then practice again... What do you plan to do by meeting such lunatics?"

"We are gradually seeing the rise of an Anti-Magic Alliance."

Kooooom.

Another explosion echoed from beyond our hideout.

It seems the battle between the Magic Tower's search party and the resisting disciples had intensified.

[The Lonely Seeker requests reinforcements from other Constellations!]

[The Incarnation of Love and Lust is too busy watching the campaign.]

[The Warhorse of the Eternal Plains advises handling it alone.]

[The Lonely Seeker spews indescribable curses.]

The local broadcast had also become intense.

"But it's still not enough. Even though it's alliance, it's just a coalition of Constellations who have grievances against the Magic Tower. Until now, the Constellations have continuously attacked the tower, and each time, the tower has won. Hunters who aren't part of the coalition will think, [No matter what, the Magic Tower will win again this time].

"Yeah, right."

The Assistant Writer readily agreed with my reasoning.

"Even if they don't like the Magic Tower, many Constellations still cooperate with it to some extent. No, even if an alliance is formed, not all Constellations will actively participate. They'll wait and see how things go. If the situation turns unfavorable, they'll quickly withdraw."

That's how the world works, the Assistant Writer said.

[Shiny feels sorry for not being able to help other Constellations.]

[Several Constellations remain silent.]

[The Lonely Seeker cautiously asks who that was.]

[The Incarnation of Love and Lust says they don't know.]

[The Warhorse of the Eternal Plains also doesn't know.]

[Some Constellations feel fear towards an unknown entity.]

"That's exactly it."



I pressed down on Shiny's hilt. The holy sword hummed. It seemed to sulk at my gesture to be quiet.

"The quest windows of the Constellations are indeed powerful. The disciples will accept the premise that the Sword Emperor has returned and join the Anti-Demon Alliance without hesitation. But... conversely, [other hunters who can't see the quest window] won't be much affected."

For more impactful incitement and fabrication, something else is needed.

A joker card.

"That's why the lunatics from the Sword Emperor's Sect need to step in."

The group that would rise faster than anyone else if the Sword Emperor really returned.

If this faction moves, even unrelated third parties will be swayed, 'Could the Sword Emperor have really returned?'

They are the Sword Emperor's Sect.

"....."

The Assistant Writer grinned.

"Of course, I can arrange a meeting. But you know this, right? The two forces most enraged by the rumor of the Sword Emperor's return on the 50th floor are the Magic Tower and the Sword Emperor's Sect. King of Death, if they find out you're behind the rumors, they'll probably tear you to pieces!"

"Haha."

I laughed.

Because I understood all too well why they would react so violently.

"How dare that nobody impersonate the Sword Emperor and deceive the people?"

"Yes, that's it."

They were people who still served the 150-year-dead Guardian Spirit.

Their faces were unknown, but probably fully armed with fervent devotion to the Sword Emperor.

Then a completely unknown kid impersonates their god... Well, it's natural they'd be angry. I understand. They want to kill me, but...

"It's okay."

That's only if I were a liar.

I smirked bitterly.

"Because I really am the successor of the Sword Emperor."

---

Let me say it again.

We do not recognize you.

We only allowed you to enter our sacred altar because acquaintances begged us just this once. Not executing you right now is our last act of mercy.

Get lost.

What do I need to do for you to acknowledge me?

We don't acknowledge anyone.

Acknowledgement isn't given, it's earned.

If you're so confident, use a sword, not words. Kid, even if you win, it doesn't mean we'll acknowledge the Sword Emperor's return!

Is that so? That's problematic.

Hmm.

What?

Hold on, wait a moment. Let me ask something to this noisy guy... Ah, yes. Hmm. I see.

You there, with the impressive beard.

Is your alias the Demon Vanquishing Spear?

Are you talking about me?

Well, the alias is as you said.

Yes. Your real name is Mihustra Pelennoban, from the Ten Thousand Sword World. Born in the same world as the Sword Emperor, but you only encountered him after ascending the Tower.

.....What nonsense are you spouting? Seems you have some worthless skill. Kid Priest, if you try to deceive the world with a clown's trickery, my spear will show you the fear of heaven...

You always followed the Sword Emperor, seeking his teachings.

.....

The Sword Emperor found you annoying. Once, he even used his movement techniques to escape from you just to see if you'd follow. But you always managed to catch up and pleaded for a single lesson.

The Sword Emperor said to you when you were alone.

With his own mouth?

.....

There.

Your alias is the Mysterious Sonic Roar. A master of sound techniques. Your real name is So Cheon-Myeong, a member of a renowned family in the Ten Thousand Sword World, but actually an illegitimate child. You lived a hard life outside from an early age.

.....

You were deeply captivated by the Sword Emperor. The person who ascended the martial realm without any help from his prestigious family.

You begged to ascend the Tower with the Sword Emperor, but he found it bothersome and refused and you couldn't accept it.

Every night, you went to where the Sword Emperor stayed and imitated a cat's cry to the top of your voice. When the Sword Emperor came out in a rage, you ran away, and as soon as he tried to sleep, you sneaked back in and started the cat cries again.

Then one winter, when you were pretending to sleep, the Sword Emperor caught you and beat you up badly.

.....

The Sword Emperor said.

Kid. Do you know why I'm hitting you?

Because I'm weak but shamelessly sought your teachings?

No, it's not that.

Because I disturbed your sleep? That's not it either.

It's simply because you imitated a cat's cry.

I hate cats.

Very much.

So now, you're going to be hit a lot.

.....

Hmm.

The atmosphere is tense.

If I've touched on some unpleasant memories, I apologize.  
I'm just trying to earn your recognition. No matter how much



you deny it or find it hard to believe, I truly came here to carry on the will of the Sword Emperor.

I know the alias of the person sitting there, staring blankly. It's Unfettered Floral Bow. I know your name, origin, the time you spent and the conversations you had with the Sword Emperor. I know all about everyone here.

Everything the Sword Emperor knew, I know.

.....

Ah. Of course, even saying this might be hard for you to accept.

If talking were enough, you wouldn't have joined a crazy group like the Sword Emperor's Sect.

Come at me.

I'll face each of you one at a time.

.....

.....

You...

What are you?

My alias is the King of Death.

I am the successor who received Aura from the greatest of all time in the Ten Thousand Sword World, the heir who inherited the sword from the supreme being of a certain snowfield, and one day, I will step even further than the Constellation you worship.

So, please, grant me a lesson.

Seniors.

---

"The disciples of the Sword Emperor's Sect have repelled the

Magic Tower's tracking team."

The Assistant Writer walked on.

"And right in the middle of the street, regular hunters are quite agitated. The disciples of the Sword Emperor's Sect are known for not interfering with outside affairs, but this time, they've clearly opposed the Magic Tower."

We were climbing through a cave passage. The passage had stairs, gradually increasing our altitude. The underground pressure and earthy texture flowed down my thighs and calves.

"The Warhorse of the Eternal Plains, the Lonely Seeker, they're all rallying their disciples. The Incarnation of Love and Lust... may not be much help in battle, but might unexpectedly provide help in terms of connections. Well, you know."

Thud.

"We're on the verge of completing the Anti-Magic Alliance."

Light shone at my feet.

Not from the torches in the cave or the magical light summoned by the Assistant Writer, but from a weak ray of sunlight streaming from the gloomy sky above.

"Congratulations, King of Death."

Ten days.

After hiding in the underground caves, I looked up at the sky for the first time in a while.

"In a hundred and fifty years, we've acquired the sharpest blade of rebellion for the first time."

The sky of the 50th floor was dotted with spires.

The towers, painted jet black as if mocking the brilliant sky, had no windows, refusing to let anyone in or out.

Above all, the five towers looked like fingers, as if trying to grasp and pull down the sky.

Who do they resemble?

"Good."

I smiled, looking at the Magic Tower.

"Let's see if we can bring down the Elder."

# Chapter 302: The Grey Spider (1)

---

It feels like I've never felt a refreshing breeze in my life.

The scent of maple leaves was intense in autumn, because there was no other scent at all. Spring was fresh. In summer, it smelled of fish, making every scent revolting.

The 'Grey Spider' wished to die every autumn.

-The Witch Clan.

Who came up with such a name?

Witch (魔女) (Manyeo) didn't simply refer to a mage who practiced magic. In Niglus-Kukulu, the language of this world, the word 'Ma (魔)' was laden with nuances of all sorts of hatred and contempt. [Forsaken], [Sacrilegious], [The 23rd], [Cursed].

‘Ye (女)’ didn’t just signify a gender. To begin with, there were more than four genders. The binary concept of male and female didn’t apply.

Mirgal, a word which approximately translates to [Grey]. The 3 primary colors, Red, Green and Blue, dominated the world, while [Grey] needed seeds from other genders to produce offspring.

[The Cursed Grey Race].

The Witch Clan.

The season the ‘Grey Spider’ was born in was autumn.

-Poor thing.

Perhaps the mother didn’t know what she was saying.

-Why be born into such a world...

The mother failed to recognize the true value of her

newborn child. The child was born with a natural blessing which made her remember 'everything seen and heard.' The child had already heard and felt a lot while in the womb.

The mother gave birth to a genius but didn't realize it.

-Poor thing...

A handful of moisture.

A bit of blood.

Eyes looking down and a hand caressing the forehead. Sympathy masquerading as love, resignation mimicking comfort, death disguised as life. That was the smell, the smell of a mother.

The smell of autumn.

-Why be born in such a place...

The Grey Spider grew to hate the world.



---

-I have no particular feelings towards the Elder.

The Guardian Spirit said.

-For me, feelings are actions, Zombie. It's just that they often don't show on the surface, but that's also an act. Maybe feelings just happen as they come? Those who live as life goes on might think so. But not me.

The guardian Spirit crossed his arms.

-I decided not to care about the Elder. If she had invited me to climb the tower together, maybe she would have followed me. We might have even become friends. But I chose not to. Not just the Elder! I didn't make a single companion.

I asked why.

-Because countless people in this world don't even get a chance to make companions.

Guardian Spirit looked up at the Magic Tower.

-Only lucky people are able to have friends. Even lovers are obtained by coincidence, Kim Zombie. The fact that you've made so many companions, made friends, served a master, and met a loved one, it's all thanks to luck. Even though it's a treasure you earned through effort, the mere fact that such people were born is a miracle.

Thud.

We stepped off the last stair and exited the cave.

-Never assume that everyone is granted such luck.

I followed Guardian Spirit's gaze up to the spires.

-Life with no one by your side exists. Some never experience luck until death. Many lives are betrayed when they hold hope. Such people eventually give up and despair. They no longer see a reason to struggle or aim higher than where they are now.

The Magic Tower truly deserved the prefix Ma.

Buildings are bases for living. They have doors and windows to go out into the world and peek outside.

But the Magic Tower has no doors. It's dyed black from the top to the bottom. A black that doesn't reflect the sun, but a black that swallows even sunlight.

Thus, the Magic Tower resembles a body, not a building. It is a will to reject the world, not an extension of it. The finger-like towers seem to rise from the ground, reaching for the sky.

-That's what I wanted to show them.

I glared at the finger-like towers.

-It's okay not to have companions.

I counted the seconds in my mind.

-It's okay not to find love worth dedicating your life to.

23 seconds, 22, 21...

-It's fine even if fate doesn't grant you luck.

18 seconds.

-Still, you can ascend.

15 seconds.

-Look! I am the Sword Emperor. I reached the zenith of this world alone. Why did I ascend? Not for the person in front of me. Not for those who lived in my era. They can all go to hell!

5 seconds.

-For those without anything. For those with no one. I ascended the tower to show you, to [prove] to you! Even though no one gave you meaning.

1 second.

-You have already become meaningful to me.

Beeeeep.

A buzzing noise erupted in my mind. Someone was trying to send a telepathy message. It was the Magic Tower.

Merely gazing at the tower for more than 23 seconds was enough to trigger a response. It's a system. A warning not to look at us, observe us, or even think about crossing us. In a timeline devoured by regression, I had exploited this unwritten rule.

「 Ah, ah. Mic test. Mic test. Who's looking over there? 」

As expected, the Magic Tower's spokesperson sent a message through telepathy.

「 Talk nicely before I gouge out your eyes. We're really stressed these days. We don't have time to play with psychos. I mean, of course, I love catching those crazy bastards and torturing them, but we're too busy for that now... Huh? What? 」

The drowsy voice suddenly sharpened.

「 You're with the Assistant Writer, aren't you? Hey, shit. You damned fugitive! 」

Beeep!

The telepathy wave intensified. Just as the spokesperson said, the Assistant Writer was beside me.

Looking up at the Magic Tower. I wasn't the only one who violated the 23-second taboo. The Assistant Writer had also gazed at the tower since exiting the cave.

「 You, there. You are dead! How dare you show your face so shamelessly? And being with that writer... You're the King of Death or whatever? Look at these bastards. Hey! Frickin' lackeys! Go report to the spiders immediately! 」

Also,

It wasn't just the two of us.

「 .....? 」

Beeeeeep!

「...Oh, look at that? It's not just one madman!」

The telepathy wave fluctuated again. The spokesperson initially targeted me, then the Assistant Writer, and then someone else, sending simultaneous telepathies.

「Fine. You all have gone mad, haven't you? Good. Ha, this is fun! We've already prepared a punitive force for you!」

Beeeeeeep.

「We've called the colonial garrison from the other towers too! Ha ha! Heard of the 'Baron of Bone Thorns'? We just called them from headquarters after 300 years, all fired up! You'll learn how many tiny blood vessels are in your body...」

Beeeeeeep.

Beeep! Beeeeeeep.

「...I'll show you! What the hell? Really, what is this? Hey! Hey! You're really asking for it... Uh, no. Here's some good news. In the last few days, our proud elite forces have been gathering! It's been centuries since such a large force

assembled! Ah ha ha! Great! Look! The Fallen are ready to deploy----.」

Beeeeeeeeep!

Beeeeep! Beep, Beep!

「...」

Beep, Beeeeep! Beeeeep! Beep!

「.....」

Dozens.

"Uh..."

Hundreds.

"Now,"



Thousands.

"Summon the Elder! Right now!!"

All of us, united in the Anti-Magic Alliance.

The refugees who walked out of the cave through dozens of entrances, the hunters silently holding their drink at the open-air bar, the followers who were bargaining with mat merchants on the streets as usual.

[The Incarnation of Love and Lust declares war on the Magic Tower.]

[The Last Sword in the Wilderness declares war on the Magic Tower.]

[The Lonely Seeker declares war on the Magic Tower.]

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth declare war on the Magic Tower.]

[The Bell that Rings for the Dead declares war on the Magic Tower.]

[The Warhorse of the Eternal Plains declares war on the Magic Tower.]

I raised the Sword of Rebellion.

The power that didn't even permit a gaze.

The Magic Tower, a den of evil, set up an eternal prison on the fiftieth floor.

Our declaration of war started by just looking at it.

-So, I have no regrets.

The Guardian Spirit smiled.

-I lived as I wanted. I showed the unfortunate and unlucky ones who are going to be born endlessly in the future. Ascend! Right now, you have no one by your side. But that's just a

coincidence. Tell coincidence to go to hell, raise your middle finger, and ascend like me. Higher. Higher! Even higher!

The spokesperson no longer spoke to me.

Only sounds of confusion and panic could be heard.

-If you're concerned about the people I didn't look after in my past life.

And...

-Look after them, Kim Gong-Ja.

Sccccrrrrreeeeech!

It was a wail, a noise that refused to become sound, a scream. As metal grated on metal, all five spires vibrated in unison, and five fingers raised their nails to tear through the dark sky.

It felt like my body was being torn apart.

"It's the [Lament of the Tower]."

The Assistant Writer murmured.

It's been hundreds of years, she swallowed her words.

"...When one tower cries, it's a [Mockery]. A warning that requires a force enough to subjugate a city. When two towers cry, it's a [Kick]. It's the power to conquer a stage. The cry of three towers is used to subjugate another world. When four towers cry, it signifies the intent to subdue multiple worlds."

"All five towers are crying now."

"Yes."

The Assistant Writer nodded.

"[Regardless of who you are, die. We will annihilate you]."

Shadows spread over the five towers.

It seemed like someone threw a stone into the sky. Ripples spread across the gloomy sky. But those ripples were so black that they swallowed the clouds of the fiftieth floor and the few rays of sunlight that leaked through them.

"Good."

From the inverted shadows, one by one, things fell.

-A time of yearning for war also exists.

A black meteor shower.

-The hungry brats are crying, but our Magic Tower isn't so generous to just let it go. Cry. If you want to cry, cry. Do as you please.

Each falling meteor was a figure. Mages, witches, beings called spiders, all cloaked in black, were pouring down.

I realized that the shadow covering the sky was a giant summoning circle.

The Magic Tower too, sensing the coming storm, had prepared for summoning in advance.

"Today might be a day that comes only once in a thousand years for you."

Boom!

Witches holding meteors crashed into the city center. Boom! The open-air bar was destroyed. Shabby houses crumbled. Boom! Boom! Countless meteor showers devastated the streets. Screams echoed.

Dust billowed throughout the city.

"But for us, it's just another day added to a thousand years."

Thud.

From beyond the dust cloud, black spiders emerged.

Some held a severed head in their left hand. Others played

with a severed arm as if it were a basketball, smiling slyly. Beyond the dust cloud where the spiders emerged, there were no screams or groans.

It was the noise of buildings collapsing.

"The King of Death?"

The spiders murmured.

"Is our prey's name really the King of Death? The Tower lacks sense."

"It always has."

"It always will."

The spiders were far apart from each other.

Someone destroyed the city's western gate. Someone else destroyed the northern bar. Another went to the central square's statue. The ones farthest apart were literally on

opposite ends of the city.

Yet, they conversed as if they were huddled together.

"Maybe it's a less impressive title. The translation could have gone wrong. Maybe it's something more plausible like the Reaper of the Underworld or the Priest Comforting Ghosts, who knows?"

"Those are probably just worse names which we got wrong."

"Thanks. I'm happy to see you after 90 years. It's a relief that your annoying nature hasn't changed in those years."

"I'm famously known for calming the hearts of those around me."

"I hate to admit it, but let me tell you. Comrades, I missed your bullshit!"

"You're actually a bitch, that's why."



"Now I feel like I'm home."

They casually exchanged telepathies as if it were natural.

Distance didn't matter. A city's gap was meaningless.

Their auras traversed the city, heading somewhere. The spider that received it shot the aura to another comrade. In my senses, the aura of thousands of spiders exchanging was clear.

If one were to look down from the sky. It would look like.

"A spider's web."

The moment I casually uttered those words.

The spider web covering the city stopped.

I felt gazes.

Multiple gazes.

-----You're the King of Death?-----

Simultaneously. Thousands of tongues whispered.

Someone's lips moved. Aura flowed. It was, so to speak, the violence of numbers. It wasn't particularly malicious or cursed. Just the fact that thousands of spiders spoke at once, for a moment, my head swayed.

'That's right.'

Blood rushed to my head.

'These are the beings the Sword Emperor faced.'

My heart pounded.

'The rulers of the city.'

I gripped the hilt of my sword. Shiny, no, [Goddess of Protection] Hwiya vibrated. Whether a butterfly plunging into a spider's web is considered suicide or not is determined only by the butterfly's flapping wings.

"I've chosen the right person."

I smiled.

"I am the King of Death, the successor to the Sword Emperor."

In that instant, thousands of spiders swarmed me.

---

# Chapter 303: The Grey Spider (2)

---

Blood splattered.

-Keugh, huck!

The Grey Spider looked down at the body indifferently. Glancing around, she spotted someone tender, trembling like an aspen.

Isn't that an amusing sight?

The Grey Spider smiled.

-Are you scared?

-Hic, ah... hiiik...

-Why are you scared?

The Grey Spider waved her hand, and instantly, the person was dragged right up to her nose as if caught by an invisible hand.

-Hi, eeeek!

-Are you a god? A god shouldn't tremble. Shaking like that, you look more like a human. Your devoted followers would be disappointed to see you like this.

Ah.

The Grey Spider tilted her head slightly to the left as if just remembering something.

-They won't be disappointed, since they're all dead.

-S-Spare me! Please spare me! Spare me!

-Yeah. I like that phrase. There's something about it that

never gets old. When people are about to die and they beg for their life, that's the moment. You're probably hanging onto every word I say right now, right? Wondering if I'll spare you or kill you.

This time, the Grey Spider tilted her head to the right.

-You should've done that earlier.

Blood splattered again.

-Aaaaaaah!!

-Hey. I heard from your companion. There's a separate world where you gods live, right? We call it the Divine Realm. I'd love to visit, but I don't know the way. Can you secretly tell me how to get there?

-Ah, uh, ugh...! Ahhh, save me, save me...!

-You're quite a crybaby.

The Grey Spider tapped the tip of the nose of the person she was holding in her hand.

-Tell me now.

-..... .., .....

-Come on.

-Stage... s-stage... [Transfer]...

The world was enveloped in a bright white light.

The Grey Spider watched the light, winding around like tentacles, and chuckled.

-So, this is how it is?

That day, a world's tower was set ablaze.

The massacre was easy. The [Divine Clan] had entrusted the attack to a few warriors. Except for a few enemies, they could not use aura, nor were they adept in magic.

The Grey Spider was frankly disappointed. It was boring. Exterminating the five clans under [Divine Clan]'s control would have been more challenging.

-It's unprecedented, a subjugated clan rebelling and destroying the ruling clan.

Hop.

Footsteps were heard from behind. Turning around, she saw a platinum-haired child with hands clasped behind, looking at her intently.

-Who are you?

-I'm the Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages. Just Princess is fine.

-I didn't ask for your name.



-Hmm. I'm like a guide to those kids.

The Princess pointed a finger down the mountain. The city was on fire, an inferno blazed through it. Magic-made clay walls encircled the outskirts of the city, and all life was being scorched inside it.

-But they're all either dead or even worse off. Well, it can't be helped, I guess.

The Princess smiled faintly.

-Congratulations! From now on, you are the ruler of this tower!

-.....

-It's an unexpected situation, but not against the rules. Certainly not a breach. Your Witch Clan was rightfully part of the 40th floor, and now, being the only survivors, you have the right to ascend to the 50th floor.

The Grey Spider remained silent.

The silence was not out of confusion. She was just processing the overwhelming influx of information. Combining what she had learned while massacring the [Divine Clan] and what the Princess had just said, the Grey Spider easily came to a conclusion.

-Hmm.

But there was one puzzle she couldn't solve alone.

-Are there other clans like us under servitude?

-That is correct.

-So, those who ascend the stage, do they all go to the 50th floor like this? Making themselves gods and using lesser clans?

-Not necessarily, but they all do.

-So every human who arrives at the 50th floor is treated as a god?

-Yes. At least until now.

Indeed.

A smile formed on her lips.

-Thank you.

-Why?

The Grey Spider responded.

-You've just given me a reason to not die.

---

It was clear from the moment our eyes met that we were formidable foes.

"Everyone. Even if we're working together for the first time in decades, surely we haven't lost our edge to the point of not being able to catch a mere newbie who just ascended to the 50th floor?"

"I'm too old to fight on instinct. Let's communicate our strategies through telepathy."

"Sorry, but that won't work."

As the spiders charged forward, they exchanged words. All were accelerating in a time stream, enhanced by aura. Before a cloak could flutter once, they had exchanged numerous sentences, listened, and rebutted.

"Why not?"

"That guy, the King of Death, is listening to our conversation."

I could sense tens of spiders in the north of the city simultaneously casting magic. In the east, a group jumped over the city walls, probably using invisibility magic before circling around to ambush me from behind.

"Really? He's not just some rookie then. I've upped my speed."

"Increase it more. He's still tracking us with his eyes."

"Increase it more?"

"More."

"Stop."

"How is it now? If we compress the telepathy further, some of us won't be able to hear."

"No use. He's still [listening] to us."

One of the spiders coldly muttered.

Seems like that spider had temporarily taken command. It was not exactly a commander, but definitely serving as a control tower.

"Moreover, he's at ease. His stream of time is faster than ours."

"What, no way! Impossible!"

"He's not moving at all. He's just standing there. Isn't he just pretending to listen?"

"It's not that. He's not just standing still..."

Found it.

".....! Transfer the command to [Baron of Bone Thorns]!"

At the instant the control tower transferred the command, I discarded a piece of my memory, sharpened my aura, and shot towards the location of the control tower's voice.

Kwaaaang!

The very moment the control tower called for the transfer, the balcony of the shabby 3-story apartment building where she was hiding was sliced open.

"-----"

The pause in the spiders' breath was distinctly felt for a

moment.

"Attention. I am the [Baron of Bone Thorns]."

A dry voice murmured. It was a different individual from the one who had just served as the control tower. The tone of the murmur carried an effort to suppress the rage towards me.

"From now on, I will exercise command. I won't allow telepathy for spiders below the rank of viscount."

".....Damn it. Crazy."

"Agreed."

"Serena just got taken down in one hit!?"

"She's not dead. Not sure if that's good news, though."

".....!?"

The initial control tower had passed command to a spider farthest from me. Probably thinking that would buy more time.

But that's exactly why I could read the move.

Immediately after downing the control tower, I focused on the north side of the city. Of course, a dry voice near me pretended to be the commander, saying things like 'no telepathy allowed' or 'prepare for bombardment.'

It was a fake.

The dry voice wasn't the [Baron of Bone Thorns]; even if it was, it wasn't the commander.

The real commander was the one who had been briefly giving orders like [Agree], [Phase], [Ready].

A clever fake. They must have agreed on this before the battle.

But I wasn't fooled.



"Warning!"

I shrugged my shoulders.

And swung.

The loaded strike shot out. It was stronger this time. The sword strike sliced the sky, cleanly cutting through the northern wall. It struck a terse spider hiding behind it. Just before being incapacitated, she screamed a warning to her comrades.

"Target, Constellation Killer level! Warning! Target----"

And the sound was cut off.

"....."

"....."

The web of spiders fell silent.

Crunch.

Someone ground their teeth. Tsk, a tongue click sounded, and ptooeey, the sound of spit echoed. However, not a single word was spoken.

Not a single word.

"You made a good choice."

Even so, the exchange of blows continued.

"Having a commander is just asking to be sniped. It's better for each one to attack me separately. Hmm. It diminishes the significance of gathering thousands, but it's better."

"However, saying I'm Constellation Killer level is a mistake."

A bombardment of magic from the north hit me. Bang! Kwaang! I carefully dodged the falling blue magic cannons.

"I'm stronger than him."

The flanking force from the outskirts hit my back.

There were 24 in total. Specializing in assassination, they wore masks covering the lower half of their faces. They swung their swords simultaneously. A nearly perfect formation, though not quite a battle array.

"Too bad."

I respectfully moved the holy sword.

"If it was me before reaching the 40th floor, I would have died from this."

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The First Form.

Sword of Starving Death.

The surroundings erupted into chaos instantaneously. Shadowy tendrils, like wraiths, sprung from my shadow. They

seized the spiders' wrists, ankles, and necks, hurling them to the ground. "Keugh!" "Huk!" The spiders' breaths were stifled.

"I've heard a lot about you."

The tendrils of shadow did not stop there. Hundreds of gestures spread in all directions. They climbed the outer walls of buildings and seeped through the cracks of windows. "Ah," "Keup!?" "That's impossible..." Spiders that had been lying in ambush inside the buildings fell.

"Witch Clan."

Flames engulfed the surroundings.

"Regardless of the world, the common stage to ascend to the 50th floor involves becoming a god and ruling one's own race. You were originally a subjugated race in the 40th-floor world... essentially, a race guided by hunters."

"You're wrong!"

A spider within the range of my Demonic Heavenly God Art shouted. A formidable opponent, she had repelled the

shadowy hands five times.

“We misjudged! It’s not that the King of Death pulled in the constellations to beat us! It’s the other way around, damn it! We worry about each other, which limits our attack range...!”

“But the hunters who ruled you made a mistake.”

Thump.

The fifth exchange of blows did not continue into a sixth. A hand struck the back of her neck. The spider fainted, succumbing to a deep sleep from the pressure point strike.

“Damn it! Is this silence meaningful?!”

“They marked you, the Witch Clan, as the scapegoats. They nurtured the five clans with care. However, the Witch Clan was made to be despised by all, taking on the anger and condemnation meant for the gods.”

“That’s right! Staying silent just means being attacked!”

“Push forward with numbers!”

“That might have been a good strategy. But they didn’t consider the possibility that you would become so strong, annihilating the five clans and even the revered hunter gods.”

“He’s a monster...”

“Bombardment! Bombardment first, then attack!”

“Fallen Ones!”

The web of spiders quivered. They uttered a word, and I muttered five in response. We were both in an accelerated time stream, but between us flowed an insurmountable torrent.

“Erase that crazy bastard completely!”

What followed was as such.

The Fallen Ones were literally those falling from the sky. Wrapped in special magic, they plummeted from the high

skies. Whether it was a suicidal attack, I couldn't tell.

Not knowing, I decided to act first.

“What----”

I leaped from the ground, shooting into the sky. I met eyes with the spiders who were just beginning their fall. We were so close, the trembling of their eyebrows was visible. I touched the forehead of the first falling spider, causing her to faint.

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Third Form.

Sword of Submerged Death.

Seven in total. I engulfed the Fallen Ones' squad in a torrent of aura. The leader, seeing her comrades fall, hesitated for a second, committing a fatal mistake. The Fallen Ones lost consciousness and tumbled endlessly.

“One must always consider all the possibilities.”

I landed first, then caught each of the Fallen Ones as they descended, gently placing them on the ground. They groaned in their unconscious state, tormented by nightmares.

“Someone you think nothing of, can in fact, be stronger than you.”

I dusted off my hands.

“Right, everyone?”

“You all make the same mistakes. That’s how it is – making mistakes, learning from each other, fixing shortcomings if possible. That’s what life should be. I believe we can surely help each other.”

Around me, hundreds of flames flickered.

Tendrils formed by aura writhed around.



“.....King of Death.....”

Someone seemed to mutter.

“No, the Great Demon King...”

Hmm.

I gave an awkward smile.

"That's just propaganda and distortion, you know?"

---

# Chapter 304: The Grey Spider (3)

---

The spiders froze at the sight of my smile.

"....."

"....."

I have met many individuals with long life spans throughout my time.

It is possible to overcome the limits of life inside the tower.

There are humans who have survived over a hundred years and constellations like Hamusutra who have wandered for tens of thousands of years. I realized one thing after meeting them.

Fear is constant.

“This is troublesome.”

I smiled broadly.

My feet were quicker than my words.

I dashed out, and in the next moment, a spider hiding in the rubble let out a short scream, “Heek.” We locked eyes at close range. She was a freckled member of the Witch Clan. I pressed her pressure points whilst I gave her a reassuring smile.

“Ah...”

“No matter how eternal it feels, a thousand years is hardly eternity.”

I hummed.

What was the meaning?

Nothing.

“A peony fades in ten days. A thousand years is all it took for the fall of the Tower’s autumn.”

The spiders scattered across the city were listening to my every word.

Desperately trying to find meaning in them.

That’s enough. If it creates even a little confusion, I’m willing to feign leisure and spout these cryptic phrases.

“Ah. I should have worn a black robe. It’s a historic moment where a thousand-year-old demon overthrows a thousand-year-old tower, and I didn’t pay attention to fashion. Well, it’s a minor detail. My master would surely laugh heartily.”

“Retreat!”

A commanding spider shouted as if spewing blood.

“Retreat! Retreat! 33rd Battalion, even for a moment, stop that monster!”

“Retreat, but where to...”

“Regroup at headquarters! There’s no answer here! The elders must step in!”

Objectively, the tower still had the upper hand in power.

Since the battle began, I’ve taken down just over a hundred enemies.

But I targeted the commanding figures, disrupting their leadership. The spiders, relying entirely on telepathy for communication, lost their means to oppose me once their wide-area network—the 'web'—was torn apart.

[The constellations’ quest progresses.]

[The Warhorse of the Eternal Plains orders the followers to advance!]

It signaled a divide and conquer strategy.

[Quest progress. The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth reveals the enemy's escape routes.]

[Quest progress. The Bell That Rouses the Dead posts the identities of those who perished in past rebellions throughout the city.]

[Quest progress. The Incarnation of Love and Lust exposes the identities of spiders of count level and above.]

As soon as it was clear that the campaign was advancing, the constellations promptly provided 'adequate rewards' and 'appropriate motivation' to their followers.

The reason they hadn't urged their followers before wasn't due to a lack of will to resist the tower.

In the end, it's the humans walking on the ground, not the stars in the sky, who clear the quests. The constellations respond as their followers advance.

"Hahaha! This is exhilarating!"

A hunter who had joined the rebellion in the underground cave roared.

“Return my constellation! You bastards!”

“...The King of Death and the Sword Emperor boasted so much, but to think it would really come to this. Honestly, I was skeptical... But yes, this might indeed be our last chance. Everyone, as an apostle of Babbit, I command you. Even if fighting isn't your forte, rise up in desperation.”

“Splendid.”

The balance of power between the two forces had been reversed.

The web, like a barrier over the monopolized city, was disassembled piece by piece.

Apostles of numerous constellations whose voices were suppressed for ages, seized control of the city. The north, the west, the south, and the east. In open pubs and lined-up taverns, blue, red, yellow, and white auras rippled like waves. These ripples overlapped, shaking the city's sky.

“Hiding underground and whispering in each other's ears ends today.”

Whoosh! Something resembling a rocket shot into the sky.

It was a strike packed with condensed aura. It wasn't a sniper shot like mine which aimed for commanders. In fact, it targeted no one in particular. The rocket headed for 'the sky'.

And it split the lower edge of the dark clouds.

Weak. A weak strike. Embarrassingly so, compared to the Sword Emperor's strike. But a sword's value is always determined by what it cuts, not by the hand that wields it. In that sense, the rocket launched by the apostle of The Warhorse of the Eternal Plains was indeed precious.

“Let's go, cavaliers.”

Light leaked through the split clouds.

“Follow the King of Death, the Sword Emperor's successor.”



The city erupted in cheers.

“Damn it, you vermin!”

A spider raged.

“We retreated because of that guy, not because we were afraid of you insects! Where do you bugs get off talking like that? Just wait, I’ll show you...”

Ah. There.

I launched a sword strike.

“What!?”

The spider's voice jumped in surprise. Along with the sound of the building collapsing, the spider's frantic bouncing could be heard.

“Hey, you without any decency! Why do you attack while someone is talking, huh? My squad just got wiped out because

of that! Unbelievable. Seriously, are you really the Sword Emperor's successor? Eh? You've been smiling stupidly! Your face reeks of bad luck, just like the Sword Emperor, ah, damn!"

I struck once more.

"Shit!!"

With that scream, the voice ceased.

The commander, who thought he wouldn't be targeted just for transmitting telepathy, was gone. The brave soul who held onto command despite knowing his fate was also gone. And the lunatic who, even though aware of his impending doom, wanted to curse till the end, had just made his exit.

Only one role remained.

"—Right. This feels familiar."

Someone with the strength to be complacent, holding an irreplaceable baton, and not forgetting to curse until the end.

“It’s a familiar shittiness. A different face, but this level of bad luck reminds me of ‘that guy’. Shockingly similar. It’s a different direction, but the bad luck is just as strong.”

Without hesitation, I attacked in the direction of the voice. And then, boom! For the first time today, my attack was neutralized in mid-air.

“May I ask...”

In the distance, through the clouds torn by the rocket.

Her finger was pointed amidst a ray of sunlight.

“Where did you learn such a shitty attitude?”

Behind the finger.

An expressionless face gazed down from the shadows.

Her hat's brim was so long and wide that not a single ray of sunlight could penetrate through.

“If there’s a specialized hospital for removing shitty attitudes, please let me know. From my point of view, that’s the root of all evil. If cockroaches keep crawling out no matter how much you stomp, there must be some academy breeding them somewhere.”

The Elder of the Witch Clan, Niglus-Kukulu, the Liberator.

The annihilator of five clans. The forsaken owner of grey. The slayer of gods. The witch who nailed six constellations. The greatest landholder. The master of all spiders. A hunter with countless aliases, revered even by the constellations, alongside the already deceased Sword Emperor and the virtually dead Constellation Killer.

"....."

I smiled.

No matter how many aliases she carried, it didn't matter. I had already decided what to call her after hearing the old stories from Guardian Spirit.

“Pleased to meet you, 'Grey Spider'.”

I called her as planned.

“I am known as the King of Death.”

"....."

Ha, a short scoff escaped her.

“The King of Death? More like the boss of the underworld. You should fall into hell and play king there, kid. Why crawl out here and cause chaos?”

“Ah. It already feels like hell being alive, so there’s no need to go to the underworld.”

“It seems you're not the kind to be silenced with a word.”

“If I’m a brat, does that make the Grey Spider an elder brat?”

"What..... What?"

The Elder seemed momentarily at a loss for words.

I shook my holy sword and smiled.

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding. It’s just a joke to lighten the tense atmosphere.”

"....."

The Elder twitched her lips, then looked down on me with disdain, followed by a realization. Quite a variety of expressions could be seen. She placed one hand on her forehead while holding a staff in the other.

“A true lunatic. Damn...”

Why does everyone I meet seem to realize that 'lunatic' is the most fitting word to describe me in the vast universe? It’s quite a mystery. A mystery indeed.

“Please understand.”

I shrugged.

“I am the Emissary of the Sword Emperor. I’m just acting crazy as method acting. Normally, I’m not like this.”

“You’re definitely not his successor.”

Hmm?

“I’ve seen your swordsmanship. Your aura control is skillful. But you’re different from that Sword Emperor bastard. There’s venom in you. Yes, you harbor poison in your heart.”

While speaking to me, the Elder’s gaze wandered around.

‘Aha.’

Of course.

Right now, the constellations are encouraging their followers with quests. But these quests are based on the premise that I am the [Successor of the Sword Emperor]. If it

turns out that I have nothing to do with the Sword Emperor, starting with [The Incarnation of Love and Lust], the quests will have to be halted immediately.

That's why the Elder is speaking loud enough for everyone to hear.

‘Smart.’

A pinpoint attack.

The Elder clicked her tongue.

“Swordsmen, do they call it orthodox and unorthodox? Even I, uninterested, can see. King of Death, you naive child. You're walking the path of unorthodoxy. The intent in your sword is completely opposite to his. How could you be his successor? Yeah, right.”

The silence of the followers was palpable. They either halted or continued fighting, all while listening to the exchange between the Elder and me.

[The Incarnation of Love and Lust looks troubled.]



The constellations, too.

“The Sword Emperor is dead.”

A giggling laughter adorned the sky. The Elder's laughter caused the tail of her broomstick to slightly shake, mocking the restlessness of the constellations.

“Even if he left a secret technique and trained a successor, purely assumption of course. Maybe there's a disciple of his somewhere! However, King of Death, you are not his disciple.”

Let's wait a bit more.

“The Sword Emperor's will is carried on by you? What was his will? To rebel against our Tower? Ha. If that's the case, thousands of you would be his successors!”

"....."

Just a little longer.

“Vermin. Constellations are always like that. Ah, there’s never a decent one among those self-proclaimed gods. Even though they know it’s not true. Even though they clearly know it won’t work, they still try to advance the campaign, bringing in some kid and making a fuss about the Sword Emperor’s return...”

“Hey.”

Yes.

“You losers.”

Now’s the time.

“Sometimes you need to get some air. Staying cooped up all day like you guys isn’t good for you.”

There was hesitation.

“Here, consider this a favor! I’ll give you a free remodelling today!”

"....."

"I'd usually laugh [Haha] at this point. But even as a master of method acting, I can't laugh like that. There's a certain dignity humans should maintain, right?"

The gaze.

I could feel her looking at me. When eyes truly meet, and only the exploration of each other matters, time seems to stop. Everything else becomes insignificant.

Until a moment ago, the Elder was fully focused on bringing us down. Speeches, provocations and schemes. She was ready to relentlessly attack our weakest points, buying time for the retreating spiders, making followers doubt the constellations, and ultimately winning the war.

All that became insignificant.

"Hey."

Among the countless names she possessed.

I chose the nickname only the Sword Emperor had used.

“Grey.”

"....."

“Are you still living like that?”

Showing the Sword Emperor’s expression, tone, and smile.

“Why don’t you ever change, whether it’s a hundred years or a thousand?”

“I think that’s also a disease. A disease. You’re basically challenging the world. You think you’re losing to the world if you change? I’ll call this disease the ‘Grey Disease’ from now on. Consider it an honor.”

“You.”

You, the Elder said.

“You—”

“Haha.”

"....."

“Or so I would say.”

I smiled.

“I’m just kidding. It’s a joke.”

"....."

“How about it? Was it a bit funny this time?”

And then, I saw.

The clouds swirled over the city due to the immense flow of magical power. The spiders retreated to the spires, flinching to

look back, gazing up at the sky. The sight of five spires vibrated, causing an earthquake throughout the city.

I saw many things, but.

“Okay.”

They were insignificant.

“I wanted to see that look in your eyes.”

The moment I raised my holy sword.

The magic storm in the sky engulfed me as well.

---

# Chapter 305: Reunion (1)

---

Throughout my life, I've never really felt a cool breeze.

-Hey.

But a hot wind? I experienced it once.

-I've heard your name often.

The heatwave suddenly blew from behind.

-Are you the Grey Spider?

-.....

-It's hard to pronounce. Let's just call you Grey. How about it, Grey? It sounds friendly. But why is it so stuffy here? No windows? What about ventilation? Is this even a place for humans to live?

The Grey Spider sighed and turned around.

The man was red and hot.

Though it was autumn and everything was turning red, this man's hair resembled the sun more than the autumn leaves. His eyes, the slight upward curve of his lips, his shining white teeth. Everything about him flickered like summer.

He wore a sleeveless uniform with the word 'Sword' boldly written on it.

When sight magic was used to check the back, there was 'Emperor' written on the back of the uniform.

-A true lunatic, damn.

The summer-like hot man must have his brain fried from the heat.



Above all, his sweat was hot.

Not the stale kind, but fresh sweat from exercising.

He always trained relentlessly. As the rumors said, his blood vessels and ki paths were always bustling with aura, leaving no room for waste to accumulate. His sweat was probably clearer than a newborn's.

Like dew on a ripe apple.

From his sweat, only the temperature was felt. The heatwaves could be seen. His muscles glistened in the sun. His sweat resembled hot dew. If the sun had a face, it would probably be smiling just as blatantly.

-Why?

All of it denied death.

-Jealous?

-How did you get to the top floor of this headquarters? Only I can access this secret lab, but I won't ask how you got here. Firstly, it would be a waste of my time, and secondly, it would only give you a chance to brag about yourself.

-Grey is quite a smart kid. Who's the good girl? It's Grey, of course!

-And I won't fight either. Because if we fight here, my precious research tools will be destroyed. Sword Emperor, I'm trying my best to maintain my composure. I ask you to stop provoking me for your life and my peace. Otherwise, I'll fuck you up, you son of a bitch.

-What? You're more sane than I thought.

The Sword Emperor plopped down on the sofa. A treasure found 600 years ago when destroying a kingdom, its softness embracing the sitter was phenomenal. It was also the Grey Spider's place to rest when she got tired of her research and the world.

-Oh? Wow, this sofa is so squishy! What is this? It's amazing.

It was also a sentient magical item.

-Aaaaah?!

-Just spit it out before I rip your mouth open and weave it into a scarf.

-I already got bitten by this sofa on my fabulous butt!?

-I know you're a legendary hunter, Sword Emperor. You've only been on the 50th floor for a fortnight, right? The streets are already buzzing with your achievements.

-My butt! My butt! Aaaaah! My cute plump butt!!

-Damn it.

The Grey Spider whacked the sofa with her staff. Finally, the sofa let go of the Sword Emperor's butt and closed its mouth.

-Ha, hi, hoo... Ha, hi, hoo... That was close.

-Just tell me what you're going to do.

-Oh, I was just curious. You've been holed up here for over a thousand years? I wanted to see what kind of person does such an epic shut-in act.

-So?

-Turns out you're more normal than I thought. Ouch, it hurts.

The Sword Emperor patted his butt. The Grey Spider frowned.

-Normal? Who are you calling normal?

-You, Grey.

-.....I've heard many things, but being called normal is a first for me.

-Anger where it's due. Taking responsibility in your own way afterwards. Sounds like a perfectly normal adult to me.

The Sword Emperor shrugged.

The Grey Spider was speechless.

-You know that in the Tower's basement, six constellations are nailed down as power generators, and that we have conquered dozens of worlds?

-There must be reasons for each.

-.....

-Just by looking into your eyes, I can tell. Whether you're just a brat throwing a tantrum at the world or someone who weaves her own rules into the world's web. Grey, you're the latter. You might have been hurt in the past, but you seem to have coped well enough.

-.....Ha. A guy I met three minutes ago is acting like a sage.

-I don't think it's presumptuous.

The Sword Emperor smiled slyly.

-It took a thousand years for you to be here, and a thousand years for me to meet you here. Three minutes is just the result of a thousand years. Life is ultimately about waiting to meet someone.

-.....

-So am I your destiny? Sorry, I'm not.

The Sword Emperor stood up.

-I need to climb the Tower more alone than anyone else.

-.....What do you mean?

-There are people less fortunate than me in this world. They too could ascend if they wished. I've decided to climb alone to prove that to them.

-Ha.

The Grey Spider scoffed.

-Such a noble sense of sacrifice.

-Yes. It is a noble deed.

The Sword Emperor bowed his head.

-I'm sorry.

-.....

-I must accomplish what I want to do. No matter what. I'm dedicating my life to leaving a mark in this world with my sword. So, I don't have time to look after you. Even as a ghost, I'll fulfill my mission.

The Grey Spider was enveloped in strange emotions.

She felt the man in front of her genuinely apologizing. It seemed like he knew exactly what he should apologize for and what she should be apologized to for.

He was just a man she met five minutes ago. But the Grey Spider felt his footprints already imprinted in a dry territory of her heart. It would take many winds to erase even their traces from this desert.

-.....

-Wait. Keep living. Days better than now will come.

-You.....

The Grey Spider opened her mouth.

-You're so irresponsibly annoying, aren't you?

-Huh.

The Sword Emperor laughed.

-Tomorrow, I'll ascend to the 51st floor.



-I didn't permit that.

-Don't worry. I'll give this place a makeover and take the price.

-You think it's that simple?

-If you're annoyed, if you dislike it, follow me.

-.....

-I have no comrades or lovers. But a stalker secretly trailing me is a burden I must bear as a celebrity. Follow and see me ascend the 100th floor. Trust me, Grey!

The Sword Emperor's smile shone like the sun.

And it was hotter than the desert.

-You shall be the second person to conquer the 100th floor.

---

Constellation [The Warhorse of the Eternal Plains].

Objective: Defeat the Tower's forces on the 50th floor.

Quest Progress: Favorable.

Constellation [The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth].

Objective: Reveal and expose all the facilities and terrains inside the Magic Tower.

Quest Progress: Beginning.

Constellation [The Bell that Rouses the Dead].

Objective: Engrave the names of those sacrificed by the Magic Tower in the past 150 years on the five spires and commemorate them.

Quest Progress: Favorable.

Constellation [The Lonely Seeker].

Objective: Each follower must find and defeat a rival from the Magic Tower in a one-on-one duel.

Quest Progress: Favorable.

And.

Constellation [The Incarnation of Love and Lust].

Objective of the Constellation [The Incarnation of Love and Lust]: Shake and topple the leader of the Magic Tower, commonly known as the Elder, by any means necessary.

Quest Progress:

"Shit..."

Currently ongoing.

"You son of a bitch!"

A storm of magical power engulfed me.

"Wow, this is on a whole different level..."

"I knew you'd come back alive! Reincarnation? Possession? Why? why did you return without dying!"

I hastily raised my aura and unfolded the Demonic Heavenly God Art. Shredding my shadow into hundreds of pieces, I simultaneously attacked the Elder. Boom! Hundreds of explosions erupted in the air.

-Zombie.

Behind the dust clouds from the explosions, the Elder stood unharmed. Enraged and flying towards me, her fingers twitched, conjuring dozens of spells. My attacks were all intercepted.

-Sorry, but can you repeat what I'm saying?

"Sure, go ahead."

-Aren't you exactly the same as 150 years ago?

I smirked.

"Hey, Grey."

"Die!"

"Aren't you just the same as you were 150 years ago? A bit, well, how to say it? Just like that."

"I'll kill you! I swear, I'll tear you apart and scatter your soul across the universe, then smother it with shit!"

She's fierce.

"You knew the heart of the remaining humans! Sword Emperor!"

The magic the Elder of the Tower wielded was indeed splendid.

Each moment, thirty-six different spells shot towards me, all with varying directions and speeds, ruthlessly slicing through the flow of battle. An attack without any discernable pattern. It was a carpet bombing.

Pop!

For the first time since the battle began, blood dripped from my cheek.

"Blathering about people's hearts, living however you please, then dying just like that! Not even once did you get to see the view from the 100th floor, you bastard! You died alone, didn't you!"

-Hahaha.

"That was my only mistake in life, allowing a man like you even a single chance!"

-Well, the 99th floor was quite tough. Couldn't help it, you

know?

"Become ashes!"

Swoosh.

A blade-like magic force grazed my calf. Luckily, it didn't sever any nerves, but the stinging pain was evident.

"You always do this, convincing people with all your fancy words that it's different this time! It always ends in failure! Sword Emperor, how are you any different from those bastards? You're just a fucking smooth talker!"

Honestly, it was dangerous.

I pride myself on surpassing the Constellation Killer, but right now, I was being overpowered by the Grey Spider. Was it because she was a great mage whom I faced for the first time? Or was her magic amplified by her rage?

"Many! So many! Bastards!"

She was strong.

Even when I unleashed the Demonic Heavenly God Art First Form: Sword of Starving Death,

"How dare you, to me, after all these numerous emotions!"

She easily countered it.

She seemed to know too well what it felt like to be starving.

"What's so special about you! Conquering the Tower alone, showing those less fortunate than you – what have you shown, Sword Emperor!"

The Elder quickly grasped my offensive moves and twisted them.

"Do you know? After you died, the Sword Emperor's sect was formed. Ha! Isn't that a comedic masterpiece? A religion, of all things! You tried to show how great a human can be, but it ended up glorifying the greatness of a god! People—humans—they never acknowledge someone greater than themselves. Only after becoming a god do they recognize it! Sword



Emperor, in the end, you just created another deity in this world!"

Frostbite, Poison, Plague, Bludgeoning, Scorching, even Suicide.

From the first to the ninth heaven of the Demonic Heavenly God Art, the Elder trampled all over them, breaking through, and finally reaching right in front of me.

"I'll ask you one more time!"

She was furious, though she too was injured by my drawn sword, with blood spurting from her arm and thigh. But no wound seemed fatal. Had she lived too long to accept new wounds?

The Elder stood right before me.

Her magic, like a spear, crossed with my sword.

"Why shouldn't I kill you!"

"....."

Thump.

My heart throbbed.

‘.....Semi-Divine Eye.’

Ever since I met the Tower Master and witnessed her trauma, and the screams from all over the world, this sixth sense awakened within me. It subtly reared its head.

The phenomenon where the past or future of the person I am fighting faintly appears.

This strange occurrence has no set rules. Like déjà vu, it occasionally pierces the other person's heart and mine without any warning.

「 Follow me. 」

Not the voice of the Guardian Spirit, but the Sword

Emperor's voice to the Elder rang out for a moment like an echo.

「Wait. Keep living.」

「Memorize the scene of me ascending the 100th floor.」

「Even as a ghost, I will fulfill my mission.」

「Trust me!」

The Elder's emotions, overlapped with that voice, were conveyed to me. Just as the Sword Emperor said, the Elder had secretly followed him.

When the Sword Emperor reached the 99th floor, the Elder quietly waited on the 90th floor.

Without telling anyone.

「.....」

One week.

「 ..... 」

Six months.

「 ..... 」

Three years.

「 .....Right. 」

When six years passed, the Elder quietly stood up.

Muttering softly as she turned her back.

「 Stupid bastard. 」

The hallucination broke there.

"You stupid bastard!"

A clanging sound seemed to ring.

Was it an illusion?

But the scene that briefly unfolded before my eyes shattered like glass. Pushing aside countless shards, the Elder lunged at me.

Crack!

Her fingers stretched out and grabbed my throat.

"Why didn't I rebuild the sixth spire for over a hundred years! Why did I lazily leave the ruins untouched! To nail your remains to a stake, seal them, and make you the sacrifice for the sixth tower!"

"....."

The Guardian Spirit silently watched.

Behind the Elder.

Although the Elder was shouting at the Sword Emperor, he was actually standing behind her. Despite the pain eating at my throat, I kept looking at the Guardian Spirit until the end.

-.....

The Guardian Spirit was calm.

Expressionless.

Seeing his eyes devoid of any regret, remorse, or the slightest self-blame, I somehow realized something I had felt for a long time, only to confirm it at this moment.

“...No.”

I murmured.

“What?”

“The Sword Emperor... Your rival didn’t fail.”

I raised my left hand.

Squeeze.

I grabbed the Elder’s wrist, which was clutching my neck.

“Elder. The Sword Emperor never failed.”

“What are you....”

“I told you. He said he’d fulfill his mission even as a ghost.”

I looked down into the Elder’s eyes.

“The Sword Emperor didn’t fail. He just died.”

"....."

“He’s still climbing the 99th floor. But as a spirit, not a human. From the first floor... all over again.”

I said.

“Isn’t that right?”

"....."

In the silence of the Elder.

Yes, and...

-You’re right.

The Guardian Spirit slowly spoke.

-I’m still undertaking the 99th floor quest, Gong-Ja.

---



# Chapter 306:

## Reunion (2)

---

The situation was perplexing.

"Hey, who are you?"

"Can you see me?"

At first, I thought I was just lucky.

Having an expert who had climbed up to the 99th floor by my side was a blessing.

The higher I ascended, the more I realized how incredible the Guardian Spirit's achievements were. The 99th floor. A legendary realm that only legends can reach. Although the Guardian Spirit often took a bystander's attitude, there was no doubt that I was fortunate.

But then.

"Huh, this is strange? This shouldn't be happening."

"Where did that Gramps Marcus go, and why is a kid like you in front of me?"

"Take me back to Gramps right now!"

It was odd.

How could the Guardian Spirit so easily accept the fact that he had been split into 'two'?

"You only copy skills, not steal them."

"Meaning, there's 'another me' attached to Gramps as the Guardian Spirit."

The greatest of all time. Unmatched in the world. A reckless and disrespectful warrior, unwilling to accept any other strongest besides himself. How could such a person simply

accept that he was split into two?

"Gramps or you. Who will succeed more as a Hunter? I'm a bit curious now."

Out of mere curiosity, as the Guardian Spirit said?

"I'll help you."

Is helping others the Guardian Spirit's nature?

"Let's conquer the tower once and for all!"

No, that's not it.

"Even if only one of us reaches the 99th floor, it's fine, right?"

I said.

"Sword Saint or I. It's enough for you if just one of us reaches

the 99th floor. You don't care about the means, as long as it's achieved, right?"

-.....

"That's why you clung to the Sword Saint and then to me, despite splitting into two.... You weren't flustered."

I was mistaken.

It wasn't me who found luck.

"It's because the chances doubled for you."

The Guardian Spirit was the lucky one.

"The Sword Saint and I are different. He's a rich family's heir. I'm an orphan with no parents. He's old and accomplished, risking it all for another challenge. I, on the other hand, am young and unaccomplished, throwing myself into the tower. Mr. Marcus, who is skilled in the game called life and me, who is familiar with death. We're completely opposite."

So, the Guardian Spirit must have thought.

Very well.

"You possessed two completely different humans. As you can see, I'm desperately proving myself by attacking the tower, while the Sword Saint is still stepping back, immersed in training like a hermit. Two types. Two methods. Two possibilities, all of which you can experiment with."

Why?

Why such an experiment?

"Your goal isn't just to take me to the 99th floor. Well, it is, but to be more precise, to take either the Sword Saint or me to the 99th floor. That's your real goal."

-Heh.

The Guardian Spirit laughed.

-Hehe. Haha!

As if delighted.

-Ahahaha!

Crossing his arms.

-Yes! That's right!

With his hair redder than the sun.

-I can't hate you for this! Kim Gong-Ja, you calculate kindness. No. You have no choice but to calculate. You are convinced to the core that no one would help you without a reason!

"It's a personality built from childhood."

-And yet, you fabricate reasons for helping others! Hahaha. Fine. I don't mind. In fact, you didn't treat me with baseless kindness.

How boring it must have been.

Unable to have his own body.

Unable to roam the streets at will. Impossible to converse with others. Only able to follow where I go, and wander where I stay.

Such a life.

If a human endures such a life willingly, there's only one reason.

-Well done, Gong-Ja.

To have a purpose they desperately want to achieve.

-To take someone to the 99th floor. That's my job. My 99th floor quest. But there's a misunderstanding I need to correct.

"What is it?"

-It's not just about getting to the 99th floor. If that were the case, I would have quickly agreed when [Demon King of Autumn Rain] tried to coax you. There's a very harsh condition...

"Hey."

Someone murmured.

It was the Elder.

"No, [you two]. What are you talking about?"

She still held my neck. But she wasn't squeezing with the intent to kill immediately, as before. There was something more important now than killing me or eradicating the Guardian Spirit.

"Who are you talking to right now?"

"....."



"Is... Is the Sword Emperor there?"

"Yes."

I nodded.

"He's here."

"....."

"I'm not a reincarnation of the Sword Emperor. The Sword Emperor is definitely there, and so am I. The Sword Emperor is standing behind you, nonchalantly with crossed arms. He must have been there since he demolished the spire, ascended to the 99th floor, and returned here... The Sword Emperor has never been gone."

"....."

"He's always been there. Always challenging the tower."

The Elder looked expressionlessly.

Expressionlessly, she turned around.

-Oh, hi. Nice to meet you.

"....."

-I'm the 40% transparent Sword Emperor. If you want to adjust the transparency, please contact the tower and purchase the DLC. A scam? Oh, dear customer, it can't be helped. That's the trend these days.

"I can't see."

-Of course.

"I can't hear."

-As expected.

"I can't see or hear."

Tough luck.

The Elder bit her lip.

"What's the point then?"

She clenched her fist.

A storm of magic swirled.

With her right hand still grasping my neck, she invoked some kind of magic with her left hand alone.

It resembled a summoning spell with attractive force. Boom! Bang! Buildings split apart. Suddenly, a straight path like a highway opened up from where the Elder stood to the northwest part of the city. Any obstructing building was pulverized.

"-----!!"

A hunter was dragged in through this forcefully made path

as if caught in an intangible grip.

Whoosh!

The Hunter was pulled in at an unnaturally fast speed. As if his neck was always meant to end up in the Elder's left hand, he landed exactly there.

"---Kuh, ack!"

A muffled cry.

"You're the Apostle of [The Bell That Rouses the Dead]."

The Elder muttered softly.

"Yeah."

"Ugh, uh... what... what do you..."

"Use necromancy right now. There should be a ghost near me. Whether it's [Soul of the Dead] or [Crimson Bridge between Pity and Charity], use any skill or plead with your damn Constellation for power. Make it possible for me to talk to that ghostly bastard if you don't want your head to explode."

"Activating skill..."

A dark aura enveloped the area, surely including the Guardian Spirit. Pressured by the Elder's threats, the Apostle who used his skill trembled.

"There's nobody... nobody here. There's no soul of the dead near you, Elder. Despite the overflowing resentment, you've surround yourself with exorcism magic to prevent the curses of the dead from affecting you? Who would want to stay near you even in death..."

"Get lost, idiot."

The Elder flung her hand, sending the Hunter flying. He crashed into the building's outer wall with a loud thud! Without a chance to scream, the Hunter collapsed.

"I'll kill you."

The Elder glared at me again, grinding her teeth, her eyes fierce and resolute.

"Make it possible for me to see that bastard now."

-Forget it.

"No? Are you lying? Pretending? Pretending to talk to someone who isn't even here, just to deceive me? Don't make me laugh. I'll kill you."

-He won't die.

"How many times can a human skull be shaved off before it's gone? I'll delicately peel off your brain. Muscles. Bones. Organs. Nerves. I'll slice them thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of times."

-In the end, you will be the one to lose.

"So confident or are you pretending to be. Maybe you're just underestimating me? Fine. Your alias is King of Death, right? I'll ask you. Answer well. I can inflict the worst pain on you. Speak."

A thousand years of decay in her eyes.

"Aren't you afraid of death? You? A thing like you?"

"....."

I looked down at a millennium.

"I'm sorry."

"Threatening me like that won't change anything. It won't make any difference."

"....."

"The Sword Emperor told me."

You.

You have talent.

An incredible talent.

Of course, you don't have any talent in martial arts.

But regardless, you have a very rare talent.

"I'm not afraid of death."

Precisely because I've overcome it.

I've overcome it until now and I will in the future.

That's why.

He saw that in me.

"The Sword Emperor chose me."

"....."



I felt it.

The grip on my neck loosening.

Little by little.

"The Sword Emperor never betrayed you, Elder. He never broke his promise with you."

"I..."

"I waited six years. Six whole years for the Sword Emperor to clear the 99th floor. That should be enough, enough for a person to give up on themselves."

"So..."

"It just took a little longer than that."

"I thought you were dead."

A voice minced to pieces.

"Of course... Of course, I thought you were dead. No. It's as good as being dead. What is this? Don't lie to me. You, the Sword Emperor, didn't take much long to reach the 99th floor. You're the Sword Emperor. You're invincible. You left to conquer the tower alone. But why... why did it take so long? Don't lie to me. Why..."

"Skill Card, Open."

I stretched my hand towards the Elder's face.

Before her eyes.

Perhaps a bit of light and letters were engraved in her pupils.

+

[Sword Constellation]

Rank: A+

Effect: From another world, he cleared his world's tower up to floor 99 but failed on the 100th. Unsatisfied, he was unable to give up on his earthly desires, and has become a spirit.

He cannot physically affect anything in this world, but is able to communicate with the holder of this skill.

Be awestruck by his skill and experience, and ask him for guidance!

\*Only the holder of this skill is able to feel his presence.

\*Skill copied from Marcus Calenbury.

+

It was an undeniable truth.

"....."

At first, the strength in her grip faded.

"...No. This is your failure, your defeat. A Constellation? What's the point of conquering the tower even as a Constellation? You've become a god."

-That's why.

Then, the sharp angle of her brows crumbled.

-I never used the power of a Constellation. Not until now and nor will I use it in the future.

Every time I translated and voiced out what the Guardian Spirit said, the pillars that had supported the Grey Spider for a millennium, one by one, collapsed.

-I didn't use the power of messaging. I let go of the faith that gathered. You can think of it as an excuse, but I did my utmost to race. I wanted to remain human, even as a ghost. I know that it's a ridiculous story.

The expressionless look on her cheeks fell apart.

-Grey Spider.

"....."

-It's quite late.

Finally, the sneer on her lips crumbled.

-I'm sorry.

---

# Chapter 307:

## Reunion (3)

---

I translated the Guardian Spirit's words.

"He says he's sorry."

"....."

"For being late."

The Elder's breath slowed down. It might have even stopped for a moment.

"Ha....."

I couldn't see her face. The brim of her pointed hat was too wide. The shadow it cast was deep. Her eyes were hidden by her bangs.

I could only hear the sound of her grinding her teeth in a sneer.

"Ha."

As if living flesh was being ground on a millstone.

The Elder's life was being finely ground on her teeth. All that was left was a sneer scattering in the air around her.

"He's apologizing now?"

[Quest Progress.]

"It's just too late for that now,"

[The Incarnation of Love and Lust nods in agreement.]

"It's a ridiculous notion."

[The Incarnation of Love and Lust acknowledges your progress.]

"Surely you're not blaming me? After all, I have lived for over a thousand years, but one hundred and fifty years is just too long for a human. It's too long to be stuck on a single floor. Who could imagine spending one hundred and fifty years trying to break through?"

[The quest progresses.]

"It's too long, idiot."

[The Incarnation of Love and Lust declares quest completion.]

"It's just too damn long."

[Quest Cleared.]

[The temporary quest you participated in has ended.]



[All disciples of the Incarnation of Love and Lust are granted the right to advance to the next floor.]

"....."

Before I knew it, the Elder was holding my collar with both hands. She was a godslayer, a witch who nailed six constellations, the master of all spiders, and had five fingers.

"...This kid. You're the successor of the Sword Emperor."

-Yes.

"He wouldn't have chosen just anyone as his successor. Your lineage boasts tradition and legends. Even if I didn't care, you were always showing off."

-Of course.

"If this kid fails, you won't be able to reach the 100th floor either."

-Unfortunately, that becomes more likely.

Beyond the Elder's shoulder, the Guardian Spirit stood silently with his arms crossed.

The two conversed using my words as a shaky bridge.

"If you only chose him as a disciple because he can use Aura, I'll kill him."

-It's surprisingly up to you to decide who you kill.

"Draw your sword."

Thud.

The Elder let go of my collar.

She took a step back, then another.

Finally, her hair swayed, revealing her expression.

"It's not the gods who decide who can climb to the 51st floor. Tell those Constellations to get lost. Quests? Damn it. Go eat shit."

The Elder looked straight at me while pointing her staff.

"I'll test you, successor of the Sword Emperor."

"....."

"If you're too weak to climb the 99th floor, just despair here. By now, you've become a god after passing the 40th floor, having been treated like one by ignorant beings, enjoying all luxuries. At least kneel before me to show you're just a human. Admit to your people that you've been lying all this time. Even if you don't have the strength to reach the 100th floor, at least free your people from the oppression of lies. I'll question your qualification."

I glanced at the Guardian Spirit.

He showed no reaction.

So be it.

"I don't think Constellations are gods."

"They are just beings who can do a bit more than others. Calling them gods won't change anything. Grey Spider, whether it's the hunters who persecuted you in the past or you who now rule over hunters, to me, it's all the same."

I unbuckled my sword sheath from my belt.

"But that's just my opinion."

And I let go of it.

[The Goddess of Protection remains silent.]

Thud.

The Holy Sword fell to the ground, emitting a noise.

Having once led the Constellation Killer to another world, torn to pieces, then gathered by my hand to regain its full power, the Goddess of Protection, known as the Holy Sword, silently accepted its fall.

"I enjoy fighting according to my opponent's perspective."

I took a stance.

There was no sword.

Just like the Grey Spider, I only had five fingers.

"That way, I can completely shatter them."

I clenched my right fist.

"Come at me."

"I'll break you without borrowing the power of a Constellation."

I beckoned with my left hand, a cheap taunt.

".....Really."

Seeing that, the Elder, who had only let out a grating laugh until then, finally burst into laughter.

She took off her hat.

"It's clear that the Sword Emperor chose you for your personality, if nothing else."

Thud.

The black pointed hat fell to the ground.

"I chose magic because it allowed me to kill faster and more. I would have to fight each of the five races and subjugate the gods one by one with my fists. It was a simple choice for efficiency."

Her staff dropped.

Her thick robe dropped.

Lastly, the black hairpin holding her hair broke in her grip.

"I didn't neglect learning how to fight with my fists, though. Little one."

Her ash-colored hair flowed down.

"You might not know, but I am a genius among geniuses."

"Hmm. It's irrelevant to the current situation, but I'm reminded of an old saying about the world's most annoying person. I thought of it every time I saw the Sword Emperor, but now looking at you, Grey Spider, I'm reminded of the same words. I wonder why? Maybe because you two are a match made in heaven."

"Got wisdom teeth?"

"What?"

"Do you have wisdom teeth in your mouth?"

"...Yes?"

"Good for you."

The Elder crouched and assumed a fighting stance.

"If you lose a molar, use your wisdom tooth to fill it. Little one."

In an instant.

Her figure vanished.

---

The shock arrived before the sound.

Bang...!!



My skull twisted. Then, a loud noise echoed in my head, not my ears. The pain followed.

I realized that the Grey Spider's fist had struck my right cheek.

Right in front of me, the Elder stood with her fist clenched, laughing.

"Wow—oh—"

Aura.

Acceleration.

"Sword Emperor's girlfriend sure has a punch—"

"Tooth number 26. The first molar."

In the accelerated timeline, the Grey Spider muttered.

Bang!

On the opposite cheek, a sharp pain exploded.

"Tooth number 45. The premolar."

"-----"

"Oops. Two corn kernels are already gone."

Something whizzed past my eyes.

It was a bloodied tooth.

The Elder caught my tooth, ejected from my mouth, and deliberately rolled it in her palm.

"I find it weird that you're losing your teeth this early. Ah, I forgot to ask your age. Do you still have baby teeth? You'll get permanent teeth as you age, so take care of them."

"Okay."

I smiled.

"I'm okay with this kind of thing."

Then, like a snake, I reached out and twisted the Elder's wrist. As I faked a twist, the Elder resisted, not wanting to be dragged around.

But that was exactly what I wanted.

I relaxed my grip.

Like releasing a rubber band, my body shot forward.

Thump...!!

My forehead struck her face. It was a hammering headbutt. A squishy sensation vibrated on my forehead.

"You, motherfucker, son of a bitch—"

The Elder's nose bled profusely in mid-air.

Unfortunately, it couldn't be helped. Like me, the Elder must have strengthened her body with Aura, but when a sturdy forehead meets a sturdy nose bone, it's clear what would break.

"You shouldn't bleed like a child at your age, Elder."

I threw a punch.

"You're too old for this lack of dignity."

"I'll turn you into an old man by knocking out all your teeth!"

"Then I'll rejuvenate you, Elder. See? My nature is a bit better than yours, proven by..."

My tooth flew out.

"Wow, haha! Ah ha!"

My speech slurred. Losing three teeth affected my pronunciation, but what does it matter? I can use telepathy with Aura, so it's no problem.

"This is incredible!"

"You're insane!"

A crack sounded somewhere. It felt like a rib. Why am I not sure even though it's my body? Because before I could check which part broke, I had already smashed the Elder's shin. So we each belatedly realized our own pain.

"Aaaaah!!"

"Damn it, shit."

Screaming, I stomped on the Elder's foot. She swore and hit my jaw. Hits came from everywhere. We exchanged shouts of pain.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth is speechless.]

[The Lonely Seeker watches the duel.]

[The Warhorse of the Eternal Plains is dumbfounded.]

Suddenly, the Constellations also watched our brawl. But it was brief. As soon as the message in my head stopped, the Grey Spider lifted her right foot and slammed it down, Kwaang! Whatever magic was in that kick, I didn't know, but the noisy messages vanished instantly.

"Get lost!"

The Grey Spider's face, soaked in blood, contorted like a demon. Her roar echoed over the city she ruled for a thousand years.

"This is my fight! I'm not asking the star-headed bastards to gawk! If any Constellation spouts nonsense again, I'll hunt them to the depths of hell and rip their souls apart! So, shut up!"

What now?

"That's cool!"

"And you, shut up too!"

My jaw shattered. No joke, it really broke. But I didn't stop laughing. I reconnected the broken bone with Aura and replaced the severed nerves. The same for my ribs and just now, my left knee.

The Elder did the same.

Despite our battered bodies, our fists didn't slow down.

"The Sword Emperor says he hates you!"

-What?

The silent Guardian Spirit was startled. Regardless, I laughed heartily, throwing punches freely.

"He said he ran to the 99th floor because he hated you!"

-What are you saying, you punk!

"He was sick of being stalked by you!"

-No! Hey! When did I do that?!

"He said he felt peaceful for 150 years without seeing you!"

Lies and slander work wonders in provocation, especially in a situation far from ordinary, like exchanging punches, with broken noses, crushed feet, and split shins. Bullshitting truly is the way of life.

"This bastard is really fucking crazy?"

The Elder was furious, nearly fainting.

"Hey, hey! You're putting too much force in your punches! You'll tire before me! Ever heard of conserving energy?!"

"What kind of shitty advice is that!"



"Apologize to the Sword Emperor! He did nothing wrong! Don't you feel sorry for him! You cold-blooded... unbelievable!"

"Ah, shit. Ah, where did this lunatic come from..."

Good.

Her breathing was disrupted.

At that moment, thump...! I powerfully hit the Elder's side.

"-----Shit."

The Elder's face soured.

"I won't use the power of the Constellations!"

I burst out laughing.

"But I never said I won't use my tongue!"

"What kind of damned, wretched, crazy, ah, wow,"

"Okay. An opening."

I hit again.

"-----!!"

"Grey Spider! You are strong!"

Seizing the moment her rhythm faltered, I hit more, and more at the same spot. The rhythm shifted entirely to me. Blood rushed to my head, and endorphins flowed.

"Just that I am a bit stronger! Hahaha!"

"Ugh..."

"Why? Because I'm in front of the Sword Emperor! You can't afford to fall apart in front of the Sword Emperor you've longed to see after 150 years! To prove you're better, superior! But I don't have that! No way!"

Slap.

I stomped the ground.

"I've already made a fool of myself in front of the Sword Emperor!"

Then I launched an uppercut.

With all my strength.

"With one more embarrassing moment, what difference does it make?!"

"-----"

Time froze.

Ignoring the pain, I punched first, and the Elder staggered, wobbling in the position where her chin was hit.

"What the hell..."

I bet she had the most unjust expression in the universe.

"That, just like the Sword Emperor, you bastard..."

Thud.

Finally staggering, the Elder collapsed, spreading webs on the ground she conquered. She was unconscious, unable to close her eyes, glaring at me.

"Sigh."

However, standing on one's feet is greater than staring with two eyes.

I stood tall and laughed loudly.

"I won!"

And roared.

Loud enough to echo through the city.

"I won!"

-.....

No response came.

The Constellations were chased away by the Grey Spider. The ordinary followers and other spiders, busy fighting around the Tower, couldn't spare attention here. Everyone evacuated, fearing getting caught in our fight.

Only the Guardian Spirit watched me with an indescribable expression.

"See! Did you see!"

-.....

"My victory! I defeated the one you left behind, regretted, and thought you had abandoned! With my hands! My two fists! How about that!"

-.....

"You're proud, aren't you!?"

"Too proud to go insane, right!?"

Why?

-Yeah....

The Guardian Spirit looked terribly embarrassed.

-Kim Gong-Ja, I think I'm going insane because of you....

Of course.

The ultimate winner is me...



# Chapter 308: Floor by Floor (1)

---

"King of Death... no, Mr. Gong-Ja. I'm sorry, but may I have a word...?"

"Surprisingly, Apothecary, you have the right to speak not just a word, but a hundred, even a thousand, as long as the listener is generous enough. And not to brag, but I'm quite a generous person."

"Mr. Gong-Ja, you are an idiot right now...."

That was the first thing the Apothecary said after examining me for 30 seconds.

"Not in a derogatory sense, but literally. Like, really, literally an idiot. Not just a normal idiot, but a massive one."

"That's a bit harsh."



"In that case, I'll call you pickled radish...."

"What?"

"Huh?"

I tilted my head in confusion, and so did the Apothecary. An incomprehensibly long moment passed.

The Apothecary continued nonchalantly.

"How can you still be alive in this condition...? Right now, I could write a thesis on Mr. Gong-Ja's condition. This is how it is with the arm. Like this. Yap."

"Aaaargh!?"

"You see how easily it bends, right? The curve is very smooth, just like this. Yap."

"Yeeek! Ouch, oww, eeeek!"

"Yep. The bones are shattered. You know the crumbs left at the bottom of a bag after crushing instant noodles...? Mr. Gong-Ja, your whole body is in that state right now... including your jaw and skull."

"I give up! I give up! Okay, stop bending it! I'm dying!"

"Talking about death like you were alive to begin with..."

But I am alive!

"Anyway, I'll treat you."

The Apothecary sighed.

"But my skill has a stronger backlash the more severe the injury is. I'll try to assist with potions as much as possible, but the pain will still be immense..."

"Uh, if we rate the pain just now as level 1, what level would the pain accompanying the treatment be?"

"Don't act like a baby over a slime hit."

Indeed.

Am I being told to die?

I've lived a life without shame.

"Mr. Gong-Ja, you have two choices."

"Choosing between life and death has always been a difficult question for me."

"Would you like to be treated all at once? Or would you prefer to be treated little by little, starting with the arms, legs, intestines, head, shoulders, feet, knees and then feet?"

"Please enlighten me on the difference."

"Well, it's either enduring a pain beyond death all at once, or experiencing a near-death level of pain several times..."

"So it's a choice between death and death..."

So, it was a choice between dying once to live and keep dying to live. Even Admiral Yi would find such a repetitive choice difficult. It's certainly not something to tell the troops. Even the most patriotic soldiers would flee screaming "Hell Joseon\*."

\*\*\*The phrase is a mixture of the words "Hell" and "Joseon", meaning that "(South) Korea is a hellish, hopeless society". Although the term began with private individuals on the internet, it was later adopted by the mass media.

"So... what will you choose?"

"I'll choose death!"

"Sorry, I don't understand which option you mean..."

"Well, it's always better to get hit with a stick all at once."

I spoke based on my years of life experience.

"Just treat me thoroughly. It'll hurt for a moment and be over."

"Alright."

The Apothecary took out a glass cylinder from her pocket.

A thick, red liquid like hangover soup swirled inside the bottle.

"Now, please lie down."

I lay down.

"Close your eyes."

I closed them.

"Then... please survive."

I survived.

"...Yes?"

There was no answer.

Feeling an ominous sense, I blinked my eyes—

---

Blink.

When I opened my eyes, I saw purple irises right in front of me.

It was the Tower Master's face.

-.....

The Tower Master, expressionless, looked down and murmured.

-...This is a bit problematic.

Tower Master Jaa Soo-Jeong?

-You shouldn't have come here yet.

What?

-Please go back.

What are you talking about?

Wait a minute.

Where is this...?

---

“—Hup!”

I suddenly sat up.

The back of my neck was damp.

"Wh-What just happened? I felt like I really experienced the

afterlife..."

"Are you awake yet?"

A familiar voice reached me.

The Elder, the Grey Spider, was lying on a bed next to me, leaning against it.

She, too, seemed to have received treatment, wrapped in bandages all over her body, sipping some unidentified red juice through a straw.

"Hey, that healer you brought is amazing. A whole year of convalescence reduced to just a week. I'd like to hire her for our tower."

"Oh, well. The Apothecary is a bit overpowered... Wait a minute. A week? It's been a week?"

"You've been yelling like a headless chicken for 173 hours, 31 minutes, and 26 seconds, so roughly a week, give or take."



Unbelievable.

[Shiny congratulates the brave hero on his safe return.]

The Holy Sword on the bed hummed softly.

That's impossible. I just closed my eyes and opened them again.

But in that brief moment, a week had passed, which felt utterly unreal.

"What happened?"

"What? To my life? It's rubbish."

"Not that. I remember defeating you and capturing you as a prisoner."

I had triumphed over the Elder, the Grey Spider.

But the moment of glory was brief. Severely injured, I had to leave the battlefield. Somehow, I managed to contact our world and called the Apothecary for treatment, which I received that same day.

...Treatment?

Is that what we can call it?

It would be more appropriate to call it a newly developed, advanced assassination technique.

Anyway.

"The battle between us and the overall war, it's not over yet, right?"

Indeed.

The Magic Tower had lost their leader, the Elder and the Anti-Magic Alliance seemed to have the upper hand. Yet, despite this, the spiders refused to surrender, barricading themselves in the five spires.

Obviously, the Anti-Magic Alliance capitalized on the momentum and surrounded the spires.

A tedious and exhausting siege began.

I was asking about the outcome of that siege.

"I understand what you're expecting, but nothing has been decided yet."

The Grey Spider shrugged her shoulders.

"Sure, the kids must have been quite shaken by my capture. But surrender is a separate issue. Unless defeat becomes absolutely certain, they'll never raise the white flag."

"Even if I threaten them with your life?"

"Well, of course, some will be swayed."

The Grey Spider smirked.

"But you wouldn't do that."

"Right. That's true."

I nodded.

"You're not planning to escape and fight a second time, are you?"

"I really fucking want to... But no. As much as I despise the unfair and cowardly tactics used against me, a duel is a duel, and a test is a test. Unless you try to kill me, I'll behave as a prisoner for now."

The Grey Spider muttered about being sealed with triple-layered binding magic, making escape difficult.

Surprisingly, she seemed quite calm about her defeat.

"Ah. Maybe you're trying to impress the Sword..."

"Do you really want to die?"

"Strong denial often means the opposite..."

"Strong denial, indeed. You're dead meat."

"Aaaaack!!"

"Yaaack!?"

Describing the recent incident, the Grey Spider lifted her bandaged leg and struck my waist, causing my still-healing ribs to scream in agony. Her leg bones, not fully healed either, crumbled as well.

It was a beautiful harmony.

As a result, I gasped and clutched my waist while the Grey Spider grunted, clutching her leg.

"Oof... Ouch...."

"Damn... Bastard...."

Groans filled the ward. Neither of us had the luxury to blame each other for our foolishness. We were simply in very, very much pain.

True pain leaves you speechless.

The Guardian Spirit looked at us as if thinking, what are these fools doing?

-Are you two idiots?

"Sword Emperor says that since 15,110 years ago, he's only loved you..."

-I swear, I'll kill you!

"Oh, it's destined to be."

I shrugged off the pain.

That's life.

It's my life... Kim Gong-Ja's life.

[Shiny looks at you with worried eyes, thinking you're overdoing it today.]

My whole body hurts, that's why. Please understand.

"Anyway, the fight isn't over yet. It's not over until it's over."

"Hmm. Excuse me, but hasn't the situation already concluded? The leader was captured and surrounded. What more could happen for the situation to be deemed decisively lost?"

"Well... Hmmm."

The Grey Spider narrowed her eyes and glanced at me.

"It might have come to a conclusion by now."

There was something ominous in her eyes.

"...What do you mean?"

"Our Magic Tower extends its tentacles across dozens of worlds, kid. Although we gathered a large army this time, that wasn't our entire force. If the kids holed up in the spires are the main force, then there's another group that can be called the 'Guerrilla Force.'"

"While they delay here with a siege, the guerrilla force could have attacked your world."

What?

"Up until a week ago, we couldn't pinpoint your world because you hid underground like a wary mole. But a week ago, you summoned a healer. Our kids likely pinpointed your world's coordinates while you were unconscious!"

The Grey Spider grinned triumphantly.

"What the..."

"Ahh, King of Death. You're indeed strong. I acknowledge that. But remember this lesson from the war. Just being strong



alone doesn't guarantee victory."

The Grey Spider clicked her tongue and waved her fist, probably intending to wag her fingers, but the bandages made it a futile effort.

"You captured me as a prisoner, but we've taken your entire world hostage. If you were a typical psychopath like any other 50th-floor clearing hunter, you'd just shrug it off. But you're different. You're insane but kind."

"This can't be happening..."

"Yeah, King of Death. Your kindness has become your Achilles' heel."

"How could such a foolish strategy be possible..."

".....Hmm?"

The Grey Spider tilted her head.

"Anyway, take this as a good lesson. I'm not a devil, after all. You're young with a bright future ahead. In recognition of accepting your defeat in the duel seriously, I'll consider it a draw. One win, one loss. What a splendid experience."

"Indeed. A truly splendid occasion seems to be unfolding."

"...What's with that attitude? Let's see if you can keep it up when you see your people begging for their lives, pleading for rescue."

The next day.

"Ugor."

A rumbling echoed.

"Annoying flies were clinging on, so I had to swat them a bit harder."

Dozens of unconscious spiders lay on the ground, each one a commander-level mage. Under their command, about six hundred guerrilla force members were tied up outside the building.

Leafanta Aegim stood tall, arms crossed.

"I wanted to resolve misunderstandings through conversation, but they wouldn't listen. I had to use my fists."

"How tragic."

"That's life. Have there been any troubles in Babylon?"

"None at all."

I crunched on potato chips from my bed, waving at him.

"....."

The Grey Spider, lying on the adjacent bed, was gaping in disbelief.

"I'm absolutely fine, except for feeling slightly dead. How about you, son?"

"It's the same as usual."

"What about Babylon?"

"No big issues. Just some small ones. Besides these guys, all sorts of riffraff from various worlds swarmed in."

"Is that so? And then?"

"Even though our world is new, word has spread by now. Those who can actually learn their lessons won't dare to mess with Babylon anymore."

"Hmm."

I put down the bag of chips and looked at the Grey Spider.

"That's how it is."

"Anyway, take it as a good lesson. I'm not a devil, either. You're young, and in respect of your graceful defeat in the duel, I'll go easy on you. I claim one victory. You have one

defeat."

I grinned broadly.

"What a splendid experience this will be!"

The Grey Spider slowly wrapped her head in her hands.

Then muttered in a voice cursing the universe.

"Can someone beat this kid for me..."

Hang in there.

Life is beautiful, isn't it?

---

# Chapter 309: Floor by Floor (2)

---

It took ten days for me to get discharged from the hospital.

Ten days was a bit of a stretch, to be honest.

"Mr. Gong-Ja, there's no such thing as complete recovery in this world."

Apothecary said while checking my bandages.

"You may look fully healed, but your body always loses something... always."

"But I feel perfectly fine now?"

"That's precisely the illusion."

Apothecary sighed.

"For instance, you contain Aura in your muscles and blood circulation. It's great because it makes your muscles incredibly efficient, but on the flip side, it means you'd be terribly weakened if you couldn't use Aura."

"Well, it probably doesn't matter much, does it?"

I shrugged.

"I'm quite skilled with Aura, after all."

"If we were in the outside world, you'd be dead by now, Mr. Gong-Ja. There's neither Aura nor mana out there."

I fell silent.

Apothecary continued wrapping the bandage expressionlessly.

" While it's true that we can't return to the outside world, we

wouldn't survive if we went there now. You understand, right? Mr. Gong-Ja's body hasn't just gained benefits... it has adapted to a specific environment and is now dependent on that environment to survive."

"....."

"Alright. That's done."

Apothecary finished bandaging me tightly.

"Fighting isn't romantic, and wounds aren't medals of honor. At least not to people like me... Please resolve conflicts with words rather than your body whenever possible."

"I can't promise I won't get hurt again in the future."

However, I added.

"But I'll keep in mind your advice to resolve issues with words as much as possible."



With that, as soon as I was discharged, I went straight to the five spires, the headquarters of the Magic Tower.

To resolve things with words.

---

"Ah. Ah. Mic test, mic test."

Wheeeing-

Following the Apothecary's advice to refrain from using Aura for a while, I did not use Telepathy. Instead, I used a magic item, a voice amplifier, and brought it to my mouth. It wasn't as clear as Telepathy, but my voice still sounded quite good.

"Ah, ah. Can everyone at the Magic Tower hear me-?"

-.....

It was silent.

There were no windows in the spires.

Just walls gleaming black like obsidian.

Even if we couldn't see them, the spiders inside must have all pricked up their ears. Of course, our side, the members of the Anti-Magic Alliance, were also intently focusing on every word I said.

"You no longer have a chance of winning."

In the midst of thousands of spiders and thousands of followers at a standoff, I spoke leisurely.

"The Grey Spider has been defeated and captured by me. The guerrilla force you were relying on as your last hope has been captured while attacking our world. Frankly, your chances of winning are zero."

I turned my head and gestured with my eyes.

"Ugor."

Uburka, who had been waiting behind me, nodded. He brought a neatly prepared bundle and stacked it in front of the spire.

The spiders of the Magic Tower rolled up in blankets.

These were the prisoners who had invaded our world and were captured.

"Damn it!"

"Untie me! Untie me, you bastard! Untie me!"

"Don't scream... It's just more embarrassing....."

The spiders wriggled with only their heads poking out from the blankets. From a distance, they probably looked like caterpillars.

I comfortably sat on top of the prisoners' bodies.

"Ouch!"

"Hey, you're heavy!"

"As you can see, all the commanders of your esteemed guerrilla force have been captured. Not to mention, we've also captured hundreds of regular spiders. In a nutshell, your hopes have been thoroughly crushed."

At that moment.

-We surrender!

From one of the five spires, a voice rang out.

-Our Magic Tower's 5th Branch has always admired Mr. Gong-Ja! We have been discussing surrender internally and we want to finally speak up! We apologize! Please, show us mercy, King of Death! If you tell me to bang my head on the ground, I'll do it all the way from here to there! If you want me to roll over like a dog, I'll do it! No, we are already dogs! Woof! Long live the King of Death!

Hmm.

Impressive.

"No, no, you don't have to go that far..."

-You traitors from the 5th Branch!!

A furious voice erupted from another spire.

-How could you humans do this!

-What? Didn't you hear? We're not humans, we're dogs. Dogs. We can do anything as dogs.

-You bastards! Have you forgotten the grace of the Elder? You were even the head spokesperson!

-Well, that position was supposed to be rotated weekly from the 2nd to the 5th Branch. But you've been subtly dumping it on me for 500 years. Do you know how it feels to be dumped on for 500 years, you bastards?

-Why are you bringing that up now?

-Then when should I? When you're all dead and lying in

your graves? Goodbye, trash. It was sorrowful to meet you, and living with you was hell. I'm deserting!

Hmm.

It's remarkable, isn't it?

'It's too good to just listen without doing anything.'

As I was silently admiring, another voice started broadcasting from the opposite spire.

-If even the 5th Branch surrenders, won't we lose our last chance...? Let's surrender. Just do it.

-Why are you saying that now!?

-We were in charge of communicating with the guerrilla force until the end... They say that this kid's world is no joke. There are more than two hunters at the level of Constellation Killer. There were even reports that they saw the actual Constellation Killer...

-That must be a lie! You believe that?

-That's not it. I have a good intuition... I felt the same when the 6th Branch was crushed by the Sword Emperor. My intuition tells me if we continue the siege, we won't even get the broth...

-Intuition, what intuition! Ah, I'm so frustrated!

-Huh? What? Are the 5th and 3rd Branches leaning towards surrender? Then there's no need to see more. Hello! This is the 2nd Branch! We'll surrender too! But if we raise the white flag now, will you spare our lives?

-Ah, King of Death! Please remember who surrendered first! The 5th Branch! Count to five on your fingers! Remember the 5th Branch!

Okay. Now I get it.

I know exactly what I need to do now.

"Please wait a moment."

I hurriedly ran somewhere, to the building that had served as a temporary treatment center for the past ten days.

Thud.

Pushing open the wooden door, I found the Grey Spider crouching in a corner, holding her head.

“What...?”

Seeing me enter, the Grey Spider lifted her face. Her expression was far more haggard than it had been this morning.

“Why are you here all of a sudden?”

“Ah, don't mind me. It's nothing.”

I took out a high-definition smartphone and took a picture of the Grey Spider.

“I just thought capturing this moment would be a precious



memory to tease you with later on.”

“.....So, you came all the way here just to enjoy my humiliation? Right now? In the middle of negotiating surrender with my children? Just to make fun of me?”

“Uh....”

I blinked.

“Maybe that’s one way to put it?”

“This crazy ba—”

Thump.

I closed the door again and returned to the siege site. As I was leaving the building, I heard the Grey Spider shouting something from behind, but I couldn't afford to listen. I was in the midst of intense negotiations, after all. There was no time for distractions.

"Mic test. Mic test. Yes, I understand. Of course, we are willing to accept your surrender."

I spoke earnestly.

"Obviously, we will ensure your lives. If desired, we can even provide you with a place to live. However, you must relinquish the exclusive rights you enjoyed on the 50th floor and free the other worlds you've colonized."

A response came immediately.

-Your Majesty! Such reasonable terms! A new era has dawned after long years of tyranny! Long live the King of Death! Long live! This is the 5th Branch speaking!

-Shut your trap!

-We're not the ones making this decision. It's up to the Elder... But we'll cooperate...

-Yeah, as long as we live, it's fine.

Voices of various tones responded.

The responses translated into outcomes.

Over the next half-day, one surrender followed another.

“The 5th Branch of the Magic Tower, the fifth net, the Net of Authority, containing four hundred and eighty-one members. We all surrender to the King of Death!”

The gates of the spires, previously shut tight like a shark’s teeth, gradually opened one by one.

Even as the gates opened, the followers of the Anti-Magic Alliance remained vigilant. They watched the surrender procession with tense eyes.

Fortunately, no mishaps occurred.

“The 3rd Branch... The nest of the Net of Sorrow, containing one thousand three hundred and thirty-three members, we surrender...”

The spiders, lined up in rows, knelt before me and my followers standing behind me.

“The 2nd Branch of the Magic Tower, containing seven hundred and thirty-six members from the nest of the Net of Rage. We surrender peacefully, please just spare our lives!”

Thump. Ordinary spiders hidden under their robes took them off. Thump. Commanders wearing conical hats removed them and respectfully placed them in front of where they knelt. Thump. Thousands of staffs, regardless of rank, were laid on the ground.

Thump.

Thump.

"....."

Thump.

Silently, with lips firmly sealed, the spiders, too, surrendered.

The reign of the Millennium Magic Tower thus came to an end.

"....."

The followers lined up behind me watched the scene in silence.

There were those who, unable to contain their anger, wanted to lash out at the surrendered prisoners.

How could there not be?

[The Incarnation of Love and Lust leaves the decision of the prisoners' fate to the King of Death.]

Despite their feelings, a voice intervened.

[The Warhorse of the Eternal Plains leaves the decision of the prisoners' fate to the King of Death.]

[The Bell That Rouses the Dead leaves the decision of the

prisoners' fate to the King of Death.]

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth leaves the decision of the prisoners' fate to the King of Death.]

[The Lonely Seeker leaves the decision of the prisoners' fate to the King of Death.]

All the Constellations participating in this war transferred their rights over the prisoners to me.

That was the 'quest reward' I had requested from the Constellations.

I had made enormous contributions in this war, indisputably the greatest. I was in a position where I could demand almost anything from the Constellations, and so, I acquired the right to decide the fate of all the prisoners.

“.....How can we simply let these people live?”

“Be quiet.”

When one Apostle, unable to suppress his rage, started to speak, another Apostle from [The Incarnation of Love and Lust] calmly interrupted.

“It’s what the constellations want.”

"....."

“And it’s what I wish too. If it were left to us, what would follow is hell. Torture, interrogation, humiliation, all sorts of vengeance. A bloody festival would commence. It’s better to leave it to an outsider like the King of Death.”

The Apostles fell silent.

I didn’t expect them to fully accept this decision. I didn’t even think about it.

That's why I planned to take the spiders to the World of the Lone Child.

To a continent once dominated by the Earth Spirit Tribe.

‘Distance makes the heart grow fonder, as they say.’

Not much will change from now on.

Just one more race, the Witch Clan, will join the council of races in the Fire River Council.

As evening approached, the blood that could have stained the ground instead dyed the sky, bringing the sunset.

“In the end, the 1st Branch didn’t surrender.”

[Assistant Writer] muttered.

“What are you going to do, King of Death?”

"....."

The last bastion of the Magic Tower refused to surrender. Even though four out of the five spires had surrendered, the last one adamantly locked its iron doors, insisting on a fight to the death.



The black wall of the tower was illuminated by the red sunset.

“Maybe a scapegoat is needed after all. Look behind you. No one is saying anything, but they’re all seething inside.”

[Assistant Writer] was right.

"....."

"....."

The Apostles, including regular followers, glared at the last unyielding spire. Unresolved grievances and anger that may never dissipate were simmering.

Even the spiders who had already surrendered sensed the atmosphere and quietly lowered their heads.

“I understand.”

All the forces on the 50th floor tacitly consented to a

massacre.

“You are a hero.”

[Assistant Writer] said.

“A hero who liberated the 50th floor. But above all, a hero must first choose whose side to take. I hope you don’t make a mistake at this point.”

"....."

Something happened just as I was about to open my mouth to retort.

“Father.”

Thump.

A large hand covered my entire shoulder.

I turned my head to look up at the figure beside me.

“Don’t worry, Father. I understand the situation.”

Uburka.

“Send me to that spire.”

My son smiled wickedly, showing his fangs.

“Perhaps I can make them surrender.”

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# Chapter 310: Floor by Floor (3)

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"....."

I gazed at my son for a while.

Silence ensued. .

Uburka, who brushed his teeth with Aura daily, had sparkling white fangs. The evening sunset lingered between his teeth.

"Uburka."

I spoke.

The silence had been around for a while now, so my voice continued uninterrupted.

"If I send you there, you'll become an emissary recommending surrender. Do you understand what that means?"

Uburka chuckled softly.

"I know. Everything that daddy knows and worries about, I know it all. Yet, I also know that daddy has no choice but to grant my request. Send me."

"I swear. There's no son as rebelliously filial as you..."

"Ugor. Can such an adjective even be attached to 'filial'?"

"Why not? Break the bounds of common sense, my son. Language is something we create."

Our father-son conversation leisurely flowed into the evening sky.

".....Wait, you two. What kind of nonsense are you spouting?"

[Assistant Writer] spoke.

It seemed she was dumbfounded by our conversation.

"Well, language is indeed something we create. Getting trapped by the specter of language and losing sight of its essence is a pitfall that a writer must absolutely avoid. So, if my words don't conform to grammar, it's not that I'm wrong, it's that grammar hasn't caught up with me."

"Thank you for agreeing, Assistant Writer. I'm glad that we're on the same wavelength."

"But let's toss that aside and feed it to the stray dogs. You're sending an emissary to the enemy's heartland? So, your..."

"My son. Ugor."

".....Right. I won't ask how you ended up with a species resembling an ogre as your son. I generally avoid meddling in complicated family matters, and it looks tangled enough to be a computer's power cable. Just tell me what you're planning... You're sending your son into the enemy camp?"

"Yes."

"That's dangerous!"

The [Assistant Writer] frowned deeply, her glasses following suit.

"Don't you see the situation? The First Branch of the Magic Tower is calling for a desperate resistance. In such a circumstance, the enemy lord's son arrives as a hostage? Will they say, 'Come here, have a cup of tea, and then be careful on the stairs when you leave'? Or will they go 'We've captured the vile King of Death's son' and start filming some sort of grim imprisonment drama?"

The reasoning followed Hamusutra's analogy, befitting his Apostle. The decision was opposed by other Apostle-level Hunters of the Anti-Magic Alliance as well.

"The Assistant Writer is right. ...Actually, I don't even know what a grim imprisonment drama is, but let's just say she's right because it's bothersome. The important thing is we've already given them a chance."

"We gave them more than enough chances! Yet they refuse to surrender! King of Death. The mercy you bestowed has been

trampled under their dirty feet. Give the order to attack now. Let Mahos's warriors lead the charge and sweep the spire clean."

".....While annihilating all the spiders might be excessive, one spire as a sacrificial lamb seems appropriate, right?"

[Berserker], the Apostle of the [The Warhorse of the Eternal Plains], and the apostle of [The Incarnation of Love and Lust] each put forth different words and reasons, but their intentions were crystal clear.

They wanted a massacre.

"....."

That's the problem.

[I had no choice but to condone the massacre.]

[I had to agree since that's what they wanted.]



'I would be betraying the Five Great Guild Leaders who acknowledged me as their leader.'

I promised my friends a new era.

They are still guarding our base, working for the lives and safety of ordinary citizens.

Thus, they are not here right now, but in fact, they have as clear a presence as the Guardian Spirit, existing by my side.

"....."

Before I knew it, all the commanders around me were looking at me.

After all, the decision-making power was mine.

I glanced up at the sky.

"Is it evening now?"

The sky on the 50th floor was often cloudy. Through a slight gap, the sunset was bleeding.

Soon, it would turn dark.

A long night was coming.

"Until the dawn breaks and lights up the city."

I looked at the tower.

"That is the time allowed for them."

And then I looked at Uburka.

"Therefore, that is the time allowed for [you]."

I did not add that it was also the time allowed for [me], and therefore for [us].

I did not say that I too would bear the consequences of all the negotiations you conduct in my absence, or the fallout of a failed negotiation. There was no need to say that if I sent you, it was because I trusted you that much, or that if you failed, I would shoulder the responsibility of that failure.

It wasn't because all the Apostles of the Anti-Magic Alliance were eavesdropping on our conversation. Nor was it because the First Branch of the Magic Tower would somehow be listening in.

It was because Uburka had already said it. He knows everything I know and worry about.

Nevertheless, he knows that I have no choice but to grant his request.

Yes, that's known.

We all knew there was no need to add superfluous words.

I simply said,

"My son."

I shook my head and spoke again.

"Chief Warrior."

Uburka bowed deeply.

I tapped his solid and vast forehead with the back of my hand.

"Do what you can, must, and want to do, then come back."

"I heed the family head's command."

The Chief Warrior of the King of Death Family answered.

---

"One night."

I told the Apostles.

"Until dawn breaks. Until daybreak. Whatever you prefer."

"....."

"I know you've already waited a millennium. So, I fully understand how shameless it is to ask you to wait a bit longer."

Then I bowed deeply.

So deeply that my forehead nearly touched the ground.

"Yet despite that, everyone. Could you possibly grant my request?"

"Ah, no."

The Apostles were flustered.

"Wait, King of Death. You don't need to bow for this..."

"That's right! Without you, we wouldn't even dream of attacking the Magic Tower..."

Some voiced their objections out loud, while others hesitated, biting their lips.

Naturally, there were also those who couldn't suppress their boiling breaths.

"Hmm."

"Mm."

But even the most vehement among them did not object.

Exchanging glances and consolidating their thoughts, the Apostles began to speak one by one.

"Alright. We can wait one more night."

"We've waited a millennium for the Millennium Magic Tower, we can wait a bit more... That's fine, then."

"One night, or even a thousand nights, a thousand years more, wouldn't change the first spire bastards' fate."

Good.

"Thank you."

With their agreement, I stood up and turned to Uburka.

"What are you doing? Go on in."

"When the sky brightens, I'll personally lead the vanguard and tear through the Magic Tower's last spider web. You must hurry to persuade them."

"Understood, ugor."

Uburka deeply bowed his head.

Then, without giving anyone a chance to stop him, Uburka ran.

Yes, he ran.

If crossing hundreds of meters in a single step could be called 'running'.

Kwaang!

The entrance to the spire burst open. Bang! Boom! Layers of barriers and hundreds of magical protections on the gate were shredded to pieces. Immediately, from the top of the spire, a warning alarm sounded. In fact, screams were heard inside the spire even before the alarm went off.

-Enemy attack! Enemy attack!

-What, what!? Who is it? What's happening!?

-I am Uburka! The son of the King of Death! I've come here to talk with you!

-What the hell???



-His son? The King of Death's? Just who did he mate with to produce something so unlike!?

-You want to talk and you bash down the door like a madman!

-Hahaha! Conversation is a privilege only the powerful can enjoy. The weak requesting a conversation is something you wouldn't even listen to. I know. I know everything. So first, let me prove my strength!

-What do you know?! Hey, hey! Wait! Just, just wait! This is seriously no joke.....

-Requesting backup! Requesting backup! Our forces are being annihilated.....!

Kwoong.

With someone's scream as the last sound, the spire's iron doors closed again. It seemed they had prepared a backup door in case of a breach.

Impressive preparedness.

Who in the universe could have prepared for someone like Uburka?

"....."

"....."

The Apostles on our side were enveloped in silence.

"Uh....."

The [Assistant Writer] barely opened her mouth.

"A pretty unique emissary for a surrender proposal, huh...?"

"It's not wrong, though. If you're powerless, no one listens to you."

"Well, I'm convinced that you're his father and he's your son. You two are like two peas in a pod."

“My heart is much better-looking, though.”

“Huh?”

“What?”

Night had fallen.

The spire, already like obsidian, became even quieter as darkness and pitch black merged. It was so silent, it was almost as if it didn't exist, belying the chaos that Uburka had caused upon his arrival.

No voice or footsteps were heard.

"....."

Time passed.

I sat cross-legged on the bare ground, meditating. The Apothecary scolded me for relying too much on Aura, but now was the time to gather it through ki meditation.

No one disturbed me in my solitary meditation.

Ordinary disciples were scared off by the formidable prowess I had shown ten days ago. The Apostles left me alone out of consideration.

At the moment, I was a father who had sent his son to a death ground.

“Aren’t you worried?”

The only one who didn’t feel the need to tiptoe around me was the ‘Grey Spider.’

She approached with her staff, using it as support. Clack, clack, and then she plopped down next to me.

“Damn. The thought of living like this for a while drives me crazy.”

“Hasn’t your magic recovered a bit already?”

“It is recovering. But that healer you brought warned me that using magic again could kill me. Ha! One gesture from me, and they’d be dead. And now this little shit talks to me like that, unbelievable.”

The Grey Spider grumbled.

“Is everyone from your world so brazen? They all seem to be...”

“Why do you do it?”

“Huh? Do what?”

“You heard that using magic might kill you. Why are you preparing to use it?”

The Grey Spider sighed deeply.

Far away, three hundred torches flickered in the darkness. But her gaze wasn't on them.

Her eyes were fixed on the first spire, standing silently in the distance.

“I’ll need to use it soon.”

“You acknowledged your defeat as a duelist, didn’t you?”

“I did. But I can’t just stand by and watch those bastards die.”

The Grey Spider said it nonchalantly.

“What can I do? I have to die with them.”

“You’re loyal.”

I circulated the Aura slowly throughout my body.

“Charumu, right? The one who fled the Magic Tower with me. That kid stabbed his superior so efficiently, and from the second to the fifth branch, they showed a League of Legends-worthy change of stance. I thought there’s no loyalty among

you, but...”

“What’s League of Legends?”

“An old game. Don't change the subject.”

“Everyone has someone special to them, isn’t that right?”

The Grey Spider’s voice was still nonchalant.

Then she glanced at the three hundred torches and the Apostles surrounding the first Magic Tower.

“But there are more people who are not special at all.”

“So, listen. Don’t start with that [If you know who's special to you, why did you do that to them?] nonsense. If you want to indulge in moral superiority, go ahead, but at least do it to those bastards too.”

The Grey Spider sighed, her breath heavy with venom.

“Isn’t it funny? [Condemning the Magic Tower.] [Mourning those oppressed by the Magic Tower.] [Therefore, we are innocent victims...] What a bunch of lunatics.”

Her words burned with intensity.

“They’re fake gods, all of them.”

I didn’t respond.

The Grey Spider took a deep breath and exhaled.

“Damned bastards... Talking big about justice, cause, remembrance, but from start to finish, they’re just rationalizing their feelings. It’s the basic principle of cults, right? Tailoring doctrines to fit the situation of the day?”

The night air was no longer chilly.

The anger from the Apostles' forces and the hatred from the Grey Spider had made this night muggy.



The Grey Spider concluded with malice and contempt.

“So, King of Death. The first Magic Tower, my sisters who stepped onto the 50th floor with me, they can’t surrender. Lie flat in front of the self-righteous bastards? Death would be better, wouldn’t it?”

I spoke.

“That's why you'll stand with them.”

“That’s likely how it will end, yes. They’ll probably all die, or worse.”

The Grey Spider's voice lost its heat.

She then spoke again, lightly.

“That’s the natural course of things. That bastard, if he was here, he would definitely spot some bullshit like “I’ll give you 200 ‘likes’ for it”. Right, King of Death?”

---

I gave a bitter smile.

“I’ll refrain from commenting on the Guardian Spirit's statement.”

“Yeah. Don’t say anything. Leaving that guy aside, why did you send your son as an emissary?”

“Are you curious?”

“Not so much curious as disgusted. Seeing you sit here moping makes my stomach turn.”

The Grey Spider narrowed her eyes, seemingly angry.

“Look. You're no different from that Sword Emperor. Always aiming higher and higher, leaving behind those who tried to stay by your side. Wasn’t he your son? If you were worried, you should have stopped him, not...”

“I’m not worried.”

I said.

“I don’t worry about my son.”

"....."

“Uburka said he would persuade them, and since he said so, he will. It’s not a whim. You may not know, but Uburka once brought a whole continent to its knees. He’s a hero of his era who promised to succeed. I have never doubted my son.”

Silence ensued.

The Grey Spider quietly closed her eyes and spoke.

“How can you be so sure?”

Still with closed eyes, the Grey Spider muttered softly.

“He won’t persuade them, you know? I just told you. It’s better to die or suffer a worse fate than death than to surrender. They won’t do it. They can’t because...”

“Because, we were in the same situation.”

The Grey Spider flinched.

Slowly, she opened her eyes.

“The same situation?”

“Uburka. His race.”

“What does that have to do with...?”

“His people were once slaves to another race. They even worshiped me as a god at one point.”

I explained.

“And his people chose a different path from yours. A path you can’t imagine. A path that one might question as even possible. Uburka will tell them, speak to them... that [a different world] might exist.”

"....."

"Only someone who was born in the same place but walked a different path can persuade another."

I didn't look at the Grey Spider. I gazed at the 300 forces and beyond, at the sky.

"So, my son will surely persuade your subordinates to surrender."

Gradually, dawn began to break.

---

# Chapter 311: The Next World (1)

---

As dawn was just taking its first steps on the horizon, changes occurred to the spire.

The land was dark, and the surroundings were silent.

"Hmm."

Prricck.

The Grey Spider, who had stayed up with me through the night, pricked up her ears. We were in the midst of darkness, not exactly in silence, but close enough that even the sound of ears moving was clear.

"She's calling."

The Grey Spider narrowed her brows and gazed at the spire.

"Excuse me?"

"Me... No, not me. She's calling you, King of Death."

"Who's calling?"

I followed the Grey Spider's gaze towards the tower. The massive iron gate remained closed. There was no sign or sound of anyone, be it Uburka, who had gone to suggest surrender, or the spiders deciding to capitulate. Nothing was present at the door.

"I don't see anyone."

"She's already standing at the door. Alone."

"....."

"The invisible one observed me for a while."

“...Don't move your lips, use telepathy.”

Finally, she spoke.

"Not too strongly. Just enough for me to hear. We can't afford to have our conversation eavesdropped."

"It's quite difficult to send telepathy to someone invisible."

"Difficult doesn't mean impossible. Please do it."

I shrugged.

"Done. Even the Elder among your people would find it hard to eavesdrop on this conversation. Now, please speak freely."

However, the invisible witch couldn't speak freely.

After a long silence, she finally spoke.



“...Are you Uburka's father?”

"Ah, that's good."

“...What is?”

"That you asked if I'm Uburka's parent instead of asking if I'm the King of Death. It implies that Uburka has become somewhat significant to you. You could have called him 'that bastard' or 'damn pig' but instead, you respectfully used Uburka's name and referred to me as his parent."

I nodded.

"Uburka must be doing a good job persuading. Or rather, he has successfully persuaded you. However, instead of sending a formal envoy of surrender, meeting me secretly like this indicates... a minor trouble. Isn't it?"

"....."

The invisible one was silent for a while.

“...We listened to Uburka's story well, carefully, and seriously.”

“Hmm.”

"We learned what kind of being you are. We took this long because we were verifying if those stories were true or false..."

I tilted my head slightly. I could sense tension in her voice.

As if she was afraid of something close by.

"Why are you so nervous?"

“What?”

"You're trembling. You're scared. What's wrong?"

“Are you serious?”

For the first time, the invisible one laughed. It was a laugh of incredulity, not amusement.

"Why am I scared? I'm scared of you, of course"

"Huh?"

"In my dreams, I saw you with a thousand elite soldiers in black cloaks under your command. I saw the Earth Spirit warriors, thousands of Asuras, willing to follow your bidding. And... even the sight of Constellation Killer submitting to you."

"....."

"And you ask why I'm scared? You, who could easily obliterate us, the 50th floor, and establish your own millennium empire if you wished?"

The invisible one muttered, "This is insane."

"...We've imposed a gag order on the investigation team. So far, most of our kids don't know the extent of what kind of hunter you are."

"So you're the leader of the First Branch. Have you decided to surrender to us?"

"Yes, but there's a condition."

Condition.

"What is it?"

"We surrender to you and to you alone, King of Death."

Her voice through telepathy was clear and decisive. An invisible tone, void of any hesitation or doubt.

"We will never surrender to the rabble like the Anti-Magic Alliance."

"....."

"You alone treated our kind as true friends. At the very least, you tried your best to do so. You even convinced your comrades. Yes, I'll admit it. If it's you, there is [meaning] in our

defeat, but not them!"

The invisible one was not seen.

Yet, I could fully sense her pointing and glaring over my shoulder, grinding her teeth.

"Is there even a single innocent person among those who stepped on this 50th floor! Oh, sometimes there were those who sinned less. Such kids willingly joined our tower. You see, King of Death? We will never kneel before those bastards!"

It was the same thing the Grey Spider had said.

"....."

I thought for a moment and then spoke.

"So, you intend to leave the people of the Anti-Magic Alliance empty-handed."

"Yes. They never deserved anything in the first place. It's

only because of you they could even hold a spoon. I won't give them the illusion that [they won]."

The invisible witch's words were resolute.

"Yes, we had a hard time too. I admit it. But only Uburka, you, and the warriors of your world are allowed to insult us! We're willing to kneel before you, but not the others. Never."

"What did Uburka say?"

"He said, [It's a difficult task]. And he recommended talking to you. I'm here because of Uburka's advice."

Of course.

That would be expected.

"...Happy endings are always difficult."

"What?"

"To protect something precious. Whether it's a grudge, pride, or anything. The world is like this, not because there are many who have nothing more precious than life, but because there are many who have something more precious than life."

"What are you talking about? ...Are you trying to be philosophical? I'm not into that."

"I understand what's precious to you."

I was mentally prepared.

"So you don't have to kneel in front of the believers."

There was a brief pause.

As if she couldn't believe my words.

"...Really?"

"Yes. Open the door, cross the drawbridge, and go to the

World of the Lone Child. My children will guide you well there."

"....."

"But... Please walk across this drawbridge."

I also set a condition.

"It's impossible to just teleport from inside the spire to the World of the Lone Child without showing any form. If you truly surrender only to me and can't kneel before the believers, then show at least the courtesy and spirit of walking across the drawbridge."

"Surely... there won't be anyone attacking us while crossing the bridge?"

"I am the King of Death."

I spoke calmly.



"If you understand what kind of being I am, you should also know the weight behind my name. You can trust that promise."

The invisible one was silent.

"...Okay."

But eventually, she acquiesced. She must have had no choice but to nod.

It was just, really, simply walking across the bridge. What's so hard about that? The spiders who worked at the First Branch must have crossed the glass drawbridge countless times.

It shouldn't be difficult.

"Then, in an hour."

"Yes. Come out in an hour."

I bid farewell and returned.

"....."

Upon my return, the Grey Spider was glaring at me with an expressionless face.

I, disregarding the stare, plopped down next to the Grey Spider.

"Smart aleck. You're always scheming."

"As the Elder, you should know the ropes."

"So, you lied to the head? Saying, '[Even the Elder would find it hard to eavesdrop on this conversation]' when you sent the telepathy to both of us from the start?"

Indeed.

From the beginning, I had leaked the telepathy not only to the invisible head but also to the Grey Spider. As a result, the

Elder was clued in on the entire situation.

"How was the sound quality?"

"Damn good, you little shit."

"Do I seem a bit different to you now?"

The Grey Spider looked up at me.

The gaze she had shown when I casually mentioned Uburka's past, and now, after hearing the conversation with the invisible witch, seemed to have deepened a bit.

The Grey Spider lamented, "Is it all real?"

I crossed my arms and puffed out my chest.

"Yes. I am the King of Death."

"Not that, you dumbass."

"Ah, about the thousand elite troops in black cloaks obediently following me, the countless Earth Spirit Tribe warriors, the thousands of Asuras backing me up? I have two rivals; one commands a thousand elite troops in white cloaks and fighters in 256 colors, along with a noodle-haired punk, while the other, an original pick for Sword Emperor, is just a damn strong old man."

"No, not that, you damn jerk."

I puffed out my chest even more.

"Or is it about me wielding the immortal glory as a sword, subjugating the blood-red Demon King, and even having the Constellation Killer, the 'season boss' of this 50th floor, under my command?"

"Aargh, not those [trivial] things! Damn, you're such a sly one!"

Unlike the invisible witch who expressed fear of my power, the Grey Spider dismissed it as [trivial].

"Powerful bastards. Bastards who command heaps of powerful bastards... Living a thousand years, you see countless [ordinary strong] ones. Why couldn't we subjugate all the constellations under the tower? Because of those fake god bastards worshiped by the fake gods, the Mahos-led group of voyeurs watching us from the 50th floor while munching on popcorn."

The Grey Spider ground her teeth.

"A bit unexpected was you taking in the Constellation Killer, but that's because he wasn't an ordinary strong one! The Sword Emperor was different for the same reason. But you... you know what I mean."

Hmm.

"Really?"

Yes.

"Seriously?"

Indeed.

"King of Death, you..."

The invisible witch had been too focused on my power to fully realize, but the Grey Spider, even from a distance, had precisely understood.

With a groan, she asked, "Between the 30th and 40th floors... you didn't rule as a god?"

I nodded.

"That's right."

"Unbelievable!"

The Grey Spider exclaimed.

"That you're such a person, no, that such a person exists! Until now, no one..."

"Yes. You could say that."

I spoke to the witch.

"You can believe that. Think of me as a liar, consider what the first tower reported as a misunderstanding, dismiss it all, forget and move on. That's certainly an option for you."

"..."

"Or you might choose something entirely different."

The Grey Spider clenched her teeth.

She leaned towards me but stepped back simultaneously, ending up in an awkward stance, neither approaching nor distancing.

I waited.

After a while, looking alternately at the tower, the encircling forces, and the brightening dawn, the Grey Spider muttered like a cornered beast.

".....The Dream Demons, or whatever, showed your tale to them in their dreams."

"Yes."

".....Show it to me, too. Let me see it, and then... No. First, just show it to me."

I nodded.

"That I can do."

And so, I did.

---

Dawn was slowly crawling up the sky.

The sound of dawn climbing was the sound of the Anti-Magic Alliance's tent and makeshift buildings stretching, the Apostles dressing up, a child crying somewhere, livestock bellowing.



".....Yeah."

And it was the sound of a thousand-year-old magician saying, "Yeah."

"....."

The Grey Spider's eyes were blurred.

Not just because she had just woken from a long dream aided by the Dream Demons.

".....I..."

After a moment, hiding her face, the Grey Spider began to speak.

"I never wanted to protect my sisters. I just wanted to find and kill the man who impregnated my mother, burn his village, destroy his domain, topple his nation, and set his continent aflame. Suddenly, I found myself surrounded by my sisters."

Her words seemed to flow out on their own, not from her tongue but just from her slightly open lips.

"I never had a sense of responsibility. But I did have responsibilities. Not bearing responsibility where it's due, I realized, makes one like my father, our divine kin. Determined not to become like them, I became the rule of my kin. I established the Magic Tower."

The promised morning.

The iron gates of the spire creaked open.

"I had no aspirations in life. I just wanted to avoid becoming like that. To not resemble him. To kill those bastards. Looking back, I realize I've always lived with that as my sole focus."

The Anti-Magic Alliance's followers started to murmur.

The murmurs varied. 'Are they really surrendering?', 'Damn it', 'Let's see how shameless they can be!', 'It's over! It's our victory!' Each person expressed their emotions. 'Kneel!' Their lives were fundamentally wrong, not just a few parts. 'Kneel!' The followers were determined to prove it this time.

"I thought to myself."

"Kneel!"

"It's impossible. Impossible. Such a life is impossible for me, and for anyone else."

"Kneel!"

"That the Sword Emperor was just a unique exception."

"Kneel!"

"But then, it seems"

"Kneel!"

"That wasn't the case."

"Kneel!"

The spiders of the First Branch started to step onto the drawbridge. Thud. The invisible bridge did not waver under the footsteps of hundreds.

"Even if it's different from the Sword Emperor. Even if it's the exact opposite. Even if it's tough. Extremely tough."

"....."

"It was possible to live another life."

While we watched, the spiders of the first Branch crossed the bridge with dignity.

Their dignity grew closer, and the fury of the followers grew hotter. 'Kneel! Can't you kneel?!' 'Those creatures!' Some even tried to throw rotten fruit or trash they had found.

"You don't have to do this."

I said.

"Thank you. That might be possible."

The Grey Spider lowered her hands from her face.

"I spent over a hundred years thinking the Sword Emperor was a special exception. I can spend over a thousand years thinking the same about you."

"....."

"I was not wrong. I did my best. I did. I did. But..."

Saying so, she laughed through tears.

"But isn't that too embarrassing?"

And then.

The Grey Spider slowly knelt.

"....."

The spiders of the First Branch halted.

Not just them. The Second, Third, Fourth, and Fifth Branch' spiders watching anxiously, the frenzied Anti-Magic Alliance followers jeering around, even the regular hunters who joined the non-festive festivity, all froze.

"I'm sorry."

The Grey Spider, the greatest spider, the monarch of all witches, the godslayer who never knelt even to gods, knelt with bandages on her body, with her forehead on the ground.

Quietly.

"My millennium was wrong."

The city fell silent.

# Chapter 312: The Next World (2)

---

The events following were, in a way, simple.

The enraged raged. Those who needed to apologize, apologized. And those who felt they had no right to add their two cents to this world, silenced themselves even deeper.

".....This is shitty."

The [Assistant Writer] muttered a curse.

In front of the drawbridge, the Grey Spider was still kneeling, her forehead touching the ground. Over her body, the Anti-Magic Alliance's followers threw rotten fruits and debris, their emotional vomit.

Thud.

A dark mass hit the Grey Spider's back and slid off.

"Ah."

The [Assistant Writer], who had been frowning, opened her lips. A sharp dagger sliced through the air at the end of her gaze.

"Wait, that thing."

But midway, the dagger was deflected with a clear 'ting!' as I knocked it down with an orb-like Aura.

The dagger feebly landed on the ground, four meters away from the Grey Spider.

"Tch!"

Someone in the crowd of thousands clicked their tongue.

The [Assistant Writer] seemed to have heard it too.



"Hey, you! What the hell are you doing looking so pathetic....."

"Don't stop it."

The [Mahos Army Commander] grabbed the [Assistant Writer]'s forearm to halt her.

"Stopping it will only make them angrier. I know this from experience, having dealt with aftermaths on the battlefield multiple times."

The Assistant Writer looked at the Mahos Army Commander, then at me.

I said nothing. Before the dagger fell, after it fell, I just stood there, arms crossed, silently observing.

Though no one else could know, this was also the stance adopted by the Guardian Spirit right beside me.

Seeing my lack of reaction, the Assistant Writer turned back to the Mahos Army Commander. Her glasses peaked sharply in frustration.

"Still, how can they attack someone who's surrendered? If you've been on the battlefield, you should know that's basic!"

The Mahos Army Commander didn't blink an eye.

"Did the Magic Tower ever adhere to that basic principle?"

The Assistant Writer clenched her teeth.

"In fact, you were one of those who suffered in prison with Hamusutra's followers, tortured until the King of Death rescued you."

"....."

"The world you were born and raised in is now a colony dominated by the Magic Tower. It's hard to imagine the Magic Tower governed its colonies any wiser than the 50th floor."

For a full millennium.

The grudges built by the Magic Tower were vast and deep.

"The Magic Tower was not wise. So, Assistant Writer, act wiser. Aren't you ascending the tower representing your world? If you have the luxury to sympathize with the world's enemy, perhaps you should prepare for conquering the next floor instead--"

"Thank you."

The Assistant Writer spoke in a low, cold voice.

"Anyway, you're saying this for my sake, right? So, thank you. I have something else to say though, so listen."

"Hm. I'm glad you appreciate it. So, Assistant Writer, I have a proposition. If you haven't decided on your team for the 51st floor, how about joining me....."

"Fuck off."

The Mahos Army Commander closed his mouth.

After speaking, the Assistant Writer's eyes widened. Her glasses followed suit.

After a moment, she flapped her arms.

"No... that... I didn't mean 'fuck off' to the offer to accompany you. Don't get me wrong. Why would you make such an offer now... Ah, forget it! Just be quiet! ...Damn."

The Assistant Writer coughed several times. Then, after giving the Mahos Army Commander a glance, she turned around.

She began to walk.

The Assistant Writer stood in front of the Grey Spider, more precisely, in front of the crowd surrounding the Grey Spider.

"Hey, you bastards, stop making such a pathetic scene!"

The Assistant Writer exclaimed.

---

The crowd immediately bared their teeth.

"What the!"

"Isn't that the Assistant Writer? It's the Assistant Writer, right?"

"The one always messing up grammar?"

"Why's the hamster Apostle who devours books suddenly popping up? Got too full of herself for helping out with the Magic Tower raid plan?"

"Everyone, shut up!"

With a voice that didn't lose to the murmuring crowd, the Assistant Writer shouted.

And then immediately continued.

"First off, whoever said I mess up grammar, let's see later. I can't tolerate such distorted information spreading. But more intolerable than that... you bastards, aren't you ashamed?"

The Assistant Writer raised her voice.

"If you want revenge, plan it yourself, gather your strength and take your revenge! If you want to lord over someone, do it to those you hunted yourself!"

The Assistant Writer gritted her teeth as she looked at the Grey Spider lying down and the various trash scattered around her.

"But what is this? If you had hunted the Magic Tower, the witches and the Grey Spider yourself, do whatever you want. However, you didn't. What the hell are you doing to someone else's prey?"

There was silence among the crowd.

For a brief moment. Except for that brief moment, the vast majority of the crowd blushed with anger. Among them, some were wearing masks which hid their face, blushing behind the mask.

A warrior wearing a mask, as if he had plucked the horn of a dragon, stepped forward with a great spear on his shoulder.

"Well said, Miss Assistant Writer."

The masked warrior spoke in a metallic voice.

"Really impressive. A true hero! Full of righteous, proper, and beautiful words. It'd be perfect if we all ran to hide in shame now, but what to do? I'm just getting pissed off. Heh. Is it because I'm a blockhead?"

"Yes."

"Don't just agree so bluntly... Well, anyway, it's so bold that those who can't afford to be bold become invisible, right?"

The masked warrior slammed the butt of his spear on the ground with a thud.

"For a thousand years. The Magic Tower ruled this 50th floor for a full thousand years! The oppression grew stronger, and this 50th floor, along with the towers that reached it, were drained by the roots of the Magic Tower!"

Voices of agreement erupted from all around.

"Miss Assistant Writer. Can't you see the pain and suffering?"

"Right!"

"The people who had to sneak through alleys to avoid the Magic Tower's notice! Those who lost their families or something even more precious to those witches and had no choice but to remain silent! Can't you see or feel those people?"

"Right! Right!"

"Miss Assistant Writer. You're speaking the truth, but that's because you have the power to speak such! What about those without such power! The weak! Even at this moment, should they just bite their tongues, stay silent, and act as if they don't exist?"

"Right! Right! Right!"

"How dare you try to gag the mouths of such utterly weak victims! Isn't that truly unjust and cruel!"

"Right! Right! Right! Right!"



As the masked warrior's rebukes continued, the crowd erupted like a wildfire. Even regular hunters who hadn't participated in the Anti-Magic Alliance raised their voices. "Wooo!" The square turned into a cauldron of ecstasy.

And the Assistant Writer doused that cauldron with cold water.

"I've heard enough of the shitty rant of an extra."

The masked warrior paused. The crowd momentarily fell silent.

Over that silence, the Assistant Writer slowly walked.

She stood in front of the masked warrior, directly looking into the two holes in the mask.

"Listen, you bastard."

The Assistant Writer, bending her back like a stretching cat, raised her head and whispered into the masked warrior's mask, bringing her face close.

"Even if you were ten times, or a hundred times stronger; even if you were as strong as the entire Magic Tower combined, I would have stood in front of you like this, and I would have said you were spewing bullshit."

The Assistant Writer pressed the tip of the masked warrior's nose with her finger.

"That's why I was dragged to the Magic Tower."

The masked warrior's mask heated up. "Ah, hot damn," the Assistant Writer flinched back, her fingers scalded.

The masked warrior spoke with a sound resembling magma overflowing down a mountainside.

"No, that's not it. You were dragged away because Hamusutra suddenly disappeared. Because you lost your backing, your power weakened! It's the same now. Now that you've got the King of Death or whatever as your backer, you're all high and mighty..."

"Ah. And one more thing."

Actually, it's two things, how do you even wear that mask, it's freaking hot, she murmured, then licked the tip of her scalded finger lightly.

"Even if you were a thousand times, or ten thousand times stronger; even if you were as strong as the entire Magic Tower multiplied, you would've just been a one-off extra introduced to show how strong the protagonist has become."

The masked warrior closed his mouth.

The Assistant Writer shifted her gaze away from the masked warrior. Her sharp-edged glasses turned towards the surrounding crowd.

"Stop making a fool of yourselves."

As the masked warrior raised his voice, the Assistant Writer's voice did the opposite. It gradually diminished.

"You are [Hunters], aren't you?"

It was a soft voice.

"Didn't you decide to climb the tower on your own feet because you wanted to go to a place bigger than where you were born and raised, because you wanted to see something different than the scenery you always saw?"

Her diminishing voice turned into a lament.

"I did. There might be bastards who climbed up because they had nowhere else to be, or dumbasses who climbed up representing their world at the worst timing, but I don't know about such grand things. I always only knew about myself, only thought about myself."

Maybe that's why she trusted the Constellation, even someone like the manager who resembled her, people are drawn to what's similar to them, the Assistant Writer muttered.

She said,

"I came here to write my story."

Her drooping glasses scanned the crowd.

"Aren't you the same?"

The gaze that returned from sweeping the crowd turned towards me.

In that gaze, not anger but regret, the twilight of the heart that sometimes seeps out when recalling conversations we once had, lingered.

Turning back to the still prostrate Grey Spider, the Assistant Writer said,

"Does this seem like something [Protagonists] would do?"

Once.

The Apostle of Hamusutra, who once muttered, [I'm not the protagonist of this story anyway,] now murmured with a shudder,

"No, it's not."

"....."

"Let's be protagonists now."

And.

There was an echo to those words.

"Well said."

It was the voice of the followers of the Sword Emperor Sect.

The Sword Emperor Sect must have suffered more cruelly at the hands of the Magic Tower than anyone else. However, they paid no attention to the witches of the Magic Tower's First Branch, who were awkwardly standing still on the glass bridge. Nor did they look at the prostrate Grey Spider.

The followers of the Sword Emperor Sect walked up and stood beside the Assistant Writer.

"It's true."

"It's a painful truth. Many would feel like hitting someone after hearing it, and frankly, I do too."

"But... still, a true word remains true."

The followers of the Sword Emperor Sect turned around in unison.

Standing in line beside the Assistant Writer, the followers crossed their arms and said,

"Without the King of Death, this hunt would not have been successful."

"As such, it would be lacking in moral integrity for us to complain any further here."

"The Emperor himself would have said the same."

The crowd hesitated and shrunk back.

-Hmm.

The Guardian Spirit spoke.

-Well, it took 150 years, but there's been a little growth.

That was the beginning.

"I think the same! This isn't fair!"

The jester who had managed to kill me on this 50th floor came out and stood beside the Assistant Writer and the followers of the Sword Emperor Sect, voicing her opinion.

"Damn... it's a mess."

The Berserker followed suit. Paparazzo and other high-ranking members of the Anti-Magic Alliance followed behind.

Finally, the Mahos Army Commander walked over and transformed into a corner of the human barrier between the Grey Spider and the crowd.

The Assistant Writer wore a slightly incredulous expression.



"Why did you come? You were the one telling me to act wisely."

"I'm here because the tide is in our favor. It's known that Mahos prefers a winning fight over a fair fight, but in truth, he likes a fight that is both fair and victorious the most."

"That right? You're not only a fool but also garbage."

"Yet, I'm garbage that fights well."

"Right. That's why I'll accept your proposal. Let's go to the 51st floor together."

"It would be an honor."

As the human barrier solidified, the fervor of the crowd slowly subsided. But it wasn't dispersing; it was more like settling down, like steam gathering under a pressure cooker.

The masked warrior exploded.

"Damn it! Your words are all forced! So, are you saying that victims who can't take revenge with their own strength should just keep their lips sealed for life?"

"That's not what we said. I'm one of those victims myself."

One of the followers of the Sword Emperor Sect spoke up.

He raised his head.

"You there. The spokesperson for the Magic Tower."

The spokesperson for the Magic Tower, who had been nervously watching the situation, hiccupped.

"Yes?!"

"You killed my disciple."

Anger can be hot, but it can also be cold.

The anger of the follower of the Sword Emperor Sect was not devoid of heat but was so filled with anger that it turned cold.

"He had talent and a light disposition, making life easy for him, but perhaps because of that, he didn't die easily. For nearly ten days, he died a gruesome death inside a glass tube, his body crushed."

The spokesperson for the Magic Tower looked away and mumbled.

"Ah, ah... um. That's truly, a regrettable incident... um. But why bring this up now...?"

"Prepare yourself."

"Excuse me?"

"I'll come to the Underworld when I'm ready, to challenge you to a duel. That's alright with you, King of Death, right?"

Hmm.

Yes.

And so, I finally spoke up.

"Hey. Who would stop a fair duel, and how could they?"

I humbly smiled.

"I'd stop an invasion led by an army, but a duel? I have no right to stop that. ...However, if you were to die in such a duel, I couldn't do anything for you under the same principle, could I?"

"That's only natural. Who would dare to kill another without being prepared to die themselves?"

The follower of the Sword Emperor Sect nodded and glared at the spokesperson for the Magic Tower.

"Wait for it."

".....Ah."

The spokesperson for the Magic Tower gnashed his teeth.

"This is really something. You're underestimating me, thinking you can win in a one-on-one fight? I'll make sure to teach you a lesson about your misconception. To be killed by the same person who killed your disciple, what a celebration for your sect. Yes! I'll certainly provide you with a spectacular death!"

"You might be able to do that. Then my disciple will come for you. And then another disciple will come for you, until my lineage is extinguished or you lose your life."

"Ah, damn... no, no, let's not do this. Mercy! Peace! Oppose war! Blood only begets blood, and revenge only leads to more revenge. Can't we just forget and forgive?"

"I'm sorry."

The follower of the Sword Emperor Sect smiled, baring his teeth.

"I'm not strong enough for that."

The spokesperson for the Magic Tower hiccupped.

---

And thus, it began again.

---

The witches of the Magic Tower received their respective [Notice of Reckoning] based on the years they had served.

Some received none, but most received three or more. The spokesperson, in particular, groaned under the weight of receiving as many as 107 challenges.

"Damn it. This is all because you guys dumped the spokesperson role on me. Being in the forefront drew that much aggro. Look here, other branch heads. If you have any conscience, you should share some of this burden. But do you even have a conscience? Ah, no... Damn bitches..."

Watching the spokesperson, Charumu, who had escaped with me, heaved a sigh of relief.

"Phew... It's a blessing I was buried deep just cleaning... This is the big picture..."

"Be careful, Charumu."

I comforted Charumu's shoulder and advised him.

"You can't run away from the life you've lived."

"What the hell... Why does this ominous realism emanate from your words..."

Thus, fifteen days passed.

Krrrrrrrrung!

The sound of the last remaining spire collapsing on the 50th floor.

[The Whip that Descends on the Self-Abuser has been released from its seal.]

The pillar that had been supporting the center of the spire tilted and fell. From afar, it looked like a giant nail. That nail shattered like glass upon touching the ground.

"Ugh...?"

From within the broken pillar, a woman with red hair slowly opened her sleepy eyes."

"Where is this...?"

"Sister!"

The Berserker rushed forward at supersonic speed. Bang! An unnatural sound, like that of two humans colliding, rang out, but fortunately, one of them was a Constellation.

The red-haired Constellation gently caught the Berserker.

"Oh. Oh my...?"

"Sister! My Constellation sister! Sob, I'm sorry I'm late! I told you to wait just three years, but 300 years have passed! I'm a fool, an idiot, a piece of trash! I should have died! Should have died but couldn't! Coward! Sob, I'm sorry!"



The Constellations sealed by the Magic Tower were being released.

"Ah... this damned self-abuse, yes. That's definitely my Apostle..."

The red-haired Constellation patted the Berserker's back.

The Berserker, having finally reunited with the god she served, buried her face in the constellation's hair, crying "Sob," shedding tears, "Wah!" sniffing, and finally, "Sniff!" bawling her eyes out.

"Um..."

The red-haired Constellation made an awkward face and wiped the Berserker's cheek.

"You're damn filthy, so ease up a bit..."

"Thank you, King of Death!"

With cheeks as red as the god she served, the Berserker spoke to me.

"It's all thanks to you! If it weren't for you, I wouldn't have been able to meet my sister again! Thank you, sob, I thought you were a damn shitty bastard, but turns out you're a damn good son of a bitch!"

"My word."

I sheathed the Holy Sword.

My shoulder was aching, not fully recovered yet, just from chopping down one pillar of the spire.

"Is that the only adjective you know how to use...?"

"What! Puppies are cute, aren't they!"

Hmm.

To that, I concede.



# Chapter 313: The Next World (3)

---

Over the course of a fortnight, various events unfolded.

[The Whip that Descends on the Self-Abuser has reclaimed its Constellation.]

[The Fist that Grasps the Sun is recruiting new disciples for the first time in 233 years!]

[The Gatekeeper Guarding the Southeast has been released from its seal.]

[The Claws that Rend the Night Sky has been released from its seal.]

[The Soliloquy of Failure has been released from its seal.]

First and foremost, five Constellations that had been sealed by the Magic Tower were liberated.

Not all Constellations were fortunate enough to have devoted disciples like the [Berserker].

Some had been sealed for as long as 900 years, while others for a mere 200. An eternity in which some once-glorious Constellations had declined to the point where not a single disciple remained.

"The last disciple to worship me died 302 years ago."

Muttered one Constellation.

A beautiful Constellation with black hair so long it flowed across the floor like a carpet. [The Claws that Rend the Night Sky], true to its epithet, lifted its eyes into the void, which resembled the night sky.

"I was always a minor Constellation."

"What power do you govern?"

"It's hardly worth mentioning. If, in your lifetime, you've ever laid in a bed or someplace else, and reached out towards the night sky with the intention of scratching it with your nails, even just once, that would have been a gesture of faith towards me."

"....."

"How does that sound?"

The Constellation of the night sky smiled silently.

"Not too minor, right?"

"No, it's quite fascinating. I mean, it's not like you're pretending to be a god. Why would the Grey Spider nail down such a Constellation?"

"Who knows? She must have had her reasons. Perhaps she was annoyed every time someone reached out to the night sky and received a message from me. Or perhaps she coveted my power, being a Constellation herself. Maybe she was even trying to save me."

"Really?"

"Either way, I don't hold any grudges against her."

The Constellation, which until a few days ago had been pinned through the heart, having its mana siphoned for centuries, now gazed out the window with a shadowed look.

"Hatred is a potent energy. It sharpens the existence of both the sender and the receiver. Just like love, greed, or hope, it can keep someone who ought to die alive. King of Death. Our savior. Do you understand my words?"

"Yes."

I nodded, recalling the eternity of my 4000 days.

"I understand what you mean."

Our gazes met.

"I know it well."

"....."

Many things happened.

The spiders lost their spire but gained a mountainous arena and, as a bonus, the right to migrate to the world of the dead. The Mountain Calamity Tribe demonstrated their architectural prowess by constructing residential areas for the spiders.

The destinations for migration varied. Some wanted to live in the New Continent, others in the empire of Raviel, and some in Babylon.

"Most of them are mages who have lived for over a hundred years! Pure high-class talent!"

Black Dragon Witch, who had been struggling with a perennial shortage of skilled workers, was ecstatic.

"We can recruit these people as we please, right?"

"It doesn't really matter, but don't stop anyone from challenging them to a duel."



"Eh? What's that supposed to mean?"

I explained.

After hearing the whole story, Black Dragon Witch lamented.

"Why can't there be people who have both character and talent, no matter which world they're from? Not that I'm one to talk."

"I'm here, aren't I?"

"Right. You're not one to talk, indeed."

Black Dragon Witch sighed deeply and lay down.

"Alright. I keep saying this, but I'm not in a position to judge anyone... Anyway, you've had a tough time."

"Any problems here?"

"Focus on your own problems. We can handle ours. Oh, didn't Hamusutra say he wants to compile our adventures into a spin-off?"

"What is that even...?"

"I've nominated myself for the mukbang genre. How about 'Black Dragon Food Fighter' for the title? It's a story where I travel across worlds, eating delicious food. Sounds like a hit, doesn't it?"

"Seriously, what... I can see why you need some off-time. Take it easy. I'm off."

Whether or not 'Black Dragon Food Fighter' will come to fruition remains to be seen, but the competition for recruiting the Witch Clan was definitely on.

Even considering the occasional irrefutable challenges to life-and-death duels, the mages were undoubtedly valuable talents.

"I'll offer you double whatever offer you've received so far as a salary."

The ultimate victor in this competition was the Countess.

"Moreover, in our Merchants Union, we have an entire race of talented individuals known as the Fairy Tribe, well-versed in trade. It's like having a team of employees who are a joy to manage. Black Dragon, Temple of All Gods, they're all good places with noble causes. But why go there and suffer under the pretense of responsibility?"

"I swear my allegiance! Wow! My Queen!"

"Right, right. You understand me. But try to cry like a cat, if you can."

"Meow! Meow! Can you also protect my life? I really don't want to do duels...."

"That's impossible, I'm afraid."

"Dammit."

Thus, some spiders who had initially sworn allegiance to the Magic Tower, then to me, swore allegiance to the Merchants Union, all within a mere fortnight. Isn't this a lesson in life?

However, there were spiders who didn't align themselves with any faction.

"How could I do that?"

It was the former leader of the old Tower, the Grey Spider.

"Got any plans?"

"I have to take responsibility."

The Grey Spider said, sipping plain water from a paper cup.

"Have you seen the challenges that have come my way?"

"Yes."

I nodded, recalling the vast amount of paper that made the already scarce 50th-floor ecosystem a concern.

"There were a lot."

"Yes. And they'll keep coming... I have to accept them. I need to tie up loose ends. Only then can I move on. Do you understand what I mean?"

The Grey Spider's words were ambiguous.

Among those who sent the challenges, there would undoubtedly be those who couldn't sleep unless they tore the Grey Spider's flesh, whose water would scald until they saw the Grey Spider's corpse. Without settling the score with the Grey Spider in some way, they wouldn't be able to take a single step forward.

"Yes."

Again, I nodded, recalling the eternity of my 4000 days.

"I understand what you mean."

And so, the Grey Spider made the empty wasteland her new nest. Anyone who bore a grudge against her was welcome to come there and challenge her to a duel.

She would hardly be alone on any given day.

Only if that day ever came.

Even if a thousand years passed a thousand times over, it would still seem unlikely, but if there ever came a day when she woke up in the morning and went to bed at night without anyone seeking her out. If she were allowed the luxury of sipping a mouthful of water over an hour under the stretched-out midday sun.

Then, at last, the Grey Spider could move on. After a thousand years, she could rise from her place and finally head towards the next world.

I asked.

"What would you like to do when that time comes?"

The Grey Spider smiled.

In that smile, I remembered someone. Someone who knew they could die at any moment and thus, no longer put on airs or felt regret. It was a smile born from total acceptance,

illuminated by pure brightness.

"Well, that would mean I'm quite fortunate."

The Grey Spider looked up.

It was nighttime, and since the place she had chosen to stay had no ceiling, the star-filled night sky stretched out endlessly above.

The Grey Spider reached out with her slender fingers towards it.

"If I'm that lucky, I might be able to climb the tower."

The Tower.

"Are you planning to challenge it again?"

"I've decided not to wait any longer."

I didn't ask any more questions.

The Grey Spider didn't say anything more either.

The three of us just looked up at the same night sky.

---

A fortnight that flowed as it should.

My work was wrapped up with arranging part-time jobs at 'Café Planetarium' for the disciples of Hamusutra. Seeing Hamusutra in a café uniform, the Assistant Writer screamed in delight.

"I've missed you, Head Librarian! Kyaa! What's this!?"

"I'm wondering the same thing..."

Hamusutra glared at me with rotten eyes. There was somewhat sufficient reason for resentment, as ten disciples simultaneously grabbed Hamusutra and vigorously rubbed their cheeks against his.



Given Hamusutra's small stature, it was fair to describe the situation as a hamster stuck between sofa cushions.

"Gong-Ja, did you not tell me that these people are essentially my stalkers, or something even more terrifying?"

The hamster protested as its cheeks were stretched.

"I'm grateful you saved my followers, but to bring them directly to me like this, I never asked for..."

"We'll never let you go, Librarian!"

"We'll be together forever."

"I'll spend the rest of my life working part-time here!"

"To think that living as a human could be so tough and bitter..."

Well, that's good. That's great.

Of course, there were those who were not so fortunate.

I'm not talking about Hamusutra.

The Mahos Army Commander asked the Assistant Writer.

"Wait a minute, Assistant Writer. Didn't you agree to ascend to the 51st floor with me?"

"Eh? Fuck off."

The Assistant Writer's mouth responded before her brain.

The Mahos Army Commander was disheartened. The Assistant Writer was flustered as he looked at him.

"Ah, that... um. There are things more important than life."

"What would that be?"

"Fandom."

Another person with rotten eyes was added to the Planetarium.

The Assistant Writer, on the other hand, was indignant.

"Ah, what! This is a line that only the real protagonist can say!"

May you find happiness in your fandom.

As humans under the sky stretch their hands to feel the edges of the world, to find a place to lean on, to stand for a moment, or to pass by, the Constellations came to me.

"I've thought long and hard about how to repay you."

[The Claws that Rend the Night Sky] spoke as a representative of the Constellations.

"It wasn't just me pondering; I discussed it with the other

twelve Constellations. For a single hunter, especially one who has just reached the 50th floor, to be rewarded by several Constellations together... It's unprecedented."

"Thanks to you, I was able to reunite with my adorable little one..."

[The Whip that Descends on the Self-Abuser] added. She played with the night sky's hair spread across the floor.

"I thought about giving you a great weapon as a gift, but the holy sword at your hip seems more magnificent..."

"Honestly, you don't seem to have much desire for material things, which makes it difficult for us."

However, [The Claws that Rend the Night Sky] continued.

"But since you claim to be a successor of the Sword Emperor, fortunately, some of us knew what kind of gift a Sword Emperor might appreciate."

The night sky clasped its hands together.

"May this be the answer for you."

A soft light enveloped my body.

[The Claws that Rend the Night Sky acknowledges the quest completion.]

[The 50th floor stage has been cleared!]

As my vision gradually whitened.

"May a Constellation that crafts a quest just for you appear someday... King of Death. Although we are not your dedicated Constellations, the existence of such a Constellation would be a very, very happy thing..."

The voice continued.

[The Whip that Descends on the Self-Abuser acknowledges the quest completion.]

[The 51st floor has been cleared!]

And it went on.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth acknowledges the quest completion.]

[The 52nd floor has been cleared!]

The Constellations that participated in the rebellion.

[The Bell That Rouses the Dead acknowledges the quest completion.]

[The 53rd floor has been cleared!]

One by one, those who had the right to judge whether a hunter was qualified to ascend to the next floor.

[The Last Sword Remaining in the Wilderness acknowledges the quest completion.]

[The 54th floor has been cleared!]

They formed a single voice to address me.

[The Fist that Grasps the Sun acknowledges the quest completion.]

[The 55th floor has been cleared!]

[The Gatekeeper Guarding the Southeast acknowledges the quest completion.]

[The 56th floor has been cleared!]

[The Soliloquy of Failure acknowledges the quest completion.]

[The 57th floor has been cleared!]

[The Lonely Seeker acknowledges the quest completion.]

[The 58th floor has been cleared!]

[The Incarnation of Love and Lust acknowledges the quest completion.]

[The 59th floor has been cleared!]

[The Warhorse of the Eternal Plains acknowledges the quest completion.]

[The 60th floor has been cleared!]

Finally.

[Your existence becomes better defined.]

[The King of Death is leveling up.]

[Your skill slots have expanded.]

The next world unfolded before my eyes.



[You are now an S-rank hunter!]

[May fortune be with you.]

# Chapter 314: I'm a Fan (1)

---

Even if it's just three times, that's enough.

In my life, please let me have my way.

In return, take everything I have.

I had stayed up all night, and upon reflection, only one choice remained.

---

"Are you the King of Death? What a grandiose alias. So grandiose it's almost laughable! Remember this, I am one of the Thirteen Evils. The one who crumbled the eternal cliffs. The master of all waves crashing against every shore, the ninth Sea Lord, the Pirate General, the Madman..."

Silence.

"I heard you defeated the Crazy Madman of the Blood Sea! Quite impressive. I hear you broke through a whopping 10 floors all at once! Indeed, without a doubt, you are the first divinity to appear in a long time since the Sword Emperor! But remember this. Every Constellation shining in the night sky was once called a divinity. To introduce myself, who imparts such profound enlightenment; oh what's the use of speaking! The Living Witness of Divine Miracles! The Thirteen Evils! The Pine Cone that Sings in the White Night, the Forester, even the aliases are terrifying..."

Silence.

"I won't be long-winded. The longer the tongue, the shorter the life. Be afraid. Tremble in fear. Today, I will impart to you one truth..."

Silence.

"Uh. Could you possibly spare my life? Of course, I might have tormented people a bit. No, quite a lot actually... Wait! Hold on! Stop! No, it's natural for people to become cranky when they live for 200 to 300 years! After indulging in every possible pleasure, what other joy could there be besides tormenting others! No. Wait. You shouldn't go in there... No, no! Please wait! That bloodstain isn't human! Really! ...Ah. Fuck, I forgot to clean up after killing..."

Silence.

"I have no regrets. You know? Torturing living beings is really enjoyable."

Silence.

"Do you think you're so great?"

Silence.

"Strong. The King of Death, huh. The Sword Emperor obtained the title of Emperor despite being just a hunter. What's next, a king? The Tower is indeed strange. Live a good life, cherish it and die a good death. If your life is inevitable, then fate must be imbued in your name too, and at this moment, my end is also not by chance."

Silence.

".....Damn it. Dammit! I-I didn't do anything wrong..."

Silence.

"This is infuriating."

"If only you twelve had attacked together from the start... Why did no one listen to me until it was reduced to three? Brothers, are you idiots? Thinking about it, you were idiots... To have your throats slit as a price for having your ears blocked, what a shitty exchange rate..."

"Uhahahaha! King of Death! Don't think you've won with this! Even if the Thirteen Evils are annihilated, there will be two, three, yes! As long as the will of our brothers continues, forever—"

Silence, silence, silence.

"Phew."

I wiped the sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand.

"It was truly a tough and long battle..."

[I rate it as a series of battles like a glittering epic drama!]

"Hmm. If it were filmed, it would've been planned as a 102-episode series, but it would've become a legendary chronicle continuing to part 2, 3, and finally part 4, cherished in love and attention. And it would've become an even more painful legend due to an unfortunate incident causing an abrupt halt to the broadcast..."

[I positively agree that it is indeed glittering!]

Guardian Spirit watched us self-praise with a look of disbelief.

-Are you shooting a comedy? You just slayed twelve hunters, that's all.

"Ah. Come to think of it, if it's called the Thirteen Evils, why were there only twelve? I should've asked before slaying them, but I forgot."

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-One of them was slain by me as I passed by 150 years ago.

"Indeed. Even after 150 years, they haven't replenished their numbers..."

Even the 60th floor is suffering from a manpower shortage.

While lamenting the reality that despite numerous hunters aspiring to ascend the Tower, the upper floors lacked hunters, I sheathed the holy sword.

-Hmm.

Guardian Spirit glanced over, with his arms crossed.

He wasn't looking at me.

The Guardian Spirit's gaze was directed beyond my shoulder, towards the fortress where the Thirteen Evils had lurked. The fortress was ablaze, emitting wisps of smoke. Even from a considerable distance, the pungent smell of burning wafted over.

-Zombie.

"I know."

I spoke nonchalantly.

"They're persistent. They've followed me again."

-How many days has it been? This is getting on my nerves. Hey, hey. Can't you just go and catch it? How long will you ignore it?

"It's just following me without showing any hostility, just watching. I plan to leave it alone unless it shows direct hostility towards me."

That's right.

I was being stalked. Probably.

I added "probably" because I truly had no idea who was following me, why, or for what purpose.

-What if it's an assassin?



Guardian Spirit proposed an extreme hypothesis.

-Considering you saved the spiders, there's more than one or two who bear a grudge against you now.

"If someone is so consumed by hatred that they must send an assassin to me just to get through the day, they would likely send the assassin to the spider they have a grudge against and not me, right?"

I shrugged and started walking.

"I even deliberately showed vulnerability yesterday and the day before when I was sleeping, just in case. But it never approaches after a certain distance."

-That's strange... What is it? Why is it following you?

"I guess it likes me."

-Ah. So it's someone with a rotten brain.

"At least their character isn't rotten unlike someone."

-Aaaargh?

"What? What is it?"

As usual, we deepened our friendship while walking through the forest path.

The unidentified X maintained a constant distance from me, neither getting closer nor going further.

"Ah."

While keeping the presence in the back of my mind, I suddenly thought.

"I'm thirsty. Is there a stream where just drinking the water cools down the stomach? There should be one in such a forest."

That was the moment.

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Drip, drip, drip.

As I pushed through the forest and stepped out, a stream flowed conspicuously. Two animals resembling deer were dipping their noses in the water, lapping it up. It meant the water was safe to drink.

"Oh. Lucky."

I approached the stream without much thought. The deer on the other side glanced at me as if thinking, 'What's that ugly animal?' but I brushed them off.

A water bottle would have been convenient, but Homo Sapiens have hands.

I scooped up the water with my hands and gulped it down.

"Ah! So refreshing! Now I feel alive."

-.....

"Uh? What? Why are you looking at me like that? Got something to say?"

-No... It's just a bit strange.

"What exactly is strange?"

Guardian Spirit furrowed its brow.

-Kim Zombie, haven't you been too lucky these days?

"Excuse me?"

Too lucky?

"What are you talking about?"

-Think about it. Right when you got thirsty, a stream

suddenly appeared. The same happened yesterday, the day before, and even the day before that. Actually, now that I think about it, you've been strangely lucky since ten days ago.

Really?

I wasn't so sure.

-Does it make any sense to have a water source wherever we go on this vast 60th floor?

Guardian Spirit passionately argued.

-And whenever you think it's time to get some sleep, there's always kindling nearby. It doesn't make sense. You're used to living in a world where drinking water and heating are taken for granted, but this kind of luck is really abnormal, you know?

"It's not exactly a world taken for granted..."

I furrowed my brows.

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And I refuted Guardian Spirit's words.

"Sword Emperor, sir. That's not strange because, [knowing there was a water source in this direction], we deliberately chose this path, didn't we?"

-...What? What are you talking about?

"What are YOU talking about? We obtained information that there was a stream flowing here [in advance], and planned our route to avoid hunger and thirst. Before we even left the village."

-.....

Just as Guardian Spirit was about to speak.

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Slowly, Guardian Spirit's expression turned ambiguous.

-...Right. That's true.

"Yeah. You told me to prepare thoroughly because the 60th floor is vastly different from the stages we've climbed so far, being extremely wide, and if we don't get geographic information in advance, we'll definitely get lost. So, after making an effort to gather geographic information in the village, why are you saying something different now?"

-Right... That's true. Hmm? It really is.

The Guardian Spirit crossed its arms.

-Why did I think your luck was strangely good...? It wasn't luck but the result of thorough preparation...?

"Exactly. Now you've got me hungry for no reason talking about weird things."

I sent out my aura and caught an animal resembling a deer. The deer, apparently not used to humans, didn't even show signs of wariness and was easily caught by me while it was

drinking.

It was a simple hunt.

"Good thing there was meat nearby."

-.....

"Ah, there's dry firewood. Lucky. Let's have a barbecue today too."

-...Were the animals on the 60th floor always this tame? No. Wait a minute. Why are there normal animals here? From what I remember, this area was only swarming with demonic beasts...

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-...But not only those. Hmm. Right. Aren't you being sneaky eating something delicious all by yourself?



"It feels fucking great."

-Bad guy.

"Good guy?"

-Weirdo.

That's when it happened.

"Owowow...!"

From the [opposite] direction of where we came, someone burst through the bushes. It was a small-statured girl. As soon as she reached the stream, she fell with a thud.

"Uh-oh."

Holding a freshly roasted deer leg, I quickly approached the girl.

"Are you alright?"

"Ugh... Meat... Meat..."

The girl sniffed around with a vacant expression, as if she was smelling with her soul rather than her body, driven by the scent of roasting deer meat.

Can't help it with the meat.

"Here you go. Eat slowly."

"Uuuu... Th-Thank you..."

The girl desperately gnawed on the leg I gave her.

"Cough! Ack, huk! W-Water...!"

"Here."

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"Drink this."

Conveniently, I had a [water bottle]. How fortunate. If I didn't have a water bottle, I would've had to scoop water with my hands for the girl, which would have been quite awkward to watch from the side.

"Hwa!"

The girl drank hurriedly, spilling water around her mouth. Gulping down, her throat vibrated, and finally, she seemed to be coming back to life.

"Thanks to you, I'm saved!"

"It's nothing. Wanderers should help each other in places like this."

"If you weren't here, I would have starved to death... You're a savior..."

The girl shyly looked up at me after casting her gaze down.

Despite wandering through the forest, her clothes and hair were relatively clean. There was a sense of hardship, but not dirtiness, perhaps?

More than anything, she was exceptionally beautiful. Really exceptionally beautiful. After meeting Raviel, I hardly thought about people's appearances, but this girl slightly distorted my ingrained habits.

I smiled gently.

"I'm glad I could help."

I was just thinking, though.

Raviel is much prettier.

"....."

The girl slightly furrowed her brows.

And then murmured under her breath.

".....Strange... Could it be... Yes, if it's like this..."

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I tilted my head.

"What did you just say?"

"Nothing."

Then the girl raised her head and smiled brightly.

"It's nothing!"

Her smile was radiantly bright.

No matter how long she had wandered in the forest, her

ragged attire and numerous wounds didn't seem to match her spirit, but she tried her best to convey her gratitude to me with all her might.

A natural brightness shone on the girl's face.

"I haven't even asked for the name of my benefactor!"

"Ah."

"Benefactor, could you please tell me your name?"

I smiled.

"Of course. My alias is King of Death."

"King of Death... King of Death!?"

The girl was startled.

"If you're the King of Death, are you the one who recently cleared 10 floors all at once?"

"Um, yes. That's probably me."

"Wow! Amazing! How could such luck be...! The Constellations were all abuzz, wondering who it could be, and to run into you in a forest where I was lost!"

Thump.

The girl excitedly grabbed my hand.

"It's truly, truly an honor to meet you!"

With a smile that could dim even the sun.

"I'm a fan of you, King of Death!"

# Chapter 315: I'm a Fan (2)

---

A series of curious events unfolded. The girl who introduced herself as my fan turned out to be, astonishingly, not a hunter but a Constellation.

"Can Constellations get lost or starve too?"

"Of course, King of Death."

The girl smiled broadly.

"Constellations come in all shapes and sizes!"

We happened to be going in the same direction, so we decided to accompany each other for a while. We chatted as we walked along the quiet forest path, with the rabbits and deer that peeked out from the bushes as our audience.



"I really don't have a single follower... There was one 600 years ago, but not a single one since then. Essentially, I've been living like a complete pauper."

"Really? So..."

I looked at the girl anew. Scanning her from head to toe. Dressed in rags, the girl looked just like a poor kid from the neighborhood.

"You're at least 600 years old...?"

"Maybe even ten times that. Constellations have a different sense of time from hunters! It's quite common to count ages up to a thousand, but after that, we just give up. It's meaningless, unrewarding, and no fun!"

That's terrifying.

"As a Constellation, you must have an alias. What is it?"

"Ugh. Of course, I have both an alias and a true name, but it's a bit embarrassing to tell it to such a respected person such as King of Death... But I'll muster my courage and tell you! Yes!

My name is..."

[■ ■■■■■ ■■■ ■■■■ ■■■ ■■■ ■■■■■■■■■ ■■■  
■■■■■.]

"Wow."

I nodded.

Somehow, it felt like a good name.

It was a name that seemed truly made for this girl, smiling brightly before me, perfectly fitting her persona.

"It's a nice name. Why be embarrassed? It's a great name."

"I-Is it? Ahaha. If the King of Death says so, it must be. Um! I'm embarrassed..."

The girl laughed softly, scratching her cheek with her index finger. Her gesture seemed very innocent. I smiled warmly and looked around.

"Now, where was it in this direction?"

"Is there somewhere you want to go?"

"I was thinking of stopping by a city or town to get some supplies. Preferably a large town..."

I wanted to buy at least one set of clothes for this Constellation-like girl. As I was thinking this, the girl suddenly raised her hand.

"Ah!"

[■ ■■■■■ ■■■ ■■■■ ■■■ ■■■ ■■■■■■■■■ ■■■  
■■■■■.]

"There's such a place just off this road!"

Turning in the direction the girl pointed, I enhanced my vision with aura and peered into the distance. True to the girl's words, there was a city in that direction.

"Oh, really."

We headed towards it. Upon arrival, it was neither too large nor too small, exactly the kind of settlement I had hoped for in my mind.

I entered a clothing store. The wind chime on the door jingled. The middle-aged shop owner, who had been reading a book inside, looked up.

"Welcome."

"Hello. I'm here to look at some clothes."

I pointed out the window.

In the middle of the street stood a small girl in rags, staring this way.

"I'd like to buy something for that girl. Something comfortable to wear. Do you have anything good?"

"That girl?"

The shopkeeper looked puzzled as he peered out the window.

"Where's the girl you're talking about?"

"Right there. That girl in rags."

"Hmm? Sorry, but I don't see anyone. I don't know what you're..."

[■ ■■■■■ ■■■ ■■■■ ■■■ ■■■ ■■■■■■■■■ ■■■  
■■■■■.]

"Ah, that girl."

The old man adjusted his glasses. Perhaps his vision had deteriorated with age? The old man seemed slightly embarrassed by his mistake and smiled awkwardly.

"Sorry about that. So, the tender girl needs some clothes. Did you say something comfortable? Just give me a moment, and

I'll bring something out."

"Ah, thank you, sir."

"Everything is business, after all."

I paid the price and handed the clothes to the girl.

Blink.

The girl looked up at me, puzzled.

"What's this for, King of Death?"

"It's a gift."

A wide, white robe.

Although white might seem prone to stains, it was actually a magic item impervious to dirt. The robe was enchanted with

both warmth and cooling magic. It could even serve as a sleeping bag when camping, and with many pockets inside, it offered ample storage space.

"I thought such a robe would come in handy, more so than fancy clothes. Want to try it on?"

"....."

Hesitantly, the girl put on the robe.

"Oh, it looks good."

The robe suited the girl's inherently innocent demeanor well. I felt a strange sense of pride as I examined her from all angles.

"But isn't it a bit big?"

Everything was fine except the robe seemed too bulky for the girl's body, almost 1.5 times too large.

"That's strange. I thought it would fit perfectly..."

"No. It's fine."

[■ ■■■■■ ■■■ ■■■■ ■■■ ■■■ ■■■■■■■■■ ■■■  
■■■■■.]

"It's okay if it's this size, I think."

The girl pulled her hand out from the sleeve. Just a moment ago, her hand had been buried in the sleeve, but now it barely overlapped her wrist. The fit didn't seem excessively wrong.

"Good to hear. I must have been mistaken."

I smiled warmly at the girl.

"It was brief, but I enjoyed our time together."

"....."



"Be careful not to get lost in the forest next time. You can't always count on someone like me being around. I'll be on my way now."

Just as I was about to turn and leave.

"Ki-King of Death! Wait a moment!"

The girl grabbed my sleeve.

"Yes?"

"Well..."

The girl hesitated. Her lips parted, but her tongue seemed to lose its way inside her mouth. After a moment, she bit her lip and looked up at me.

I could briefly glimpse the myriad thoughts crossing through the girl's eyes.

"So..."

[■ ■■■■■ ■■■ ■■■■ ■■■ ■■■ ■■■■■■■■■■ ■■■  
■■■■■.]

What could it be?

Just as I was about to ask, I was interrupted.

“—I've found you.”

It wasn't the girl's voice nor was it mine.

"I've been looking for you for a long time."

".....!"

I swiftly turned towards the source of the voice, gripping the hilt of the holy sword. The voice had come precisely twelve steps away from me, and I had failed to notice any presence until [the other party came within twelve steps].

The implication was clear.

The opponent was an incredibly skilled master.

-Zombie.

'Yes.'

Guardian Spirit warned me in a subdued voice. Knowing well what he was warning about, I nodded.

'...Among the hunters I've met on the 60th floor, he is the strongest by far. That guy.'

He was a man dressed in dark robes.

"I thought you'd run somewhere, but hiding in a village of all places. I wonder if you were trying to hide a tree in the forest, but you weren't the only one with that idea."

The man wore a conical hat, which was so tattered that it was full of holes. It did nothing to shield from rain or snow, and it even failed to hide the man's face.

Through the holes in the conical hat, the man's eyes glaringly looked my way.

"You're hanging around with strange folks, I see."

"....."

"Come with me. You wouldn't want to see blood flow in the streets, would you?"

The grip on my sleeve tightened.

The girl, completely terrified, clung to me.

".....Hmm."

I subtly shifted to shield the girl from the man's gaze. The man with the conical hat frowned.

"What are you?"

"I don't know who you are or why you want to take this child. But the moment you ask [what are you] instead of [who are you] upon first meeting someone, it already shows what kind of person you are."

"Interesting."

The man with the conical hat sneered.

"You know how to judge a person's character but you can't assess strength. Usually, such people die first. You've done well to make it to the 60th floor."

"Perhaps it means I'm not your average person?"

"If your head really survives this and you don't die, I'll acknowledge it."

Chaaang!

What happened in the following instant was as follows.

The man drew his sword and swung it first. A black aura surged, slicing through the air between us in an instant. However, when the distance of twelve steps was reduced to six, my sword stroke intercepted the man's attack.

"....."

The man's eyes widened, seemingly surprised.

Then, whoosh! From three directions—southeast, behind, and west—throwing stars flew towards me. The man wasn't alone; he had brought accomplices and had them lie in wait, but I had already sensed the hostility of the three, and before the throwing stars could come within twenty steps, I intercepted them.

"Huh."

The man's eyes widened a bit more.

A pedestrian, just an ordinary one walking down the street who happened to be near me, suddenly drew a dagger from his bosom and charged. He, too, was one of the man's companions. I reinforced my hand with aura and firmly caught the dagger. Twisting the hand, "Kuhak?!" I shattered the arm up to the shoulder and sent the man flying backward.

That was the full account of what transpired in that brief moment.

"...Not bad."

"Hiiiiek!"

As if time, which had briefly paused, started to flow again, screams erupted from the streets. People, belatedly realizing there was a fight, hurriedly moved away.

Only I and the girl remained.

The man with the conical hat and his companions remained on the road.

"You've got the nerve for such bold words, huh."

"Let's just say I have the ability to discipline the arrogant."

"You knew who we were before you resisted, didn't you?"

"Well, I'm not sure. Hmm. I don't really know."

I stroked my chin.

"Maybe, just a bunch of scumbags trying to drag away a powerless Constellation...?"

"....."

The man with the conical hat's expression became increasingly interesting to watch. Still, it lacked entertainment value. A man's life is his face. Let's make it more interesting.

"Ah. So you're so poor you keep wearing the same conical hat because you can't afford a new one. I see your organization is broke. Should I sponsor you? I have so much money it's practically rotting. I can save up to four beggars like you. Five is tough though. You guys decide who to drop out by drawing straws."

"Decided."

The man with the conical hat gripped her long sword more



tightly.

"I'll cut off your tongue and feed it to the dogs."

The blade gleamed with ominous energy.

It wasn't honed through ordinary means of cultivating aura.

"King of Death..."

Behind me, the girl's anxious voice trembled. Wondering whether she should seek help or if she was just being a burden. I gently winked at her, who was caught between two emotions.

"It's okay."

"....."

The girl bowed her head deeply.

Meanwhile, the man with the conical hat assumed a stance.

"I am the leader of the Blood Demon God Cult, the Blood Demon."

".....Huh?"

I blinked.

"The Blood Demon?"

"Yes."

"The Blood Demon God Cult? So, a cult? With 'Blood' added in front?"

"Indeed."

The man with the conical hat smirked, seemingly pleased with my reaction.

"It's too late for regrets now. Of course, if you cut off your own tongue as an apology, I might forgive you. Spend your life as a mute, repenting for your arrogance. I am generous to those who can chastise themselves..."

"What's that? A total pseudo-religious cult?"

"....."

Abruptly.

The man with the conical hat stopped talking.

I was flabbergasted.

"What's with all this pseudo-religious cult leader strutting around saying 'I am this, I am that'? Blood Demon God? Cult? If it's a cult, it's a cult, if it's a demonic cult, it's a demonic cult, but where did this 'Blood Demon' mongrel come from?"

"What..."

"Hey. Who gave you permission to use 'cult' in your group's name? Now that I look at it, you're not beggars. I misspoke. Hey, even the Beggar's Sect has more roots than you. Know this; if the Beggar's Sect complains about you, 'What kind of rootless rabble are you?' the authorities will side with them."

"....."

"And Blood Demon is a title for a demon. One of the Four Demon Lords I have is called Blood Demon. Not even close to being a leader, but a title used by someone below the leader. Tsk. Where do you get off being so arrogant? Do you want a spanking? Want to get hit?"

"You....."

"Anyway, those who come from martial worlds always seem to lack manners the most. Please act according to your level, really, according to your level. Now, let's start the negotiation. First, remove the 'demon' from your signboard. Remove 'god' too. I'll acknowledge the 'Blood Cult' part."

"I'll kill you."

The man's face twisted like a demon's.

"I'll definitely kill you!"

No.

Why is a pseudo-religious cult leader getting angry?

The pot is calling the kettle black.

# Chapter 316: I'm a Fan (3)

---

The battle with the Blood Demon was truly a scene reminiscent of mountains of corpses and seas of blood.

---

I blinked.

"Huh...?"

What just happened?

It felt like an eternity had passed, yet it also seemed like only a moment had gone by.

It was as if the sense humans have to perceive time had momentarily been paralyzed. To give an example, it was similar to the sensation of being under anesthesia for medical treatment from an Apothecary.

"King of Death. King of Death! Please come to your senses, King of Death!"

Before I knew it, I was lying down. When, why, and where I had lain down were all difficult to discern.

I can't quite remember.

What's clear is the face of the person sobbing in front of me. A boy, an all-too-familiar boy, held both of my hands, looking as though he might burst into tears at any moment.

\*"The girl" from the previous chapter is now "a boy". It's not a translation error or author inconsistency, the character themselves switched genders.

"Are you alright? Please come to your senses."

"Where is this..."

"You've been injured while you were fighting with the Blood Demon. It was a dishonorable fight. While it was 1-on-1, the elite members of the Blood Demon God Cult joined the fight..."

The boy wiped his tears on my sleeve. It seemed as though the floodgates to his eyes had broken, as tears streamed endlessly, causing me concern just from watching.

"Fight... injuries..."

"Ah, please don't move recklessly...!!"

The boy urgently stopped me as I tried to get up.

"You've sustained severe internal injuries, King of Death! Your body is in shambles... bones shattered and organs torn to shreds... just a moment ago, I feared you might never open your eyes again!"

That's when it happened.

"—Ugh?!"

As the boy said, a surge of pain swept through my body. I tried to circulate aura and check my condition. Snap! My ki pathways twisted. Crunch! It felt like a thorny club was ravaging the insides of my veins.



"Ugh, kuh... uh..."

"Ah, what should I do? Wh-what can I do? How can this be fixed?"

It hurts. It feels like death. My eyes are drying up. My cheeks feel cool. The sensation in my fingertips has evaporated. Only pain remains. It's as if someone is peeling off my skin layer by layer, like peeling an orange.

No human could endure such pain.

I could, just because I had died to the point of death.

"Aah."

Suddenly.

From beyond my consciousness, a delighted sigh fluttered.

"Really, what should be done...?"

The scene faded into darkness.

"....."

I opened my eyes.

Again, it felt like a long time had passed, or perhaps, I had merely taken a breath.

What had changed since I lost consciousness was that my mind was somewhat clearer and the boy was coming toward me with a tray of porridge, having donned an apron.

"Ah, please eat. Mister."

"Ah."

The Constellation spooned up some invisible porridge and fed it to me.

The boy scooped up some porridge with a wooden spoon and fed it to me.

"....."

Huh?

"How does it taste?"

The Constellation looked at me expressionlessly.

The girl smiled affectionately.

"I specially made your favorite porridge."

The Constellation murmured softly.

The boy hesitated.

"Is the taste alright?"

"....."

The scent of anchovies wafted in my mouth.

When I was young and caught a cold, the director used to grate apples for me. He would then cook white rice porridge with tiny anchovies added. The grated apple tasted different from the usual apple, just as the porridge tasted different from usual. The bloated anchovies were tasteless but became somewhat chewy if you kept chewing, and they had a subtly nutty flavor.

"Yes. It's delicious."

"Phew, that's a relief."

The Constellation smiled, lifting the corners of his mouth.

The girl let out a sigh of relief.

"It was a real crisis. I merely wished for an enemy to block your path, but out of nowhere, a formidable enemy appeared. It seems you unconsciously believe that [nothing less than this level of strength can hinder you]."

"Yes?"

"No?"

The Constellation spoke as if it were nothing.

The boy tilted his head slightly.

"Did I just say something, Mister?"

"....."

"Why were you so angry at the Blood Demon? Even when attacked, you were dignified, but suddenly hearing about the Blood Demon God Cult, you became agitated. Honestly, I was a bit surprised."

"Ah."

My mind was foggy.

"Because I'm the Vice-lord of a place called the Demonic Cult..."

"Ah."

"I place significant meaning on the two words Demonic Cult. I believe it's a name that shouldn't be used lightly. The fact that mere riffraff dared to mention a cult similar to the Demonic Cult made me enraged."

"Indeed. Indeed."

The Constellation rested his chin on his hand and stared intently at me.

The girl nodded thoughtfully.

"So, that's your sore spot...?"

Hmm.

"I'm curious about the Demonic Cult. If it holds such deep meaning for you, there must have been someone precious. Would you share your story with me?"

.....

"Ah. You had a master called So BaekHyang. It sounds lonely, yet clear, like a fragrance that tickles the nose."

.....

"You love someone named Raviel Ivansia. Heh, she's that beautiful? Ah. Indeed. So that's why no matter how hard I tried, you never fell for any beauty tricks. Troublesome indeed. Being the loved one is the easiest and most powerful way. But with such a deeply engraved presence in your heart, any manipulation would backfire. Scary. Terrifying. I must be careful."

Huh.

".....Did I just say something?"

"Yes? No."

The Constellation caressed my cheek.

The boy grinned with a soft smile.

“Are you not saying anything, Mister?”

Is that so?

It was.

“However, the presence of the Sword Emperor is a bit of a nuisance. A Guardian Spirit, no less. It must have taken a long time for my powers to take hold because of that. What to do...? If I remove it, I'd be too far from the current Mister. No choice then. Yes, it'll be a bit tiring, but I'll take care of both of you.”

Swoosh!

An arrow flew towards me.

-Hey, Zombie Kim! What are you doing!

The Guardian Spirit shouted incredulously.



-Losing focus during a fight, have you become so complacent, thinking you're some high-and-mighty expert who has devoured the heavens!?

Ah.

Right.

Currently, we were raiding the stronghold of the Blood Demon God Cult, in the midst of purging the enemy.

Because... how I ended up attacking this place was...

“Mister!”

I lifted my head towards the direction of the voice.

“Over here!”

The girl.

I had run into her by chance in the forest two weeks ago, and though she was once a Constellation, she had now lost all her power. Along with the Thirteen Evils, there were cults like the Blood Demon God Cult on this 60th floor, not just them but also the God Demon Sect, White Demon Sect, and the Mad Demon Sect, collectively known as the Four Demons.

They were all...

Aiming to kidnap this boy for their nefarious uses.

Just like the Magic Tower.

Due to being bedridden a few days ago, I couldn't do anything but watch as the girl was kidnapped.

That was something I couldn't possibly accept.

“Please save me...!”

The boy's scream snapped me back to reality. Right, what's there to hesitate about? Deep within this fortress, the girl was chained to a pillar with iron chains.

No matter if she had lived for thousands of years or was once a Constellation, the child now was fragile. A fragile being. Someone must protect her. It just so happened to be me.

“Yes. Awaken in such a manner.”

From the far reaches of my mind. No, the very bottom of my consciousness. Perhaps from the highest sky, a distant voice echoed.

“What will you do now?”

“I will save the boy.”

I answered firmly. Answered? No. In this fortress-like castle, countless arrows flew at me, and I barely managed to fend them off one by one. Because, uh, because...

“Even though you haven't fully recovered from the injuries sustained in the fight against the Blood Demon, do you still intend to save the boy?”

“Yes.”

“If so, the Blood Demon would come out and ask, [To think you'd dare confront us with a body no better than a rag, it's utterly ludicrous. Are you seeking death?] The Blood Demon seems to have been wounded in the previous bloody battle as well, but look... there are hundreds of trustworthy subordinates around him....”

"....."

“Ah. How unfortunate. An arrow has flown and struck your thigh.”

Throb.

Pain surged through my thigh. It hurt. I almost kneeled.

“What will you do? Will you swing your sword again?”

The Constellation slowly stroked my thigh.

The boy cried out, calling for me.

“...Yes.”

“Really? You might really die at this rate?”

The Constellation chuckled.

The boy started crying.

“Arrows continue to rain down from the sky, piercing you.”

“I dodge.”

“Yes, you are strong. Your aura can indeed cover the sky and block the rain of arrows. But at that moment, the internal injuries you sustained flare up in agony.”

Crunch!

It was the sound of the pain of bones being torn apart coursing through my entire body.

“Argh.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Gah. Uh, ah! Damn, it...!”

“Let me ask again. Does it hurt?”

“Damn... these, bastards. Getting all high and mighty with their bow skills.”

“One last time, I'll ask. King of Death, where does it hurt, how does it hurt, and how much does it hurt? Please answer me. It would please me to hear it.”

It was torturous.

“My body.”

As if it was burning, no.

It was actually burning.

My body, which needed rest and recuperation for a while now, was being burnt by my own aura. Normally, the aura should first protect the bones, blood vessels, muscles, and nerves before being utilized. But in the current situation, I had no capacity to protect myself.

"Ah....."

My veins burst with the pressure, scorching all my muscles like flowing lava. The aura pooled in my blood vessels, melting my bones into a mushy mess.

"Oh dear."

The Constellation reveled in my agony.

The girl cried out in despair at my pain.

"How could this be..."

My breath was toxic.

“So adeptly, [pain] can be imagined, can't it?”

“Ugh, ah. Gah....., ugh.”

“All I did was say you were hit by an arrow, Mister. I simply laid out the situation you would face if you came to rescue me, having been kidnapped. But how could you... how could you imagine it so vividly, to this extent?”

It's amazing, someone seemed to murmur.

“Incredible. It's as if, as if you've really experienced [agonizing death] before...? But that can't be. It shouldn't be. How can you imagine such pain? Have you experienced your bones melting before? Have your blood vessels ever burnt up? How do you know such pain to recreate it under my power...?”

I pressed forward despite the pain.

Arrows struck my shoulder and forearm but I ignored them. Pushing my aura to its limits, I stepped forward and slashed through the ranks of the Blood Demon God Cult who had tied



the boy to the pillar.

“Without a doubt...”

The Constellation reached out and cupped my cheeks.

The boy sobbed, bound tightly to the pillar.

“You are the one I’ve been waiting for since thousands of years.”

Just a little more.

“For someone you’ve only known for a few days, you throw your life into the fray, facing pain worse than death, not just in words, not out of ignorance, but knowing what death and pain are, yet you still move forward...”

Just a little more.

“You, perhaps, can imagine any quest I set forth. If I say you’re in the middle of the ocean facing death, you’ll truly find

yourself drowning in the sea. Drowning. It's a different dimension from the mediocre hunters who suck up to you—you will truly imagine every crisis, every pain, every death as they are. I have waited only for someone like you to ascend.”

Finally.

My blade struck the Blood Demon.

Blood splattered.

“You are my third disciple.”

[■ ■■■■■ ■■■ ■■■■ ■■■ ■■■ ■■■■■■■■■ ■■■  
■■■■■.]

“I will create quests for you. I'll continue the campaign. I'll create a world where you can feel a sense of achievement and joy. I'll become a god just for you. I only ask for one thing. Trust me, Mister.”

A bright smile emerged from the blood-stained scene.

“Will you trust me?”

[■ ■■■■■ ■■■ ■■■■ ■■■ ■■■ invites you to their faith.]

[Will you accept ■ ■■■■■ ■■■ ■■■■ ■■■ ■■■ as your  
Constellation?]

Darkness enveloped my vision.

# Chapter 317: Me and You, on the Frontlines of Time (1)

---

[Congratulations.]

[■ ■■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■ ■■■ has become your Constellation.]

[You have become the sole disciple of ■ ■■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■  
■■■.]

It felt like a dream.

A dream which wasn't mine, but someone else's.

-.....

The dream seemed both long and short, meddling with my sense of time. It was as if I was standing in the middle of a stream with the waters wrapping around both my sides at their own distinct paces.

The sensation of being devoured by time.

-Hmm.

Tick.

A day had passed.

Or at least, it felt like a day had passed.

-This is definitely fucked up.

‘What?’

-Never mind. It's useless to speak now. I'm also under the dominion of a power. Even if I spout nonsense right now, it'll just distort your memory, and surprisingly, mine as well.

‘...What are you talking about?’

-I'm simply stating a very obvious truth of life that speaking is often futile. I'm informing you, Zombie, that you've transitioned from a physical zombie to a temporal one.

What the hell?

-How do we deal with this nasty motherfucker?

The Guardian Spirit muttered emotionlessly.

-Simply distorting memories would have been manageable, but this is likely [world manipulation]. Beyond the 60th floor, it's filled with perverted lunatics. It's lamentable that a pervert has attached to you, but thinking about it, it's fitting. Kim Zombie, this bastard, has all the qualities to attract all sorts of perverts in the universe.

‘...So, what exactly are you talking about?’

-What to do.

The Guardian Spirit's eyes sank.

Ignoring my question, the Guardian Spirit was lost in his own world.

-How to kill this nasty son of a bitch?

At that moment.

“Mister?”

A very familiar voice gently tugged at my ears. Following the voice, I naturally turned my head and saw the [adorably precious] boy tilting his head in confusion.

“Do you have something troubling you...?”

“Ah.”

His anxious expression and his worried gaze.

Every expression and gesture of the boy, perhaps even his very existence, flickered like a candle flame.

I wanted to protect that fragile and pitiful being.

“It’s nothing. Just...”

- Hey, don't talk about me. Let's see what happens.

“...Just lost in thought.”

My mouth felt dry. The thought of having to lie to this pure boy, to hide something from my [only Constellation] and [unique god], brought an unimaginably deep sense of guilt.

“Hmm.”

The boy smiled with his eyes.

“Is that so? Mister, you're quite the thinker.”



[■ ■■■■■ ■■■ ■■■■ ■■■ ■■■ ■■■■■■■■■ ■■■  
■■■■■.]

“Thinking deeply is a sign of kindness, I believe.”

Saying that, the boy leaned his head against my forearm. A pleasant scent wafted to my nose. For some reason, it was a fragrance I really liked... a fresh scent I seemed to have smelled somewhere else, from someone else.

-Hmm.

While enjoying this blissful moment, the Guardian Spirit spoke to me after days.

-This is definitely fucked up.

‘What?’

-Never mind. It's useless to speak now. I'm also under the dominion of a power. Even if I spout nonsense right now, it'll just distort your memory, and surprisingly, mine as well.

‘...What are you talking about?’

-Is this the first time you're hearing what I just said?

What the hell?

‘I knew you weren't in your right mind, but you've never been this off before. Maybe you're missing the Grey Spider? Sword Emperor, loneliness is an incurable disease.’

-Fine. Fuck. That's just great.

The Guardian Spirit smirked.

-So, [any memory or event that interferes with their power] is automatically erased, huh? Definitely. It's a Lexical Star-class Constellation.

".....?"

-Ah, please, I beg you, act a bit. If you weren't a Hunter, you might have been an actor. Is asking for a tiny miracle of not

showing everything on your face too much to expect from you? Am I expecting too much from the world?

‘...It feels quite unpleasant, but for now, I’ll grant you that miracle.’

-Thanks.

Tick.

A day had passed.

“We’ve finally defeated the remnants of the Blood Demon Sect, Mister!”

The boy rejoiced.

“Who would have thought that the Mad Demon Sect, White Demon Sect, and God Demon Sect were connected behind the Blood Demon Sect! And that a final boss named Heavenly Demon was hiding among the four factions! Unforgivable!”

“For Mister, the title of Heavenly Demon is more than just a name. You can't forgive them either, right?”

Indeed.

I am now traveling with the boy through the 61st floor.

It feels like a week has passed in the blink of an eye.

“To audaciously claim the name of the demonic cults and even dare to misuse the title of Heavenly Demon among four places. They are cruel bastards!”

During this time, we had been defeating the false demonic cults.

We defeated the Blood Demon and destroyed the cult that kidnapped the boy. While rescuing the boy, we learned many things. That he was a Constellation who had lost his power. That he was on the brink of extinction without even a single disciple to believe in him.

『I will become your disciple.』

I told him that.

The boy cried and embraced me, saying he too would become my Constellation. Though powerless, he would create quests solely for me, and urged that we both keep our spirits up until we reach the 100th floor together.

『We pledge to accompany each other for life.』

Certainly, that was the case.

『A single Hunter and a fragment of a Constellation.』

This is our story alone.

-Huh.

For some reason, the Guardian Spirit laughed merrily.

-This is ridiculous. No wonder a Lexical Star-class Constellation like Hamusutra would be in charge of the beginner's stage. They might be the same kind of perverts, but

at least they don't consider the world their personal property. It's actually a given, but there's no Constellation fulfilling this obvious role. Think about it. How scarce must talents be for someone like Hamusutra to guide newbies?

This is some local broadcast-level shit.

“Alright! Mister, let's set off!”

The boy, with his arms crossed, smiled brightly.

“This time, it's a quest to beat down those White Demon Sect bastards! My one and only disciple!”

I smiled back.

“Yes, let's go right away, my god.”

-I'm just curious, but if I say the exchange between you two just now seemed extremely absurd to me, would this also be censored by the world?

[■ ■■■■■ ■■■ ■■■■ ■■■ ■■■ ■■■■■■■■■ ■■■  
■■■■■.]

‘Huh? What did you just say?’

-Got it. Fuck. This bastard is being childish, see.

We continued our journey.

The White Demon Sect disciples were lawless villains.

Every first day of the month, the White Demon Sect descended upon the twelve worlds they had colonized, gathering three hundred children as offerings for human sacrifices. They sacrificed the lives of these children to build their inner strength, which they referred to as demonic power (魔功).

I was enraged.

『Such evil is absolutely intolerable by the King of Death.』

Tick.

A day had passed.

『The King of Death did not hesitate in eradicating the false demonic disciples. In the eyes of the King of Death, they were clearly evil. There was no need to consider their circumstances. No need to ponder their past. No need to understand their hearts. Without a second thought, simply, the sword had to be swung.』

Tick.

Another day went by.

『A fight where one does not need to yield oneself, a fight where it's okay not to accept others, how pleasant is that? How enjoyable. How blissful. Perhaps the King of Death had long been thirsty for the joy of simply forgetting oneself and fighting.』

Tick.

Another day passed.



-If you're going to be childish, then I'll join you.

With every passing day, a ticking sound was heard from somewhere. It was a sound that quickly faded into oblivion, resembling the ticking of a clock's second hand or the sound of someone freely typing away on a typewriter.

-I don't expect much from you, Zombie.

As if playing the keys of a piano.

-But do this one thing for me.

‘Ah, what now?’

-Every dawn, I'll recite a sentence. Just don't forget those. Don't worry. They won't be sentences that threaten your adorable god. They won't shake the world, just meaningless sentences.

‘...So, you're basically talking nonsense.’

-Yeah. Nonsense.

The Guardian Spirit smiled.

His gaze wasn't on me but on someone else, beyond my shoulder, into the void.

-So, one sentence a day. Utterly useless nonsense. You can remember that much, right?

'Let's hear it then.'

-This year is bound to be a jackpot because it's a bumper crop full of bullshit, even though it was made in a hurry.

'.....'

Pure, unadulterated nonsense, right?

If you squeezed it, nonsense juice would gush out.

-Remember it.

However, the Guardian Spirit's face was deadly serious.

-Forget it, and you're dead.

‘...Is there any significance to using a part of my life's disk space for this beyond being a mere collection of fragments?’

-Remember it before I chuck your entire life into the trash bin, you bastard. It's one sentence a day. I won't say anything more today, so please just listen.

'Hmm.'

It was rare for the Guardian Spirit to beg like this.

The atmosphere was slightly overwhelming due to his intense expression.

I sighed.

‘Alright, alright. I’ll remember it, happy?’

Tick.

Another day went by.

Every dawn, or at least when I felt it was dawn, the Guardian Spirit casually dropped a line.

-The sovereign is a saintly king, right? But the one who is the general now is a famed commander.

‘.....’

-You seem to want to say something, but just burn it into your brain. Do I really need to beg you to listen to me?

‘No, you don’t have to go that far. It just seems you’re being incredibly stupid. It’s pitiful...’

-Great. Feel pity all you want. Let’s see how it goes.

Tick.

Another day passed.

I successfully suppressed the White Demon Sect disciples. It was a grueling quest. The sorcerers who had been conducting human sacrifices for hundreds of years were powerful, and the strength they had accumulated was solid, irrespective of their karma. Evil deeds. Wicked acts. Villains. They were like a trifecta of cruelty, and I had to give my all to defeat them.

-The evening brings me joy, because it's blessed by that saintess.

Tick.

Yet, the arduous battle was inexplicably enjoyable. Upon reflection, I seemed to love the act of clashing with full force.

Was that why I felt a surge of joy deep within my heart when I faced off against the Grey Spider of the Tower?

-Let's become conmen in the local mart! That's the only way to enjoy the life of a star.

Tick.

The journey with the boy became more enjoyable as days passed. The world was still overflowing with such clear-cut evils. Harm did not beget harm, and perpetrators did not pretend to be victims. They were the kind of villains one could cleanly slice through without hesitation.

-Terror be gone, death stay away.

Tick.

Still, the Guardian Spirit kept spouting meaningless nonsense.

Another day went by.

-Kim Gong-Ja, you're too fucking floaty, you fucker. I want to vomit.

'.....'

I just let it be.

Just as I remained myself, the Guardian Spirit would always be the Guardian Spirit.

After all, while people could change, the Sword Emperor couldn't just be replaced.

-Mister.

The seventh day.

-Do you trust me?

Today, too, we were dusting off false demonic disciples. After the Blood Demon Sect, God Demon Sect, and White Demon Sect, only the Mad Demon Sect remained. After smashing the enemy's outpost, we joyfully headed towards the Mad Demon Sect's lair.

“Ehehehe~.”

The boy even hummed a little tune as he walked ahead. Watching his back, I felt proud. It was as if the canvas of my heart was being painted with the color of happiness.

The Guardian Spirit was like ashes randomly sprinkled on a colorful canvas.

‘No, I don’t trust you.’

-I trust you.

What's this?

Chills ran down my spine.

‘Are you insane?’

-But it's not just you I trust. I also trust Gramps Marcus.

'.....'



-I know it's funny to say "also," because Gramps isn't your substitute. But I trust you understand what I mean.

The Guardian Spirit's voice dissolved into thin air.

-To be honest, it's okay if you fail.

'.....'

-Trust means believing that each other will do their best. And "best" is not something defined by others but by oneself. Hence, a trusting relationship means each party deciding on their best and accepting each other's decisions. That's all there is to it.

‘Do you know that I'm really scared right now?’

I was serious.

Even if he cursed and swore at me 24/7, it wouldn't be as bone-chilling as this moment.

‘What exactly are you trying to say with such a prelude?’

-Just listen to me for once.

‘I am listening.’

-No.

The Guardian Spirit looked at me intently.

-Listen carefully.

-Do you remember the nonsense I've been spouting for a week?

‘I remember.’

-Your memory is shit. Do you really remember everything?

‘After you threatened me like that, should I just ignore it?’

And my memory is fine. It's just that yours is freakishly good, that's all.'

-Good to know.

The Guardian Spirit nodded slightly.

-Then recite them.

'Out loud?'

-No. In your head.

'.....'

Fine.

I closed my eyes.

"...Huh? Mister?"

Perhaps because I suddenly stopped, the boy, who was walking ahead, also halted and turned to look back at me.

“Sorry, please wait a moment, my god.”

I asked for his patience.

I focused quietly.

‘The nonsense spoken by the Guardian Spirit.’

The image was of etching white letters onto a black canvas.

For an aura user, whose work involved manifesting products of consciousness externally, this wasn't a difficult task.

I lined up the sentences from the past 7 days like bricks, one after the other.

This year is bound to be a jackpot because it's a bumper crop full of bullshit even though it was made in a hurry.

The sovereign is a saintly king, right? But the one who is the general now is a famed commander.

The evening brings me joy, because it's blessed by that saintess.

Let's become conmen in the local mart! That's the only way to enjoy the life of a star.

Terror be gone, death stay away.

Kim Gong-Ja, you're too fucking floaty, you fucker. I want to vomit.

It wasn't a difficult task.

However, the reason the Guardian Spirit had to say [such things].

To find that out, I accelerated the time of my consciousness.

'He's not the kind to utter such embarrassing lines with

mere nonsense.'

What could it be?

What kind of trick had he played?

'What did the Guardian Spirit say?'

I recalled.

Somehow, inexplicably, parts of my memory were eaten away as if by worms.

Yet, I could still recall some voices.

『This is definitely fucked up.』

I remember.

But this alone doesn't serve as a clue.

『Is this the first time you're hearing what I just said?』

This too.

『Alright.』

Then, this?

『If you're going to be childish, then I'll join you.』

I paused my accelerated consciousness for a moment on this timeline.

"....."

Childish.

The Sword Emperor is originally a childish person.

Therefore.

Taking the first letter of what the Guardian Spirit said:

‘This’ year is bound to be a jackpot because it’s a bumper crop full of bullshit even though it was made in a hurry

‘The’ sovereign is a saintly king, right? But the one who is the general now is a famed commander

‘The’ evening brings me joy, because it’s blessed by that saintess

‘Let’s’ become comen in the local mart! That’s the only way to enjoy the life of a star

‘Terror’ be gone, death stay away

‘Kim’ Gong-Ja, you’re too fucking floaty, you fucker. I want to vomit

"....."

No, that's not it.



It makes no sense.

Even if I take the last word and sound it out... hurrycommandersaintessstarawayvomit? No. Even combining them in my head doesn't form a plausible message. Wait, just a moment.

Just a moment.

This year is bound to be a jackpot because it's a bumper crop full of bullshit even though it was made in a 'hurry'.

The sovereign is a saintly king, 'right'? But the one who is the general 'now' is a famed commander.

The evening brings me joy, because it's blessed by 'that' saintess.

Let's become 'con'men in the local mart! That's the only way to enjoy the life of a 'star'.

Terror be gone, 'death' stay away.

████ ████████ ████████ to ██████████ ████████ ██████████  
██████████. ██████████ ██████████ it.

.....

Hurry.

Right now.

That.

Con-Star.

Death.

To it.

.....

『Hurry and die to that Constellation, right now.』

"....."

“Mister?”

『Do you trust me?』

“Are you alright? You’ve been silent for a while. And your expression is very absent.”

『I trust you.』

“Ah. It’s perhaps due to the internal injuries from fighting the mages...? It was indeed a long and exhausting battle. The quest was rushed a bit, wasn’t it? Shall we rest a bit before continuing?”

『Listen.』

"....."

I am.

“Mister?”

I am.

Handing a dagger to the boy's hand.

“Ah?”

I pulled the dagger towards my throat.

".....!"

A slicing sound erupted.

“Why... Mister... what the...?!”

Everything happened in an instant.

Before he could resist, before he could use any power or skill, I immobilized his body with my aura, and placed my neck upon the immobilized blade.

My neck was diagonally severed.

[You have died.]

Beyond the blade, the boy wore a look of horror.

"-----!!"

A scream.

“Why! Damn it! Fucking—”

A shout.

[A skill has been activated.]

And then, the world around me shattered into pieces.

# Chapter 318: Me and You, on the Frontlines of Time (2)

---

I have no place that I can call my hometown.

If there was one, it would be the pillowcases spread out in the sunlight, wafting with a fresh scent. The bunk beds at the orphanage and that very place where, when I was young, the director would clean my ears with a cotton swab.

A hometown now unreachable.

[You have died.]

Blink. Blink.

Like a broken lamp gasping for breath, a warning sounded in my mind.

[You are currently an S-class hunter.]

[Due to the enhanced penalty, you will choose the order in which skills are activated.]

If Kim Gong-Ja's hometown was the faded, checkered bunk bed on the second floor of the orphanage, then this place, too, could be considered his hometown.

The hometown of the King of Death.

It was a dark origin.

[1. Will you first acquire the skill of the enemy who killed you?]

[2. Will you first materialize the trauma of the enemy who killed you?]



If one were to add a bit of humor, perhaps this was the essence of the King of Death.

Heh.

A man with roots. The King of Death, Kim Gong-Ja...

-Yeah, I've heard your escapism.

The Guardian Spirit said.

-Hey, there's a lot I want to say, but choose option 1 for now. Starting with trauma will be a disaster.

"Damn it..."

-Yeah, I get that you're dying of embarrassment right now, but can you just choose 1 for now? Even when you were B-class, your trauma was messed up. Now you're S-class. Screwed, right? Now, choose. Option 1.

"Arghhh...!"

-Choose!

I chose.

[You have selected option 1.]

[The condition for your skill has been fulfilled by your death.]

[Randomly copying a skill from the Constellation ■■■■■■  
■■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■.]

Swoosh.

Golden fireflies fluttered around.

[Creating skill cards.]

[Please select a skill card.]

And that was all.

I clutched my head, waiting for the cards to form. 3 seconds. 6 seconds. But no matter how long I waited, I could only see one bright light moving around in the dark void looking like a firefly.

Which meant that...

".....Just one?"

There was just one skill.

The Constellation that mocked me possessed only one skill.

"There's no point in choosing. I have to pick that one anyway. Wait, now that I think about it, didn't my appearance change a bit too? Not just the choices, but me."

I opened and closed my hand in the darkness. There was a sensation. It wasn't like moving an imaginary hand in consciousness or swimming in a dream. It was the real sensation of my body moving.

-Right?

The Guardian Spirit also stroked his chin.

-Back in the day, I could only hear your voice or see you faintly like a ghost, but now you have a full body. It's still pitch dark around, though.

"Is this also because my Hunter rank has gone up?"

-Who knows. Even if I'm a genius, how would I know your skills better than you do?

Muttering "let's see," the Guardian Spirit turned to the back of the golden card.

And read the skill description written there.

+

[The Universe's Wild Expanse] (1/3)



Universe's Wild Expanse] is effective only when you and your companion try to fulfill an imagination together. Choose your companion wisely.

\*However, this skill can only be used three times.

This skill is not permanent. The number of uses decreases with each casting. When [The Universe's Wild Expanse] is used for the third time and completely ends, the skill will be destroyed.

\*A penalty is imposed each time the skill is used.

Currently, '1 use' of [The Universe's Wild Expanse] remains.

+

My mouth fell open.

At first, I was speechless at the skill's immense power. But then...

"So many restrictions!?"

I was shocked at the unprecedented number of limitations.

"One, two, three... four restrictions? Four? My God. Even [Returner's Winding Clock], which is also EX-ranked, only has one restriction. I've never seen a skill with more than two restrictions before, and now this..."

-Hmm.

The Guardian Spirit murmured. Unlike me, he seemed to find it reasonable.

-Even if it was a top-tier Constellation, I wondered how it could be so terrifying. Indeed. Originally, it maximized the effect by slapping penalties on its own power. My intuition is never wrong. A pervert playing with perverts. The Master of Perverts.

"Master of Perverts..."

-Do you remember?

The Guardian Spirit suddenly asked.

"Yes?"

-The name of the Constellation. You were half-brainwashed into worshiping it as a god, but it was your dedicated Constellation for a while. Every time it used its power, its name appeared in the messages. Do you remember the name of the Constellation?

"....."

I furrowed my brows deep in thought.

".....No, I don't remember. Is this also the effect of [The Universe's Wild Expanse]? A wish, an imagination, not wanting its name to be revealed, erasing our memory of it."

-It's possible, but there's another interpretation.

The Guardian Spirit flicked his finger.



The golden card bobbed up and down.

-The name was stolen.

"Stolen?"

-The penalty.

Penalty.

-This space isn't under the Constellation's influence. It's free. However, the skill card's description doesn't even mention the alias, just ■ ■■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■ ■■■. There must be a reason for it.

".....So the name was completely erased?"

-Ninety-nine percent.

The Guardian Spirit crossed his arms and slowly tilted his head.

-According to this, [The Universe's Wild Expanse] can only be used 3 times. And it's already been used twice. Kim Zombie, you're probably the last target chosen for [The Universe's Wild Expanse], the 3rd and final companion.

"....."

Upon hearing those words, a voice came to mind.

The Constellation had informed me when asking me to become its believer.

『You are the one I've been waiting for since thousands of years.』

『You are my third disciple.』

『Will you trust me?』

The third disciple.

The Constellation had clearly said so.

-Therefore.

As I gathered clues from past memories, the Guardian Spirit speculated on his own. With a snap, the Guardian Spirit flicked his finger.

-This mysterious Constellation has already used [The Universe's Wild Expanse] twice and received two penalties. One of them was probably 'losing its name forever.'

"Losing its name... Is that such a severe penalty?"

"Why do you think Constellation Killer was so strong? Why did you make such a fuss about getting back the name of Constellation Killer?"

I pondered, resting my chin on my hand.

The Guardian Spirit scratched his cheek.

-Names are important. Losing it is a massive penalty.

"Um."

-It's significant for people, but for a Constellation, it's an enormous penalty.

The Guardian Spirit explained.

-A name is like a coordinate. Without a name, there's no target, without a target, there's no direction, and it's nearly impossible for faith to gather to a Constellation whose whereabouts are unknown. Losing a name is akin to 'giving up on faith.' It becomes impossible to become a major Constellation like Mahos or Babbit.

That was one penalty.

"What about the other penalty then?"

-Something similar to a name. Something that occupies a part of one's existence.

The Guardian Spirit's gaze deepened.

-I believe it's probably the appearance.

Appearance. Looks. Outward form.

The physical totality that exposes oneself to the outside.

-Any guesses?

"....."

There is.

An idea came to mind.

『I'd like to buy something for that girl.』

『Something comfortable to wear. Do you have anything good?』

There was a time when I tried to buy a set of clothes for the

Constellation in a village which was probably constructed by [The Universe's Wild Expanse].

The shopkeeper said.

『That girl? Where's the girl you're talking about?』

『Right there. That girl in rags.』

『Hmm? Sorry, but I don't see anyone. I don't know what you're...』

That's right.

Initially, the shopkeeper didn't recognize the Constellation. Rather, even if he did, he couldn't precisely identify it.

It was the same for me.

『But, isn't it a bit big?』

『That's sttrange. I thought it would fit perfectly...』

I ended up buying clothes that were too big for the Constellation.

Even though I recognized the Constellation as a 'girl', somehow, unconsciously, I gifted her clothes much larger than 'her'.

".....That's right."

Not just the physique. The voice, gender, tone of speech, everything I remember is dubious.

Literally in the dark.

All things forming the appearance of the Constellation were shrouded in fog.

"The Constellation lost its name. It lost its appearance too. That's the penalty the Constellation bears. And choosing me as the third believer, the last partner for [The Universe's Wild Expanse], means..."

-There's one more penalty far worse than losing a name or appearance left.

"Yes."

Perhaps.

".....Its entire existence might be erased."

All traces of the Constellation's life.

Including its own memories and those of others who remembered it, everything might disappear as the third penalty.

So called 'erasure of existence'.

I couldn't think of a more severe penalty than losing a name or appearance.

-Indeed.



The Guardian Spirit nodded at my conjecture.

-Despite such penalties, the Constellation wanted to use [The Universe's Wild Expanse] on you, not caring if it disappeared.

"....."

-Why, you might ask? But I guess we'll find out soon enough.

"Yeah."

I reached out.

"Anyway, I'll have to see the trauma."

I caught the only golden light twinkling in this void.

[Selection complete.]

[Copying skill.]

As I gripped it with my fingers, the card dissolved into nothingness. It transformed into golden fireflies and flowed towards my heart. For a while, my heart was dyed in gold.

And then.

[You are penalized by the skill.]

[You are currently an S-class Hunter]

[Warning.]

[Warning.]

Tick.

Somewhere, a clock hand started to move.

[The level of penalty is supreme.]

[Welcome to the Human Realm.]

At a furious speed beyond cognition, the hour, minute and second hands jumbled up, leaving only afterimages as they spun crazily.

[Re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

Suddenly, my heart chilled.

When I was B-class and faced the Constellation Killer's trauma, the Guardian Spirit couldn't enter with me. No. He did enter, but couldn't maintain his existence. He was overlaid on mine and Kim Yul's memory, and he transformed into someone else.

There was also a time when I died as an A-class.

It was to the young clown, the Jester. While preparing for war with the Magic Tower, after drinking poison repeatedly, I inadvertently ended up dying multiple times.

'That person's trauma wasn't much.'

She lived her life enjoying it. She wasn't on the level of Kim Yul or Ester.

Not every human living in the world can be that unhappy.

Ultimately, the density of trauma was determined not only by my level but also by the killer's life.

'.....What will it be this time?'

Tick.

'The trauma of a Constellation.'

Tick.

'If it's severe, I might even disappear myself...'

Somewhere, a clock hand stopped.

'But.'

I bit my lip.

'I'll overcome it.'

The moment I made up my mind.

[Warning.]

[Unable to find the alias of the skill target.]

[Unable to find the true name of the s

kill target.]

In the darkening consciousness, the tower's voice rang.

[Warning.]

[Unable to find the appearance of the skill target.]

[Re-enactment failed.]

[Substituting necessary data for manifestation.]

With an ominous sound, I thought, and then.

[Manifesting the trauma of the enemy who killed you.]

Pop.

My consciousness was cut off.

# Chapter 319: On the Path of Endless Strife (1)

---

It's tedious.

"....."

I blinked my eyes.

As my eyelids fluttered, I attempted to move the tips of my fingers. They moved.

Without any issue, I lifted my head, raised my torso, and moved my lips.

"Kim..... Gong-Ja....."

It worked.

I could speak. My name. The coordinate of my trace.

I hadn't lost it.

"Uh.....!?"

Suddenly, a severe pain wracked my head.

"Ugh.....! Uh...!"

The blood vessels on the side of my head throbbed as if they were going to burst. The headache spread quickly from the side to the front of my head. My lips parted, and my salivary glands uncontrollably sputtered. I barely managed to wipe the drool leaking from my mouth with the back of my hand.

"Huhk....."

"Miss! Are you alright?"



Someone burst in. The sound of the door and footsteps intertwined.

Even the urgency in those noises was as grating as scratching a lump of metal in my head.

“Keep it... quiet.....”

I could only groan.

“Keep the... noise down.....”

“Oh my. Look at the fever on your head.”

Fortunately, it seemed the other party understood my words.

“I thought you were a bit better over the weekend, but oh dear, what to do. I’ll call a doctor.”

“Hmm.....”

“Just wait a bit, Miss. The others will be here soon, too.”

I found it hard to grasp the situation.

Being addressed as "Miss," I must have become a woman.

Then, was the original gender of ■■■■■■ a female?

‘Strange.’

There was no record of the original gender for ■■■■■■■■■■. It was obliterated. Since the tower stripped that name and appearance, even if my skill glimpsed the trauma, it wouldn't be known.

My skill is also executed by the tower, isn't it?

‘Why then?’

I squinted through the pain.

‘What kind of person has the trauma been replaced with.....’

And the moment I looked up at the mirror in the room, I forgot to even moan and gaped.

"....."

Hair as sorrowful as moonlight, silver.

Eyes that circulate blood, making the onlooker shudder.

Yet, the curve from the forehead to the jawline is so agonizingly delicate, one cannot help but watch the precarious balancing act, feeling an unknown fear while having no choice but to gaze upon her, denying any other option.

That was.

“Lady Raviel? Are you alright?”

“Seems you've got a fever as soon as you woke up again today...”

“Being as prone to illness as you are, it's alright. It's probably nothing serious.”

“What should we do? Should we inform the madam?”

“Wouldn't that just add worry on top of worry? Let me examine her first and then...”

She was the person I loved.

It's tedious.

"....."

I lay by the fountain in the garden, gazing blankly at the sky.

It seems that I've become the goddess I love, Raviel Ivansia.

And a very young Raviel at that.

"About twelve years old, I guess...."

Even this voice that reverberates inside my mouth carried an unchanged beautiful resonance despite being my own.

"Uh."

Just muttering to myself made me somehow feel embarrassed. As if Raviel whispered a secret into my ear.

What to do.

If someone else sees this, they'll think I'm a lunatic who's smitten with his own voice, just a mad person.

My embarrassment aside, I wouldn't want Raviel to be regarded as a madwoman.

"Is that so?"

I realized.

I must become mute.

What a brilliant solution.

Might as well live with my eyes closed too. I can avoid mirrors, but that'd be trouble when maids are dressing me. It's best to just bind my face with bandages and live like that.

"Miss! You can't just lie down in the fountain!"

A maid hurried over from afar.

"Come quickly."

I was lying on the rim of the circular fountain. Even though the sunlight was scorching, it was cool here because of the fountain's chill seeping in.

Raviel liked cool sensations. I knew that since I started living with her. Even as a child, she was the same, instinctively seeking cool places.

“No, I misspoke. Come slowly. You're out of breath.”

“Heck, hek... Oh my, I'm dying...”

“You're already out of breath. My advice was too late. It's a master's negligence to not notice a servant's panting.”

“Ah, Miss.... In such a place, recklessly, lying down! As the empire's premier lady, your dignity is in question...!”

The maid covered my waist with a thin blanket. Even the blanket was of the highest quality touch. The Ivansia family, proving to all that they need not be frugal, indulged in unnecessary luxury even for a blanket.

“Is that so?”

“Yes!”

“Think about it. As you said, I am the empire's premier lady. But being the premier lady is not only a status given at birth but also a credential that must be proven time and again in the future.”

“Huh?”

“If I am not worthy of being the premier lady as you said, lying leisurely by the fountain may look vulgar. My caliber is just that limited. However, what if it's not vulgar?”

“Huh?”

“If I still appear noble despite lying by the fountain, that proves my ladylike quality, doesn't it? Eating, sleeping, wearing and simply living should emanate nobility. Naturally, even lying by the fountain should turn into a painting, shouldn't it?”

“Uh... Uhm...?”

“So the blanket is unnecessary.”

I flicked it, sending the blanket into the fountain.

"Ah! But it's expensive...!"



“The fountain might occasionally want a blanket too. Rather than that, look at me.”

The maid hesitantly obeyed my command.

Her eyes captured my image.

Lying on the rim of the fountain, with one arm stretched down, I looked at the maid at an angle.

"....."

“How is it?”

“...Noble.”

“Does it become a painting?”

“Yes. You are a painting, Miss...”

“I ask your aesthetic sense. Would adding a brown blanket to this portrait bring cultural gain or loss? If this painting were to hang in the palace corridor, should it include a blanket or not?”

“...Oh? Would it look more beautiful with the blanket...?”

“Exactly.”

I nodded in satisfaction.

“So, it's proven that I have no issue being the empire's premier lady. I'm striving to create a picture worthy of hanging on the palace walls. Your worry has also been proven unnecessary.”

“Huh? ...Uh?”

“Now go. I wish to enjoy the garden's freshness and the fountain's murmurs a bit longer.”

“Ah, yes... Uh? Huh...?”

The maid walked away, still puzzled. The puzzlement didn't cease as she retreated. Watching her, a slightly amusing sensation fluttered through my cold heart.

For a brief moment.

The murmurs of the fountain beside me flowed.

"....."

It's tedious.

"....."

It's tedious.

"....."

It's tedious.

"Hmm....."

What is it?

This bottomless sinking boredom. No. The boredom itself is at the bottom, but what exactly is it?

"Indeed."

This was Raviel's childhood.

"I wonder, is it the world that's dull?"

The emotion that dominated her entire youth.

"Whether I read books, chatter in social circles, learn the sword, nothing feels fulfilling."

The sky was blue. It was so clear that there were few clouds. But even such a sky would have more expressions than my current face, which was also Raviel's face.

Absolute expressionlessness.

Let's assume there are several paths I could tread upon from this point forward.

'Become the emperor's consort. Become the empress, turn the emperor into a puppet, and play with the empire. Or gather the nobles' factions under the banner of Ivansia and rebel. Rule over the newly established empire and enjoy a reign of twenty years.'

Perhaps that's the extent of the paths laid out for Raviel from birth.

"Anything's possible."

I intuitively sensed that whichever path I chose, I would succeed, barring some unforeseen misfortune.

'The current emperor is a saintly ruler. There's no need to plot a rebellion. The diligent subjects under His Majesty's knees and the wise people swinging their hoes in Ivansia's lands every season are quite satisfactory.'

I thought that the scenery was beautiful.

Like looking at a famous painting I barely knew, I found it beautiful but not fun.

Only the emotion [wanting to preserve what is beautiful just as it is] existed in this heart.

Then, am I to live a life for the empire... A life for all the people of the empire?

It would be meaningful.

But

"It's boring."

So tedious that I can't stand it.

Wake up every morning, dust off the painting, work to preserve the colors, catch the ruffian trying to ruin the painting, kill the thief trying to steal it.

That's all.

A life where every moment from morning till night is predetermined.

"Hey."

Plop.

Waves rippled on the surface of the fountain.

Turning my head lazily, I saw a blond boy in the center of the garden, holding a pebble and grinning.

"My lady."

"....."

I opened my lips expressionlessly.

"I'm not a lady yet, Your Highness."

"Then, lady-to-be."

"If I were to call you the crown prince-to-be, would it not be disrespectful?"

"I believe tolerating each other's disrespect is a virtue of a couple. If not, well, I might take concubines. Is that the future you desire?"

"Honestly, it doesn't concern me."

"My lady-to-be is indeed a woman with a cold heart."

The blond boy lamented quite convincingly.

The sole heir of the empire. The empire's successor, the crown prince.

Also, the man who has been designated as my fiancé since 20 years ago.



Before I was even born, that is.

'Is this also a predetermined path?'

The blond boy spoke.

"You refuse to stand and show respect even after seeing me. You're the first, apart from the empress mother, to stay lying down in my presence."

"Since you said tolerating each other's disrespect is a couple's virtue."

"Oh. Then I might as well become even more disrespectful."

The crown prince grabbed my wrist. The wrist was perfectly cooled, and when the crown prince held it, his body heat transferred to it. It would probably leave a red mark on my wrist.

"Let's go."

"Where to, if I may ask?"

"Anywhere. Well, to be frank, imperial father suggested that I sweet-talk you a bit. It won't hurt to be in good graces with the Ivansia family. I agree. However, If I have to sweet-talk anyway, it's best to do it with the empire's most beautiful lady, right?"

"You speak well. It will become a calamity in the future."

"Huh?"

The boy tilted his head in confusion.

"What do you mean?"

"Words are impromptu, but the actions born from impromptu words leave a trace. Considering even this trace is called responsibility. Words last only as long as the mouth opens and closes, so to bear responsibility, actions must follow. You speak well, Your Highness, so the traces will be long, but can you bear them?"

".....?"

Indeed.

He didn't understand.

Despite trying his best to mimic an adult, the crown prince couldn't grasp advice that touched the essence of life.

Because only adults or geniuses can understand that.

Unfortunately, the crown prince is neither.

"It's like you're speaking like a prime minister. Well, whatever. I didn't come here for a private lesson from my lady-to-be."

"What then?"

"I heard a new shop opened in the market! A pastry shop, they say. Filled with exotic pastries, and the seasonal strawberries are delicious!"

".....Pastries can be prepared immediately at home. Shall I

order some?"

"Ah, you don't know at all. This to-be, you really don't know!"

From lady to lady-to-be, and now just to-be.

"Pastries from the kitchen are just evidence of service! I'm not looking for service. A proper exchange between free citizens... That's right. I desire free trade!"

"The citizens will rather envy Your Highness and me for our freedom."

"We envy each other then. An ideal relationship between the sovereign and the subjects!"

He doesn't listen.

Moreover, this man doesn't even know what he's saying, merely scattering plausible sentences he picked up.

"Come on, come on! I've even arranged a carriage. Not a royal carriage or one from your family, but just one rented from a merchant. No one will recognize us!"

That's impossible.

Her silver hair is the noble symbol of Ivansia. The moment they enter the pastry shop, the employees will panic, kneel, and the shop owner will rush out bowing, all easily imagined in Raviel's mind.

Is that so?

"Let's proceed as Your Highness wishes."

"Oh! Even the lady-to-be can be reasonable!"

Is escaping the predetermined path this simple?

"After the shop, let's go to the market! Phew. Not to brag, but I've already visited all the six-day markets, three-day markets, and even the permanent markets in the capital. In this regard, I'm far more of an expert than you."

"Yes."

I just became a bit more foolish.

"I'm looking forward to it."

"Look forward to it!"

Being with this man makes life feel shaky.

Everything familiar to me, my daily routine, what I'll eat and drink, where I'll sleep, all the paths are shaken and twisted.

It might not be 'fun', but,

It was certainly something 'fresh' enough to be noted.

"Come! Lady-to-be! This way, this way!"

Even if it's just for a moment, I can forget myself.

If that's the case, isn't it worth giving your heart to him?

"Amazing. So strawberries in season taste this good? Here, lady-to-be, try some. Hmm. Suddenly, I want to see the sea. The sea. What do you think? Let's go to the sea."

Since escaping from oneself is always the hardest task.

"It's too dark to see the sea..."

"Your Highness."

Yes.

"Hmm?"

I've decided to be content with this life.

It's tedious. Incredibly so.

"I will try to love Your Highness."

"Oh! Finally..."

"However, I have a condition."

Sometimes, life must be satisfied not with the sun, but only with the moonlight reflected on the water's surface.

"The sea must be calm enough to reflect the moonlight."

I simply requested the world to quiet down.

"Do not take concubines. Do not even give them a glance. If Your Highness is capable of love, grant that precious love only to me, and if love is impossible, then pour that effort only into me."

"....."

"Then, perhaps I can stay by Your Highness's side. To support Your Highness, to protect the empire, and to serve the



people. Your Highness, can you promise to love only me?"

The boy remai

ned silent.

After a short while, with the usual convincing manner, the boy spoke brightly.

"Of course!"

"....."

"I will love only my lady!"

Yes.

It's good to have expectations for the world.

At least the sound of the waves echoing in that unseen sea is

a bit cooler than the murmurs of the water flowing through the fountain.

[Currently re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

I quietly closed my eyes.

# Chapter 320: On the Path of Endless Strife (2)

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Tick.

The needle grazed the white flesh of the clock, marking a scar that was destined to be there.

"....."

"How many times must I explain it for you to understand? I have nothing to do with Lady Goldencup! It's a misunderstanding! A misunderstanding!"

I blinked my eyes.

As I blinked, the blond crown prince in front of me raged. Since we were alone in the audience room, he must be venting his anger at me.

"Lady, you've completely misunderstood me as a person!"

"....."

It felt like a long time had passed.

Yet, it seemed like only a brief moment had elapsed.

Was my sense of time damaged? It was as if every strand of my hair had dissolved in lukewarm water. Am I swimming in Raviel's dream, or is Raviel swimming through my time?

'Either way.'

I fanned myself with a fan.

'It doesn't really matter.'

There was no need to distinguish between us.

Meanwhile, the prince's voice grew louder and louder.

"It's utterly displeasing! Your tone, it's as if- as if you think I'm being unfaithful to you. Me, the foundation of the empire!"

I looked beyond the crown prince's golden hair.

Tick.

Tick.

A lavishly decorated golden wall clock consumed its own flesh to pass the time.

".....Wait. Lady, when someone is talking to you, where are you looking?"

"I apologize. I was looking at the clock."

"The clock? You mean to say even conversing with me is a waste of time?"

"Not at all. It's just that a clock continuously passes the same place as if it never knew it had been there before. Perhaps, the condition of eternity is oblivion."

"What? .....What are you talking about?"

"Yesterday, you yelled. You forget what you yelled yesterday. Yesterday, you nagged. You forget what you nagged yesterday. The day before yesterday, the day before that, a week ago, a month ago or a year ago. You forget and forget again, discard and discard again."

"....."

"The scenery that you passed just yesterday. The places where my touch lingered just yesterday. Yet, they seem entirely new, as if foreign. And thus, people live eternally. A thousand years ago, and a thousand years from now."

"I really don't understand what you're saying."

The crown prince furrowed his brow.

"Are you admitting that you misunderstood the relationship

between Lady Goldencup and me?"

"Your Highness."

I closed my fan.

"In the course of history, you are not the first nor the last to make excuses after betraying love."

"....."

"Those who evaded a day by claiming it was a misunderstanding or a mistake were also not the first. They all met their ends and lie dead in their graves. Please be wiser. Would the impending disaster change just by getting through today?"

"I don't understand what you're saying!"

"Lady Goldencup cannot love you."

The crown prince paused.

"What?"

"She fundamentally loves herself. Don't you see?"

"....."

"The crown prince may harbor affection for her, but what truly excites Goldencup is [the image of herself secretly sharing love with the crown prince]."

I spoke calmly.

"I'm not saying you shouldn't share love. To share love with such a person, you must become a follower, Your Highness. Earnestly beg for Lady Goldencup's love, as if receiving mercy, and accept her favor. Only such a relationship will make both you and her eternally happy."

"....."

"However, Your Highness is the nation's foundation. You must stand the highest. Would you bow to a mere baroness? If Your Highness bows, your subjects will bow, and the people will follow suit, making the baroness the true ruler of this



land, not Your Highness."

I gazed intently at my fiancé.

"Are you truly prepared to hand over the country to the baroness's family?"

Splash!

"....."

Drip. Drop.

Water dripped down my temple.

In front of me, the blond man was seething, holding an empty glass.

"You're the worst kind of person."

It was a meaningless curse.

Yet, even if it was the most trivial insult from the most insignificant person, the wound I received was still a wound, and the surface of my heart stung slightly.

"Why can't you understand me even once? I'm struggling too. It's hard! The prime minister nags endlessly, I have to attend unfamiliar places and keep a solemn face! Of course, being born into the great Ivansia lineage, you wouldn't understand! But..."

"But."

I looked at the prince expressionlessly.

And I thought.

"But, what are you saying?"

Should I replace him?

"....."

The current emperor is a saintly ruler.

But there are countless cases where a tyrant ascends to the throne immediately after a saintly ruler's death, leading the country to ruin. If the empire's fate is to last only one more generation, it wouldn't be bad to start preparations from now.

As a last resort.

For this certain end, I could spread spies across the country, assassinate obstacles in advance, and prepare to incite rebellion at the right moment.

"Your Highness."

He was hesitant.

The crown prince involuntarily stepped back.

"I understand Your Highness the deepest. Since childhood,

I've strived to love you. This love may seem insignificant. But this is my utmost. In my heart, I cannot fuel a greater flame."

"....."

"Dismiss Lady Goldencup. That is the way for Your Highness, for the country..."

"Monster."

The crown prince reached for the doorknob.

"Such a monster."

And he fled.

"....."

Tick.

Time flowed.

"....."

Tick.

Water droplets wetting my hair fell with the ticking of the second hand.

"....."

Suddenly, I realized.

I had been betrayed.

"Ah."

It's tedious.

[Unable to find the alias of the skill target.]

In that tedium, a bit of anger coagulated.

[Unable to find the true name of the skill target.]

Tick.

But.

It's tedious, and it's a tedious life.

[Unable to find the appearance of the skill target.]

Tick.

Certainly.

[Re-enactment failed.]

My lord,

I, to you,

[Substituting necessary data for implementation.]

Tick.

It's tedious.

"....."

I blinked my eyes.

As I blinked, I realized that I was sitting cross-legged.

Had I fallen asleep in this posture, or had I briefly reached a state of emptiness with no worries, and failed to grasp enlightenment, slipping out entirely?

"Lord Heavenly Demon."

The sounds of the world reached me.

"....."

I slowly turned my head.

Flinch.

The eyes of a woman in black robes trembled as they met mine.

I knew her name.

"You are the Hell Ghost Demon."

"My apologies."

The Hell Ghost Demon prostrated herself.

"How dare such beings disturb the sovereign's practice... I



have committed a crime worthy of death!"

"Such fuss. Enlightenment is said to be a peace so quiet that nothing can disturb it. If it were to be disturbed and broken, then it wasn't enlightenment to begin with."

I smiled.

"It's as if I awoke from a light sleep. Rather than ruining my enlightenment, I'd prefer to receive an apology for interrupting a pleasant nap."

"Uh... um... sorry...?"

Tsk.

"You're such a joyless subordinate. Just stay there with your head bowed."

"Ah! Yes!"

The Hell Ghost Demon seemed to find that much easier and

immediately responded.

"Then, I will report!"

"I'm listening."

"Firstly, we've circulated a proclamation throughout the land to evacuate the people."

The Hell Ghost Demon continued speaking while upside down, her head supporting her entire body without any shaking, showing that she was truly a well-trained elite of our sect.

"Many people did not believe the words that a plague was descending from the heavens, but when we showed them those already affected by the contagion, tightly bound and paraded around, even the most skeptical had no choice but to believe!"

"....."

I see.

For months now, a mysterious illness had been spreading throughout the martial realm.

This place is still before I, no, before my master faced the white curtain of death.

"Well done."

"It is an honor!"

"But what use is fleeing from a moving plague? One cannot build a hut under the sea or pitch a tent above the clouds. The edge of the sea under the sky will be the last refuge for the people."

"....."

"However, it's merely fulfilling the duty towards humanity. I am proud of you all for choosing to comfort the people, even for a day, rather than seeking refuge on an island where you could have lived another day."

The Hell Ghost Demon straightened up and prostrated herself again.

"Loyalty!"

Beyond her, hundreds of elites prostrated themselves.

"For the Demonic Way of the Heavens!"

Further on, tens of thousands of disciples kneeled.

"For the Survival of the Common People!"

A lofty echo resounded through the headquarters of the Demonic Path.

I sat on a stone platform and bowed my head.

The peak of the Demonic Cult, having reached its zenith at this time, spread before me.

"....."

It's tedious.

Despite the world facing destruction, what exactly is this eerily calm tedium?

It's not triviality. It's not boredom. I haven't lived in a world small enough to be considered trivial, nor have I led a leisurely life to be considered boring. I have always lived on the edge, fighting for survival through all seasons.

'Did I give it my all?'

Yes.

'Did I take responsibility for what needed to be accounted for?'

Yes.

'Did I shoulder what I didn't need to?'

Undoubtedly.

'Was it good to wield the sword?'

Perhaps.

'Was I happy?'

I don't know.

"....."

I slowly nodded.

'I can answer "thus" to a thousand questions.'

All disciples of the Demonic Cult bowed their heads. Only the sky could see and know my nodding gesture. Thus, I was nodding to myself, using the white sky as a mirror.

'Only two questions which I answered with "perhaps" and "I don't know," are making me feel tedious now.'

I want to know.

"NamGung Woon."

I spoke.

The Hell Ghost Demon slightly raised her head.

"Yes?"

"Send a letter to the Head of the Martial Alliance, NamGung Woon."

"....."

The Hell Ghost Demon didn't ask further. She simply brought the writing brush and paper.

I flicked my fingers.

Paper.

The paper floated in mid-air, stiffening.

After mastering sword techniques, I became less reliant on tools. As the Hell Ghost Demon swallowed a small exclamation, I flicked my fingers again.

Brush.

My finger became the brush handle. The ki at the tip of my fingernail became the brush tip. Drawing a circle with the ink at one point, there was nothing rough about writing, even with a space between the paper and me.

Ink.

Thus, the black letters imbued with my ki were written.

"Burn it."

I laid my hand down.



"How dare I..."

"A plague may ravage the world, but the world remains, and life persists after awakening. This is my will. If it's a will, it will remain even if burned."

"....."

The Hell Ghost Demon, trembling, set fire to my paper.

The flames, transferred from a candle, quickly consumed the edges of the paper. The fire devoured, turning the path it passed black, and spread wildly.

"Ah."

But the letters were not consumed by the flames.

Instead, they blazed.

The ki contained in the ink held the letters firmly. The letters became embers, fixed in place, burning brightly mid-

air, even as the fire consumed their base.

The world may be incurable, but can't humans console each other's ailments?

Living a hundred years, does death depend on a second?

Come forth, Martial Realm.

My hundred years await here.

The Hell Ghost Demon trembled and prostrated herself.

I glanced at the conviction I had inscribed in the air.

"Write one more, and send it to that scoundrel of the Martial Alliance. Take it yourself and, in front of NamGung Woon, in front of the riffraff of the Martial Alliance, burn it with your own hands. It's a pity I can't see their faces."

"Yes, Lord Heavenly Demon."

The Hell Ghost Demon's voice faltered.

I muttered indifferently.

"When the embers burn out to ashes, you'll know you need not respond to the call for the Great Orthodox-Demonic War."

The disciples marveled at the words I inscribed in the air. They considered it a miracle. Just like rain falling from the sky and flowers blooming from the earth, the embers suspended between heaven and earth were evidence to them, a permission that they were still allowed to exist in this world.

They shouted.

"For the Demonic Way of the Heavens!"

Thud.

Something landed on the tip of my nose, causing me to look up.

"For the Survival of the Common People!"

Snow was falling from the sky.

It was the first snow.

"For the Demonic Way of the Heavens!"

Yes, NamGung Woon.

You wouldn't betray me, would you?

But.

"For the Survival of the Common People!"

Can I make you happy?

That was the only issue, and it remains an issue.

[Currently re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

I quietly closed my eyes.

# Chapter 321: On the Path of Endless Strife (3)

---

The Heavenly Demon So BaekHyang harbored an untold secret.

It was that she had shown mercy to NamGung Woon, the Head of the Martial Alliance. She showed mercy to the unparalleled Orthodox Path leader of the NamGung clan, hailed as a once-in-a-generation genius who had gained fame for his righteous deeds and eccentricities since his youth. To that very man.

'This much, huh.'

The master had shown mercy.

".....! .....!"

Snow was falling.

Fighting through the swirling snowflakes, NamGung Woon advanced. Even as the snowstorm raged, the area around NamGung Woon alone melted away. Fierce ki was burning within NamGung Woon's muscles.

'So this is it.'

Snow was falling.

In master's slightly lowered eyes, the scene of snow falling on the world, a single snowflake sticking to the Head of the Martial Alliance's forehead before melting away, the sight of thousands and thousands from the orthodox and demonic paths clashing swords, was all reflected.

The Great Orthodox-Demonic War.

On this battlefield, where everyone sensed the end of the world and poured out their last strength, only one person—only master—only I was not out of breath.

'To strive so hard to defeat this body.'

Kraaang!

While fending off NamGung Woon's axe, I felt pity.

'So pure-hearted. So upright. He's purely using martial arts to defeat me. His axe is filled with earnest feelings towards me.'

I knew.

If the Heavenly Demon So BaekHyang had never been born, NamGung Woon would have stood tall as the supreme martial artist. He might even have been praised as the greatest martial artist of all time. The Head of the Martial Alliance, NamGung Woon, was truly the greatest opponent I could face.

To wish for more would be greedy.

'Ah.'

I didn't want it to end.



'How is it that one can effortlessly cleave the heavens with talent yet possess the skill to be unmatched by anyone through effort alone?'

I didn't want it to end.

'Is there no such person?'

An opponent whom I could desire with all my heart.

'NamGung Woon. The Great Axe Sage. Can't you be that person?'

If only you had been a bit stronger.

I would have gladly given my life to you.

'I don't have the courage to lie to you and rig the match.'

Snow was falling.

'I don't have the intention to lie to myself just to be satisfied with life.'

Tick.

'Not even once have I told a lie, so who could match me?'

It's tedious.

'No.'

Is it?

'It's lonely.'

Tick.

That day, the Heavenly Demon So BaekHyang did not cut down the Head of the Martial Alliance, NamGung Woon. She couldn't. Master could not take the life of someone who had come all this way to participate in the Great Orthodox-Demonic War. Indeed, to someone who could not walk the

path called 'herself,' master could not offer her own life either.

A life with no way out.

When the first day of the Great Orthodox-Demonic War was postponed, master might have sensed that this winter would feel eternal.

[Unable to find the alias of the skill target.]

But.

[Unable to find the true name of the skill target.]

Lonely and lonely as life may be.

[Unable to find the appearance of the skill target.]

Certainly.

Gong-Ja.

You will come for me.

My master, the master with a blossoming smile.

[Re-enactment failed.]

[Substituting necessary data for implementation.]

Tick.

"Oh."

I blinked.

"Have you arrived?"

As I blinked, before me was the Guardian Spirit.

With slightly longer hair and a bit thinner than the Sword Emperor I knew, he was leaning on his chin with his legs crossed.

".....Sword Emperor, sir?"

I was slightly taken aback.

"Yes."

"Huh. So I appear in the trauma, too? I mean, I used to, but ever since you reached B-class, I hardly ever... Oh? I have a body?"

I felt around my body.

It wasn't Raviel's body. It wasn't master's body. It wasn't anyone else's body either, so I groped around this body, which should have been familiar to me, as if I was touching it for the first time in decades.

"Tsk tsk."

The Guardian Spirit watched me with amusement.

"You're making a fuss for nothing."

"Ah, why? I seriously feel like I've lived for more than 20 years. Just maintaining my self-awareness is an incredible feat. Where are we, by the way?"

"Who knows."

The Guardian Spirit chuckled softly.

"Probably still in the midst of your skill activating. You must be continuously seeing the trauma."

".....? So, does this mean I'm seeing your trauma?"

"I don't have anything like trauma."

I looked around.

Just as the Guardian Spirit said, there was nothing here.

Absolutely nothing.

Like a waiting room where you pause before entering a stage, a vast expanse of nothingness. A space like an endlessly spread white canvas, and in a place that couldn't even be called the center, the Guardian Spirit sat quietly holding only a sword.

"....."

"Why? What are you looking at?"

"No... It's just. Your, your legs."

I pointed at the Guardian Spirit's legs.

Usually slightly blurred, his legs were now distinctly formed.

"Not just the legs, but the whole body... It's so vivid. Even your voice."

"Hmm."

"Could it be?"

"It's simple."

The Guardian Spirit twirled the sword hilt.

"Probably in your trauma, my living form is being played back. But, as I said, I don't have any [trauma to speak of]. So, it's probably being reproduced weirdly like this."

"Huh."

"Specifically, I remember up to the part where you're brainwashed by some perverted kid, running around calling them 'My god! My god!' but my memory of about a day's worth is vague. How about you? Does [the year is bound to be a jackpot because it's a bumper crop full of bullshit] ring a bell?"

".....That did happen."



Reality returned at last.

Yes.

Since the trauma began, I had gone through half a lifetime of Raviel and another half of master. It felt as if I had been dreaming for far too long.

"This time, I thought I was seeing your trauma...."

"Oh. Were you looking forward to it? Sorry, sorry. I've enjoyed life, you see. I did get caught stealing dumplings when I was four and got beaten to a pulp by a tavern waiter, but even then, I was munching on dumplings while being hit. After all, the dumplings that entered my stomach couldn't be put back on display, right? So, technically, I won. I've known nothing but victory since I was four."

"You... No. Never mind. Let's not talk."

"So? I remember whispering '[Terror be gone, death stay away]' to you. What happened then? Dude, talk to me. I can't give you advice unless you do."

I recounted the events I had experienced.

"Hmm."

The Guardian Spirit listened to my story with a smile in his eyes, still in his slanted posture with his elbows on his knees.

"Zombie."

As soon as I finished talking, the Guardian Spirit remarked.

"How do you use the Demonic Heavenly God Art?"

"Excuse me?"

"The Demonic Heavenly God Art. The demonic technique of your cult. How do you use that?"

Cult, he says.

"I just use it? I'm not sure what you mean."

"Really? That's interesting. Hunger varies from person to person. Take, for instance, the Sword of Starving Death. Some starve for lack of millet, others for a hamburger. Are they the same? The hunger of a farmer? The hunger of an adult and a child? How do you, just like that, use the Sword of Starving Death encompassing all types of hunger?"

"They are the same."

I answered immediately.

Had this been when I was just about to grasp the Demonic Heavenly God Art, maybe I would have been puzzled.

But now, I wasn't newbie enough to be played by such a question.

"Being the same doesn't mean it's identical from start to finish. It just needs to share the same context. 'Suffering because one couldn't eat something.' Here, 'something' could be millet or arugula pizza; it doesn't matter. So..."

"Right."

The Guardian Spirit's eyes narrowed slightly.

"That's why people can understand each other, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"The trauma you're experiencing now is the same."

"....."

Tick.

I blinked.

"Come again?"

"The act of understanding between people is experiencing the same thing. It doesn't mean the same person in the same

situation at the same time and same place experiencing the same event. It's when different people in different situations at different times and in different places go through the same event. That's what understanding is."

The Guardian Spirit hummed.

"You can't peek into ■■■■■■'s past. Why? Because there's no name. No coordinates. Even the appearance was lost. How would you peek into the lifetime of someone who can't be called by anyone, can't be seen by anyone?"

“ ”

"But we know that ■■■■■■ failed. Their life must be marked by failure. You can tell by the [The Universe's Wild Expanse] skill. Once. Twice. They used it on someone other than you, but now there's no one by their side."

The Guardian Spirit whispered.

"They were betrayed."

Despite the distance, the Sword Emperor's voice felt as if it

was whispered right into my ear.

"Gong-Ja. Do you really need to know who ■ ■■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■ ■■■ was betrayed by, in what situation, when, and where to finally understand their trauma?"

"Betrayal is betrayal. Disappointment is disappointment. So, your betrayal can be my betrayal, and even though you are you and I am me, we can still call that understanding."

Right.

That's the essence of the Demonic Heavenly God Art.

"Your master said the same, didn't she?"

The doctrine of the shadow.

".....Right."

I finally nodded.

Why I couldn't peek into ■■■■■■■■■■'s past,  
why I had to witness the half-lives of Raviel and the master, it  
all made sense.

"The most similar cases to the trauma of the Constellation were reproduced."

Undoubtedly.

"■ ■■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■ ■■■ must have trusted someone at first. Although not satisfied, they must have thought that person could create fun quests and happy stories under the [The Universe's Wild Expanse], or at least, imagine a fresh world."

But they were betrayed.

Just as Raviel was betrayed by the Crown Prince with noodle hair.

"Tedious."

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ and Raviel are different people in different situations, different times, and in different places,

but the depth and angle of the wound inflicted by the first betrayal were exactly the same.

Therefore.

"Tedious."

■ ■■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■ ■■■'s past was substituted with Raviel's past.

"They trusted someone again."

The second disciple.

"After the first betrayal, the Constellation had grown a bit. They didn't choose a disciple just because 'this person seems fresh' this time. Undoubtedly the best of the era. Overflowing with talent... With exceptional imagination. They chose, thinking that with this person, truly enjoyable quests might continue."

But it wasn't enough.



Just as NamGung Woon was a hand's breadth short for the master.

"Lonely."

The second disciple was certainly excellent. Under the effect of [The Universe's Wild Expanse], the disciple would have expanded their imagination just as I did, imagining a village where there was none and making enemies appear when needed.

Yet.

"Lonely."

■ ■■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■ ■■■ could not be completely satisfied with the imagination unfolded by them.

".....No one. Or rather, most haven't experienced death."

I somehow felt I knew why the Constellation remained unfulfilled.

"The sea can be imagined. Whether detailed or vague. But can one imagine themselves drowning in the sea, struggling... gasping for air as seawater rushes into their throat? That sensation, that pain?"

The answer is simple.

If you haven't experienced it, you don't know.

"Perhaps the other disciples... couldn't 'properly' imagine their crises. Their death, the moment of life and death, when they might really die."

Because.

"The world is just that way. How can one so accurately..."

"So accurately imagine the pain, especially one of this extent?"

"Have you ever felt your bones melting? Have you ever felt your blood vessels burning up?"

"How on earth can you imagine such pain so vividly, under my power, and reproduce it?"

Because they had said so.

"....."

The Guardian Spirit nodded.

"Yeah. Your thinking is probably right."

The first disciple's betrayal.

The second disciple's disappointment.

And so, ■ ■■■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■ ■■■ finally chose the third disciple, the last subject of [The Universe's Wild Expanse], the ultimate disciple willing to accompany them even to the point of erasing their own existence, who was none other than me.

"So, only one mystery remains."

"What's that?"

"You."

I shifted my gaze.

"Sword Emperor, sir."

"....."

My eyes looked straight ahead, at the Guardian Spirit.

The living form of the Sword Emperor was in front of me.

"Why are you here? Why are you here as the substitute for the 'third' trauma, all alone in this place where there's nothing?"

"Who are you?"

The corners of the Sword Emperor's mouth lifted.

"Nothing here, you say. From my perspective, there's plenty."

In the eyes of the Sword Emperor was reflected a youth with black hair.

"There you are, Kim Gong-Ja."

"....."

"Perhaps you are the third trauma."

Tick.

"I'm like a ghost clinging to you, added as a bonus. Or perhaps, since we devised a plan together to screw ■■■■■■■■■■ over, I was included considering that too. Anyway, you're here."

Tick.

"Just as your love waited for you, and your master waited for you, Kim Gong-Ja, the third wound drawn by this Constellation is waiting for you. Perhaps that alone is the wound. Everything else is secondary."

Tick.

"Now, a day will have passed by without me or the Constellation knowing, and only you are left with a wound."

"Go."

[Trauma re-enactment complete.]

"That's the best I can do for you, partner."

[The target's ego has remained intact.]

"Think about how you're going to live."

[Penalty Finalized.]

And then.

The world around me shattered into pieces.

# Chapter 322: ■ ■■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■ for You, and Only You (1)

---

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

Tick.

Somewhere, a second hand seemed to move, or so I thought.

"....."

“So, Mister, where shall we head this time? We have quite a few paths to choose from. We could directly invade the headquarters of the Mad Demon Cult or take a brief respite by returning to the city!”



I looked around.

Slowly.

Savoring this world as if tasting it.

-Terror be gone, death stay away.

There was one existence that needed no savoring.

With an unimpressed expression, the Guardian Spirit recited the world's most nonsensical mantra, clearly annoyed and bored.

Our eyes met.

-.....

As soon as our gazes intercultural, the Guardian Spirit sealed his lips, his eyebrows slightly raised instead.



And thoughts, if possible.

Without harboring any hostility towards ■ ■■■■■ ■■■ ■■■■ ■■■ ■■■, I simply continued to observe my surroundings.

The Constellation was all smiles.

“If we head to the city, hmm, that’s right! Mister, you have vanquished numerous demonic heads so far. The citizens tormented by the heretical demon cults would surely welcome you warmly, wouldn’t they?”

Beyond the Constellation’s shoulder.

“They might be weak and cowardly, but they will not forget your grace, Mister!”

Tick.

A wall clock was ticking away.

"....."

Only then did the true essence of this world reveal itself to me.

This place had no dense forests.

No Thirteen Evils.

No Blood Demon, God Demon, White Demon, or Mad Demon ruling the shadows and lights of the world, and nor did they have heretical followers. No grand sanctuaries harboring vast secrets, no cities, villages or streets. Not even a small clothing store existed in this place.

Tick.

Only a wall clock remained.

“If we do go to the city, um, let’s see! So far, Mister, you have eliminated numerous demonic beings. The city’s residents, who have been harassed by the pseudo-demon cults until now, would probably welcome you quite warmly!”

In the meager attic.

A space barely four square meters.

Wooden floor tiles were filled with dust in every crevice. It was shabby. The floor seemed coated not with bleach but with dust, shining palely. There was a window, but nothing outside. Only eternal incandescence illuminated the room.

The faint light scattered dust particles.

Too small and too blurry to replace petals, these dust specks, taking up most of this attic along with the bookshelves, fell and disappeared.

A wall clock, wooden floors, a window, bookshelves, and dust.

"....."

That was the 60th stage.

The entirety of this world.

“Ah. While Mister ponders over which choice to make, a man from the recently destroyed stronghold of the White Demon Cult approaches. He seems to recognize you, Mister. No, he specifically seems to have followed you!”

The last thing left was the Constellation's face.

Not that he had a head.

Simply put, the place where the face should have been looked like distorted blackness, as if a child had mischievously smeared black crayon.

■.

Or ■.

It was either a window without anything outside or bars trapping the outside.

“[Ah, Mister, the King of Death? I am not a suspicious person. I am merely a hunter who was captured by the White Demon Cult and forced into labor until now.]”

Tick.

Black smudges where the Constellation's face should have been, disappeared only at the corners of the mouth.

Thin lips moved slightly, now firmly shut and firmly shut, earnestly mimicking an old man's tone.

“[Please come visit us!]”

Even without eyes or a nose.

He seemed happy.

The Constellation appeared content.

“So, Mister. What will you do now? The old man has finished speaking. He probably hasn't shared the entire

situation. Mister! How will you proceed...."

Whoosh!

As the Constellation began to raise his voice, a burst of light spread next to the chair I was seated on. Emerging from the light was a hunter, whose identity was unknown.

The hunter looked around in slight confusion.

"Huh? Where is this....."

"....."

The Constellation frowned.

It was like a child being interrupted while building a sandcastle in a playground.

"Alright, congratulations. You've cleared the 60th floor."



“...What?”

“What do you mean 'what'? It means there's nothing left for you to do here.”

The Sovereign waved his hand dismissively.

“Just get lost.”

[■ ■■■■■ ■■■ ■■■■ ■■■ ■■■ ■■■■■■■■■ ■■■  
■■■■■.]

Once again, the hunter was enveloped in light.

Without a chance to respond, the hunter was whisked away by the light.

“Really. It’s so annoying when people interrupt the flow like this.”

The Constellation sighed.

“Ah, Mister, don’t worry. You’ll forget everything that just happened! Hehe. Anything that interferes with our story gets automatically deleted!”

"....."

Is that so?

‘That was... someone who cleared the 59th floor and came up here.’

I realized what had happened.

After the Magic Tower had collapsed at our hands, the number of challengers aiming for higher floors significantly increased.

Some of them should have reached the 60th floor by now, and the others are still on their way.

The hunter who briefly appeared in [this world] a moment ago was one such case.

‘And ■ ■■■■■ ■■■ ■■■■ ■■■ ■■■ is forcibly passing them through. As soon as the hunters reach, the stage is declared cleared, and they are sent away.’

That hunter must have had his memories altered.

He probably believes he had a proper adventure on the 60th floor, received a decent quest, and successfully completed it.

‘Even the Guardian Spirit had incorrect memories about the 60th floor.’

Let alone what the other hunters would think.

It’s certain.

This attic is now a sanctuary reserved solely for the two of us.

“What! Shall we refresh our spirits anew!”

The Constellation said brightly.

“As the silence stretched on without a response, an anxious air enveloped the old man's face. Nevertheless, being a hunter who had stayed on the 60th floor for quite some time, it seems the leisure to manage his expression had long vanished. The old man—”

Stroke.

"....."

The Constellation paused.

It was only after the Constellation halted that I realized I had extended my hand to stroke the Constellation's head.

“It works.”

I murmured.

“Even if you've lost your appearance, you can still be touched.”

"....."

"That's a relief."

The Constellation's lips parted slightly.

".....Huh? Eh? .....Uhm?"

It stammered like a broken music box.

The Constellation seemed utterly baffled by the current situation, tilting its head left and right in confusion.

"Huh.....?"

A buzzing noise filled my head.

I knew then, that it was the tower signaling the manifestation of the Constellation's power. For a constellation that had lost its name, coordinates, and was beyond identification, the tower attempted to make its presence known through the buzzing noise.

Had it been before the regression, I too would have forgotten the recent memory.

However, now, for some reason, I hadn't lost anything.

I vividly remember spending half a lifetime as Raviel and master, the conversation with the Guardian Spirit in the white space, and even the unnamed hunter who arrived only to be unceremoniously expelled. I remember all of it.

“Huh? What?”

The Constellation was flustered.

“Why? .....How? This shouldn't be happening, um. Um!”

[■ ■■■■■ ■■■ ■■■■ ■■■ ■■■ ■■■■■■■■■ ■■■  
■■■■■.]

It was futile.

“Huh?”

And meaningless.

"....."

[■ ■■■■■ ■■■ ■■■■ ■■■ ■■■ ■■■■■■■■■ ■■■  
■■■■■.]

No matter how much the Constellation exercised its power, or how much it begged the skill for oblivion, my gaze remained fixed on the Constellation's face. The face smeared with ■ and ■, was reflected in my eyes.

"....."

The shabby 5-square-meter attic remained a 5-square-meter world, and the wall clock was still a wall clock. The [The Universe's Wild Expanse] skill had not erased or interfered with my memories.

My hand, resting on the Constellation's head, where the face had vanished, did not retreat.

“Why, why.....”

“Because I feel no hostility towards you right now.”

I said.

“There’s no chance I’ll harm you. I have no intention of ruining you or disrupting your enjoyment. I’m harmless.”

"....."

“You must have used [The Universe's Wild Expanse] to beg. To exclude any being or event that interferes with our play. Thanks to that, even the slightest voice or thought that obstructs our time together could be eliminated.”

Stroke.

My hand brushed over the head that had lost its face.

Something that had been deprived and disappeared... Only a trace remained at the boundary.

Everyone has their own creases, but even the creases seemed



invisible on the Constellation.

I hoped that at the very least, my touch could prove that something had been there.

“But your wish doesn’t reach me. Or rather, it does reach me, which makes it even more impossible to damage my memory. Maintaining my memory is deemed [for your sake] by the skill.”

"What....."

“I want you to be happy.”

"....."

The Constellation froze.

“Have I become your hope?”

I continued.

“For thousands of years, has no one ever satisfied you? Throughout your life, you abandoned your original name and even your face, yet, was there never a voice that truly reached you? Is that how you lived?”

“I didn’t come here to be a meaning to you. Yes. I can’t lie. I’ve forgotten most of what you said to me. To me, you are still nameless, and you will continue to be nothing more than noise that I can’t even locate.”

But.

“If you wish to make me your meaning today.”

If that’s the case.

“I will dedicate today to you.”

"....."

“You’re not perfect.”

[The skill is activating.]

“You must have known you’d be betrayed the moment you gave trust to the first contractor. You surely had flaws too.”

[You have been designated as a target of The Universe's Wild Expanse.]

“So you are somewhat rash.”

[The skill is activating.]

“Perhaps you regret things soon after starting them, get disheartened, but still can’t give up your own pleasure and keep challenging humans.”

Tick.

A small crack appeared in the black smudge on the Constellation’s face.

A fissure formed.

“Perhaps your eyes are slightly sharp?”

[The King of Death is exerting his skill.]

As I imagined, the corners of the eyebrows, the sharpness of the eyes, peeked through the opening fissure.

[The Universe’s Wild Expanse] made my imagination come true exactly as envisioned.

"....."

“Your hair will be green.”

Tick.

I touched his eyebrows.

“Because you seem to harbor a lot of jealousy.”

"....."

Tick.

The black smudge cracked a bit more.

Beneath the broken shell was the luster of emerald.

".....It's pointless."

Tick.

"I've already lost everything. Name and face both. No matter how much you, the King of Death, search, how can you find what's not there?"

"Then I'll imagine until we find it."

Tick.

“I’ll give you silver hair. I’ll imagine black hair. Look in the mirror at the form I’ve imagined for you, and confirm it, then tell me. [Yes]. Or, [No].”

"....."

“Not just the hair, but the eyes, ears, nose, everything.”

[The skill is activating.]

“I’ll summon countless co

lors and shapes, piece by piece, until someday, your appearance gets restored. Your name, too. A, B, C, D, every letter spoken will surely echo with the sound that was your name.”

[The skill is activating.]

“Let’s find it.”

Tick.

“I’ll find it for you.”

Another layer of black husk crumbled.

Eyes.

The Constellation's eyes were grey.

# Chapter 323: ■ ■■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■ for You, and Only You (2)

---

I have heard your wish.

Every wish requires a price.

First, I will take your name.

Second, I will take your face.

Third, let's take your fear.

If that's alright with you.



And still, you're fine with it.

May fortune be with you.

"....."

Silence flowed between us.

However, the direction of the silence was different.

I closed my mouth to wait for an answer, and the Constellation bit its lip, unsure of how to respond. The ■■■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■, now with emerald hair and ash-grey eyes, slowly exhaled.

"...But."

But,

"I don't know either."

The breath was toxic.

“I can’t remember what I looked like. Even if you, the King of Death, say you will find me, it’s simply impossible. What tone I used, what clothes I wore, if I could even wear them. I can’t recall.”

How can you find something that doesn’t exist?

The breath murmured so.

Exhaling a poison that had long been festering in the lungs.

“I can’t find myself because I abandoned it. You, the King of Death, can’t find me either.”

“That’s right.”

I nodded.

“It might indeed be difficult to find the original you. Even if we think we found it, there’s no guarantee it’s the right one.

It's like planting a red flag claiming you've found the South Pole in the middle of a snowfield without any equipment."

"Yes, so..."

"But you don't need the original you."

I caressed the Constellation's cheek.

Tick.

[The skill has been activated.]

A white outline appeared.

The smudge was peeled away, and ■ crumbled.

Another bar of the cage that covered the constellation broke.

"Finding the original you, I don't think that would make you

happy.”

“...Why do you think so?”

"You abandoned it, didn't you? There must have been a reason."

I smiled faintly.

“I don't know where you were born. What you experienced in the distant past, your childhood, the wounds you received or the embarrassing things you did. I don't know those trivial details.”

We couldn't see them even as traumas.

No skill could easily reveal them.

“But I know what you like, how much you like it.”

You like adventures.

You love a life of smashing through enemies with someone you chose, experiencing thrilling dangers, enduring true pain to leap over death, and keep moving forward.

To the extent that you'd abandon your original name and face to achieve it.

“You like me.”

"....."

To the extent that you'd be okay with losing your existence by using your last third wish on me.

“Then, please choose [the face you want to show me].”

"....."

“I will see you as you wish to be seen by me. I will see what you show me. What else matters?”

"....."

“You like me. You like adventures. You chased what you like, threw away the unnecessary burden, and came all this way. That’s you.”

Tick.

“You haven’t lost yourself.”

Tick.

“You came all the way here to find the self you want.”

『Everyone travels.』

『In a 5-square-meter attic, an infinite desert lies.』

"....."

Startled.

The Constellation shuddered once and looked at me.

[The skill 'The Universe's Wild Expanse ' has been activated.]

That's right.

I was now using the power of The Universe's Wild Expanse to create a world.

Just as the Constellation had brainwashed me to show the world.

This time, I became this child's Constellation, showing it the world.

『A young fox.』

『A fox born in the desert knows there's no water and no toys. As the wind blows overnight, hills flow away, valleys are filled and with every passing day it loses its home.』

『Every child born in the desert can't love itself from the

moment of birth. 』

『 But the night sky. 』

"....."

The Constellation looked up.

[The skill has been activated.]

With the help of my imagination and The Universe's Wild Expanse, a vast night sky spread above our heads.

Even in an empty desert, if you look up, stars are scattered.

“It’s okay.”

I whispered.

『 Children without landmarks in their birthplace have no



choice but to walk using the night sky as their map.」

“I won’t deceive you.”

"....."

The world is imagined.

A young fox's journey begins.

『The only sounds you hear in the desert is the sand rustling, crackling and drying out.』

『Just the parched wind.』

『The fox walks, accumulating sand in its heart, layer by layer.』

“It’s okay.”

『The fox walks because it has nothing.』

『The food is never satisfying.』

『Everything grown in the desert always contains sand, so when you bite, sand sticks to your lips. No matter how much you eat, the thirst doesn't quench. Though something accumulates in the once empty heart, it's not the starlight of the night sky but the dried sandy soil.』

『Have I become the desert?』

"....."

『Am I also becoming the desert?』

"....."

『The countless grains of sand that cover the world are infinite and boundless, evidence of all that have died on this land make up the sands of the Ganges, and what will die from now on will count the Nayutas\*, but am I just a grain of sand being added to the already infinite sand?』

\*Originally taken from the Sanskrit word meaning "a very large number," one nayuta is generally acknowledged as 10 to the power of 60, though some people argue that it's to the power of 72.

『The desert remains a desert.』

『There's nothing but traces of death wherever you look.』

『Everyone is dying.』

"....."

『The fox chooses a cactus due to lack of food.』

『Because it's thirsty.』

『Sometimes, as you cross the desert, cacti stand like telephone poles. The child knows there's water inside. Water. The only comfort that washes away the deadly thirst.』

『The thorns are well-developed.』

.....To protect even a handful of water..... in this sandy hell..... you've developed so many thorns.....

『The fox whimpers as it plucks the cactus. It is barefoot. Thorns stick into its soles. Blades graze the toes and blood flows. The skin is pierced, but if it doesn't drink, it feels like dying, so the fox cuts the flesh of the cactus.』

.....I'm sorry.....

『It sucks up every drop of water.』

.....I'm sorry.....

『Thorny water.』

『The fox is quenched. For a while, it can walk a bit more. But its throat hurts. A sharp thorn is stuck inside.』

『The young fox paid the price.』

『The cactus didn't forget to take revenge on the beast that

stole and drank from it. 』

"....."

『After drinking the water for the first time, and then the second, the fox realized. 』

『Maybe. 』

『Maybe I'm the one making the desert? 』

『The fox, its nose buried in the flesh of a cactus, suddenly looks up at the sky. The sun is painful. It had always wondered why the world was a desert, curious where the desert came from, and thought perhaps it was because the sun was so hot. 』

『Perhaps, after the sun, I am the next sinner in this desert? 』

"Ah....."

『I've killed so many cacti.』

"Ah,"

『I have even cursed the cacti for not being an oasis.』

"Ah... uh..., ah."

『To those who bristled with thorns to protect even a handful of water, I questioned why they wounded the soles of my feet, breaking their black thorns. Those thorns were merely blackened with dried blood.』

『When I walk on a sandy path, corpses of thorns lie scattered.』

"....."

『The desert becomes even more of a desert.』

".....No. ....No, King of Death. I am....."

『Prick.』

『The fox's throat hurts.』

"No! I-I did nothing wrong."

『I ate too much sand.』

『I swallowed too many thorns.』

".....Why....."

『But.』

『That was all there was.』

"....."

『Please save me.』

『Someone, please, save me.』

『There's nothing here.』

『Not even I exist.』

".....Yes....."

『All I became adept at was breaking thorns with my feet.』

『Now, even boasting that my feet don't get hurt when stepping on cacti, would that be a boast?』

『I'm not bleeding.』

『Is a sign of being an adult.』

『At some point, I find myself adept at surviving in this desert.』



".....I hate it."

『I've also become accustomed to drinking water.』

『The trick is not to cut the cacti entirely.』

『You don't need to remove all the thorns.』

『Just one or two.』

『At most three.』

『Then, just peel the skin where the thorns were removed a little and drink the juice. Just a bit. A tiny bit of indulgence.』

『It doesn't hurt.』

『The cactus doesn't die.』

『There's no sinner, no corpse.』

"I hate it!"

『 Just a dry throat. 』

『 An unquenchable thirst that grows little by little on the inside, until it becomes as big as a heart. 』

『 One night, I vomited. 』

『 What came out of the heart wasn't blood, but sand. 』

"I loathe it....."

『 Even the things I thought were stars in the night sky. 』

『 Looking back, they were sand grains that had already died. 』

『 Sand sparkling in the sunlight. 』

『Both this desert and the night sky were nothing but graves.』

"....."

『The fox, having walked the desert for thousands of years looked up at some starlight and slowly let out a breath,』

"I..."

I.

"I hate this world."

The breath was poisonous.

"It's boring. Tedious. No, meaningless. Why? Why is there no meaning? How can you laugh? What's so funny? There's nothing. It's lacking. In fact, everything is lacking. Why are you here? Why do you keep being there? How? In this utterly empty world,"

Why is there nothing for me?

".....Mister."

[■ ■■■■■ ■■■ ■■■■ ■■■ ■■■ ■■■■■■■■■ ■■■  
■■■■■.]

Tch.

[■ ■■■■■ ■■■ ■■■■ ■■■ ■■■ activates its skill.]

"Mister, you will make me happy, won't you?"

Before long.

At the fox's feet, an oasis unfolds.

"Isn't that so?"

The mirror of the desert.

The unscarred white sand gets wet, turning white.

With each ripple, the grains of sand tick and softly rustle.

"....."

I did not answer the fox right away.

Walking from the middle of the oasis, parting the shallow water.

Crossing the water that barely covered my ankles.

I went behind the fox.

"Yes."

I held the fox's shoulder.

"It's okay for you to drink me."

I put a little strength into my hand.

The fox, whose shoulder was grabbed from behind, naturally dropped its head.

The water's surface.

"If you take a sip when you wake up today, I will bring back the same amount of water while you sleep. Today, tomorrow and the day after. Until the day I dry up."

In the mirror of water so clear that it could break upon touch, the fox was reflected.

The fox's face was reflected.

Its fur was shining like gold.

And its eyes turned to ash.

Even the ■.

"So."

I held the fox's back, supported its shoulder, and whispered in its ear.

"Please tell me your name."

"....."

"Let me see you. Your face. Tell me the face you want to show me and the name you want to be pronounced by me. Decide. Then..."

As long as you wish.

"It's okay for you to live by drinking me."

Drip.

A ■ fell from the fox's face.

It was black rust that flowed.

".....I deceived you....."

The part where the rust fell turned black.

The oasis became slightly muddier because of it.

But the water was still clear enough to swallow the rust shed by the fox and reflect its face transparently.

Yeah.

It's fortunate.

"I brainwashed you. I fragmented your memories. I tore apart the voices that reached you and cut off every touch that reached you. Yet, you..."

"I told you, it's okay."



I stroked the head of the young fox.

"My daughter is a Demon King who has killed me hundreds of times."

I could stroke it without a hint of falsehood.

"And my son is a warrior who challenges me to a duel whenever he's bored."

It was also fortunate that I could do so.

"My lover has stabbed my heart with a knife and killed me."

"....."

"Brainwashing? Memory manipulation? Sorry, but that's nothing to me."

I smiled.

"I don't hate someone just because they harmed me."

"....."

Silence flowed between us.

Eventually, the fox opened its mouth.

"But a person named Yoo Soo-Ha..."

"Can we talk about that later? It'd be even better if we didn't at all. Anyway, it would be nice if you could tell me your name."

Silence flowed once more.

But the direction of the silence was different.

".....My name is....."

I closed my mouth to wait for the answer, and the fox bit its lip, unsure of how to respond. The young fox, now with golden fur and ash-colored eyes, slowly let out a breath.

"■ ■■■■■■ ■■■ ■■■■ ■■■ ■■■....."

The fox's lips reflected on the water surface moved slightly.

"Only for you."

Perhaps.

The fox pondered over the six words it could choose.

The young fox thought about the nineteen blanks the world had allowed it.

And suddenly looked down at its ash-tainted eyes.

"....."

The fox nodded.

"Yes."

Click.

Finally, all the rust peeled off from the fox's beautiful face.

With a face cleansed of ink, a voice free of thorns, and a heart devoid of sand.

"Just for you,"

The child of the desert said.

"I am A Music Box Just for You."

And so, it became.

[A Music Box Just for You activates its skill.]

The desert crumbled away.

Like an hourglass turned upside down.

The sand that formed an infinite horizon fell endlessly before disappearing.

"I will sing for you, King of Death."

[The skill has been activated.]

"As long as it's for me, I am just an instrument that sings as engraved by you, Mister. An in

strument that no one but you can play, remembering only one piece of music, that is me."

Swoosh.

The golden fur settled down.

"So."

"Yes."

I held the fox's paw.

"From now on, the only constellation I serve is you."

To the child who will become my god.

[Congratulations.]

['A Music Box Just for You' has become your Constellation.]

[You are the sole believer of 'A Music Box Just for You'.]

In the oasis of a desert spanning about 5 square meters.

I made a contract with a grey fox.



# Chapter 324: A Music Box Just for You, and Only You (3)

---

"I love you, Mister. Please go out with me."

"Ah, that's not possible."

"Damn it!!"

The first thing I did upon hosting the Constellation was reject the Constellation's confession.

[A Music Box Just for You becomes angry.]

Thump. Thump! The young fox stamped its feet on the floor in frustration.



Those who haven't seen it wouldn't know, but a fox playing whack-a-mole is incredibly cute. That means, my Constellation is cute.

"So, I'm not cute to you?"

"No. You are cute."

"I'm not lovely to you?"

"You are lovely."

"You like this form I've taken on, and moreover, Mister, you want to make me happy, impervious to any brainwashing or manipulation, right?"

"Your words just now are correct."

"Then that's love!"

The fox leaped up and grabbed my collar. Swing swing. Those who haven't been grabbed wouldn't know, but a fox

hanging from a person's collar and squirming is incredibly cute. You get what I mean?

"Hurry up and love me! Love me right now! Bestow upon me immense happiness, human! Make me happy!"

Hmm.

I hope you understand what I mean.

[A Music Box Just for You activates its skill.]

['The Universe's Wild Expanse' attempts to change your emotions.]

[Failed!]

[Skill conditions not met.]

"That won't work, you know... God...."

The Universe's Wild Expanse fulfills each other's imaginations. If what I imagine is the happiness of the Constellation, and I wish for that happiness to be realized not as a delusion but in reality, no distortion occurs.

In short, I wished for the fox god to be happy in reality even without [The Universe's Wild Expanse].

Until the end of our reality, until complete death arrives. Therefore, [The Universe's Wild Expanse] will continue without adding any distortion to reality.

"Ugh....."

The fox wrapped its head with both hands.

".....It's strange. The weird one is Mister, but it's as if I'm being treated like a childish and weird Constellation. Isn't it strange? If this isn't love, then what is love? What is it?"

"When you can ask that question, that's youth."

"Am I already in my thousands of years of youth? Damn. Spring is too long. I might die of pollen allergy before summer

comes."

"God, your speech has become a bit rough. You're cute enough to smack around the cute things of the universe a few times, but isn't there an error in your speech? Shouldn't your speech sound more like a fox?"

"Disciple, then, do you know how a fox cries?"

"Ming ding ding ding ridi ding?"

"That's outdated. And you got the rhythm wrong too."

The young fox said coldly.

Foxes can also make expressions.

Today, I, Kim Gong-Ja, a Socrates among us gained another new insight while climbing the tower.

-Indeed....

Guardian Spirit suddenly sighed.

-The concentration of bullshit around Kim Zombie has thickened even more....

"What does that mean?"

[Shiny tries to butt into the conversation, asking what that means.]

[A Music Box Just for You deeply contemplates the sound of a fox's cry.]

-Really, where did you gather all these 36-flavor crazies from? Is this even legal? Zombie, is your existence legal? To my eyes, it seems like it needs to be illegal.

The tiny 5-square-meter room was bustling.

Inside it were 1 person, 1 sword, 1 desert fox, and 1 ghost.

It was the most perfectly racially equitable 4-member party

in history.

"There's no need to stay here any longer."

First off, it's cramped.

"Peep. Peep."

And the fox god answered. It seemed the young desert fox had finally decided how it should cry. From my perspective, it was evolutionarily and probably physically the wrong vocalization. But the fox god seemed quite pleased.

"Peep, peep."

"What are you saying?"

"Peek."

I immediately understood what the fox god was saying.

[A Music Box Just for You governs the 61st floor as a Constellation.]

[A Music Box Just for You assigns you a quest.]

Before me, the grains of sand moved with a swish.

The granules came together to form letters.

+

[Spoon-fed Quest]

Constellation: A Music Box Just for You

Difficulty: F

Objective: Stroke the head of the Constellation you serve.

\*However, you must stroke with all your sincerity.

+

"....."

"Peep."

The fox god lifted its chin confidently and triumphantly.

"Yes. Understood."

I smiled and stroked the fox god's head.

As my hand brushed over it, platinum fur rippled softly.

With all sincerity.

[Quest Completed.]

[Stage Cleared.]



Perhaps, there has never been a hunter who completed a quest this quickly.

If this were a speedrun, then it's a speedrun.

Not counting the half-lives of Raviel and my master that I had to spend.

[Congratulations.]

[You have cleared the 61st floor!]

And I was enveloped in a sight different from before.

Swish.

A sandstorm blew. It wasn't irritating to breathe in, nor did it sting the eyes as it brushed by. It merely carried the sweet scent of desert roses. The delicate fragrance of flowers that bloomed by feeding only on dew under the sun, lingered at the tip of my nose.

'It's not a dazzling light.'

Until now, whenever I headed to the next stage, I was enveloped in white light.

'Perhaps because I truly have a Constellation now.'

I smiled.

Now a Constellation that cannot use any powers and has nothing to do but stay by my side, but perhaps that's what constellations in the night sky are meant to be.

The wish I have for my Constellation is already enough.

If I could smell the scent of roses with every floor I climb.

'That's fine.'

I drowned in the sandstorm.

[You are being transferred to the next stage!]

Tick.

The last thing I heard was the moving sound of the wall clock left in the tiny room.

---

[You have entered the 62nd floor.]

A new floor.

Although it had only been about a week in reality since I stayed on the 61st floor, my arrival was announced with a clamor.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth re-detects your presence!]

The Constellations must have been tracking me continuously.

After causing such a spectacle on the 50th floor, I even managed to simultaneously contract with up to ten Constellations, albeit temporarily.

Whether it was Constellations I had contracted with or not, it was difficult for them not to be interested in my tumultuous actions.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth notifies other Constellations of your arrival!]

And then, my presence on the 61st floor disappeared.

Thanks to [The Universe's Wild Expanse ] activated by the fox god, we were completely isolated, locked in a world just for the two of us.

Even other Constellations didn't know about the fox god's existence, nor its powers. Maybe the Constellations were just stomping their feet, not knowing what on earth had happened?

And now, as if nothing had happened, I've returned, hence their hasty messages.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth proposes that you become their official disciple.]

[The Warhorse of the Eternal Plains offers you a disciple's position.]

[The Lonely Seeker offers you a disciple's position.]

[The Incarnation of Love and Lust proposes the position of Apostle to you!]

It's been a while.

Quite a few familiar names appeared one after another in the messages.

I gave a broad smile to the invisible Constellations.

"Have you all been well?"

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth questions where you had been hiding all this time.]

"I wasn't exactly hiding. The details are private, so let's keep it a secret..."

[The Incarnation of Love and Lust is proposing the position of Apostle to you!]

"Ah. Right. About that."

Boing.

The fox god leaped onto my waist and climbed up to my back.

"I've already become a servant to a Constellation."

The fox god coiled itself around my shoulder. And then, it wrapped its fox tail gently around my neck. From afar, it might look like I was wearing a golden scarf.

"Peep."

The fox god nuzzled its head against my cheek.

[The King of Death is a disciple of A Music Box Just for You.]

[A Music Box Just for You politely requests other Constellations not to mess with you.]

A deep silence enveloped the heavens.

[The Lonely Seeker falls silent.]

[The Warhorse of the Eternal Plains falls silent.]

[The Incarnation of Love and Lust falls silent.]

Only the sound of the fox god's tail swishing and its eye-smile quietly flowed.

After a while, one Constellation sent a message.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth politely asks what kind of trouble you've been rolling in.]

Hmm.

I couldn't ask for a better first impression.

"Now, everyone. Calm down a bit..."

[A Music Box Just for You nonsensically responds that it really likes snake liquor.]

".....Snake liquor? Why bring up snake liquor all of a sudden?"

Guardian Spirit answered my question.

-The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth, that is, Hisimet Cretsu, is a serpent god, Zombie. In short, your Constellation lord has just insulted a serpent with racial slurs.

"Ah. So that's why..."

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth swears to kill you!]



".....They react so violently. Hmm."

Indeed.

It seems our fox god intends to make enemies of other Constellations right from the start, to ensure they don't mess with me.

[The Incarnation of Love and Lust says they have never heard of such a Constellation like yours.]

[A Music Box Just for You responds that's because your rabbit ears are rotten. A Music Box Just for You expresses sympathy for you, who lacks someone to regularly clean your ears.]

[The Incarnation of Love and Lust swears to tear you apart.]

Remarkable.

".....Perhaps Babbit is."

-A rabbit god. From what I know, they take pride in believing their ears are the most adorable in the universe. They laugh off insults to their parents and character, but for some reason, they go berserk if their ears are insulted.

"I see. Can you explain it in simpler terms?"

-Um...

Guardian Spirit pondered seriously.

-As if someone insulted Raviel to you?

What?

That's catastrophic.

Are you planning to destroy the world, fox god?

[The Warhorse of the Eternal Plains says everyone is too excited and suggests restraint.]

[A Music Box Just for You worries that seeing your long face makes it feel like its own face is getting elongated.]

[The Warhorse of the Eternal Plains prepares for war.]

This is serious.

The forces hostile to us are increasing at an alarming rate.

I had no other choice but to give a taste of hell to those who insulted Raviel, except to talk it out first by giving them hellish pain.

The Constellations would probably do the same.

How can we correct this misunderstanding and delusion?

-No. With a Constellation that manipulates the world for its own pleasure as your god, what misunderstandings or delusions are there to correct...? Did you really think it would respect other beings? It probably regards all life in this universe as mere ants...

Let's ignore Guardian Spirit's words.

They're not good for my mental health.

"Let's, let's focus on conquering the stage for now, God."

"Peep."

"Wow, the 62nd floor. What kind of place might it be? Is a force like the Magic Tower reigning here? I'm curious. So curious I could go crazy. Really, I'm going crazy with curiosity! I'm just going insane!"

I desperately tried to divert the fox god's attention.

"There must be a Constellation governing this stage, right? Who could it be? It would be nice if it were a somewhat normal and friendly one this time. Really curious who it could be..."

"No need to be curious."

A voice was heard.

"And you won't need to know."

At that moment, the ground shook.

The reason the ground shook was that something had plunged from the sky. Exactly in front of me. More precisely, where my head would have been if I hadn't used my movement technique to dodge.

Kooooom!

I immediately put distance between us. The spot where I had just evaded was smashed again. Bang! Bang! As I swiftly flew away, lightning-like strikes followed me as if a flyswatter was being swung three, four, several times to catch a fly.

"Looks like you're worthy to be called a king."

After a total of eighteen attacks, taking 2 seconds in time, the one who attacked me finally spoke.

"King of Death. You're the one who killed my Apostle."

It wasn't a human.

It resembled a human, but with giant tooth-like horns on both sides of its forehead.

Golden eyes devoid of emotion were directed at me.

"Pay for your arrogance with your death."

Creak.

The Constellation was carrying a massive hammer, overly large, on its shoulder.

[The Ruin-Harvesting Cow attacks you.]

Ruin-Harvesting Cow.

[The Ruin-Harvesting Cow swears to annihilate you.]

In the past, Silvia Evanair...

It was the Constellation that Lady Goldencup had worshipped as a god.

# **Volume 14 – Chapters 325-349**



# Chapter 325: The God and the King (1)

---

"Ruin-Harvesting Cow is 'Mutia'."

Or so the blond-haired priest boy had said.

The Heretic Inquisitor stroked his chin.

"Mainly governing the areas of [Destruction] and [Recreation]."

"Simple but powerful."

At that time, the Heretic Inquisitor was wearing a flowing dress.

It was the period when he was impersonating Lady Goldencup, the Baroness.

Therefore, the Heretic Inquisitor not only stroked his chin but also flicked open a fan, though such a description is probably irrelevant.

“Domains reinterpret the world and brainwash people. The Great Library we were just in does the same! The Head Librarian interprets the world as a [collection of stories], and there, we are [characters in a story].”

"Defeating those who possess their own laws with laws we can use."

The Heretic Inquisitor smiled broadly.

"I define this as a Holy War and a Constellation War!"

---

Kooooom!

A storm that lightly swept everything around it crashed down. It was a single strike. Rocks turned to rubble, pebbles to sandstorms, one strike incinerated the surrounding area.

"You dodge disgustingly like an eel."

The ground cracked in a grid pattern. The lines of the grid creaked and shifted out of place. Bang! Boom! Each time [Ruin-Harvesting Cow] swung the hammer, the misalignment intensified, and finally, the terrain was damaged beyond its original form.

"Try escaping forever, King of Death."

Creak-creak-

"If you're wondering what happened to the one who tried to flee from me, it would be wise to ask directly to your head. I once exchanged blows with one for 31 moon rises and falls. If you intend to ask about his whereabouts, you will meet him the moment your skull is shattered."

The ground flipped over.

"At the same time, you will face your ancestors the moment your skull is shattered."

The terrain thrashed and the landscape was in chaos. Creak! The ground tore apart. Sediments that had accumulated over a long time were exposed.

Mutia wasn't just showing off her strength.

"Peep!"

The moment the fox god loudly warned, the ground collapsed.

Rumble rumble rumble!

The entire floor of the land surrounding where Mutia and I were standing caved in. I tried to evade, but Boom! Mutia swung the hammer to block me. I had to choose whether to avoid the collapsing ground or the hammer aimed at my head.

It wasn't a difficult choice.

Rumble rumble...! Boom! Crash, roll roll.....!

As a result, I chose to endure the collapsing ground. The altitude at which the two of us fought became lower and lower, and with every hammer blow to the ground by the Constellation, the speed of the collapse accelerated.

"Indeed."

Before long, our battleground transformed into a colosseum.

The difference from the Colosseum built in Rome might be that it didn't consider the audience at all.

Where the spectator seats should be, there were only steep sedimentary rocks standing.

"Not only did you swing the hammer at me... you changed the terrain to make it hard to escape."

The Colosseum was an artificial hell created for still-living humans to watch and enjoy the bloodshed and slaughter. A gladiatorial arena without spectator seats would simply be a pure hell.

"That's right, young lad."

The one who created a pit of hell in just a few minutes readjusted her grip on the hammer.

"Live as long as I have, and you'll grow tired of achieving just one thing at a time. Achieving at least two goals simultaneously is not so much a virtue for us as it is a habit."

"If it's at least two, it could actually be three or four."

"You're a quick-witted lad."

Ruin-Harvesting Cow.

Mutia, with her golden hair flowing, looked up at the sky with her golden eyes.

[The Ruin-Harvesting Cow issues a quest to its followers.]

[You have been targeted by the quest!]

[The quest has been revealed.]

+

## [Annihilate Your Nemesis]

Difficulty: SS

Objective: You have killed my believer. You have killed an Apostle. You have severed the voice of a child I took in and cut off their lifeline. Is there any reason I should not wring your neck now?

Die.

Compensate with your death.

I have heard you are eyed by many Constellations. Some Constellations will even steal this proclamation to read it by any means necessary. To those, I declare: If you are not prepared to fight with me, Mutia, for all eternity, do not meddle in this vendetta.

It is simple and clear, I wish for your death.

\*However, you cannot participate in this quest.

\*You are the [Target] of this quest.

+

The moment the letters were engraved in the air.

"Strike."

Behind those letters, dark shadows loomed. As many people as the letters, or perhaps even more—on the other side of the colosseum. From atop the high sedimentary rocks, they all leaped towards me in unison.

[The Ruin-Harvesting Cow's Apostles manifest.]

Each one of them.

[The Ruin-Harvesting Cow's Apostles manifest.]

Was like Lady Goldencup.



[The Ruin-Harvesting Cow's Apostles manifest.]

[The Ruin-Harvesting Cow's Apostles manifest.]

[The Ruin-Harvesting Cow's Apostles manifest.]

Apostles.

"Is this the third stratagem?"

"That's right. These are the children who wish to avenge their sister's enemy."

"Nice. Because she's Lady Goldencup, so Goldencup, and truly a master's lackey, so Goldencup."

"Didn't I tell you? At this age, it's natural to aim for multiple gains. It's nothing to be amazed about."

I tightly gripped my sword handle.

About two hundred people.

All of the Ruin-Harvesting Cow, Mutia's Apostles, were wielding huge hammers. Should I say even their hair was similar? They were similar. Whether short or long, from translucent platinum to dusky gold, all had golden hair waving.

"Scattering gold dust across the galaxy."

I admired the scene unfolding above me. A golden meteor shower was pouring down. The word Constellation War, once mentioned by the Heretic Inquisitor, fleetingly crossed my mind.

"Ha."

Another voice also crossed my mind.

"You seem quite at ease."

It was Mutia's telepathy.

"To compose a poem facing death. If I have two hundred Apostles following me, they are sharper than ten thousand soldiers under Mahos. King of Death, are you also so relaxed because you have laid out several schemes like me?"

"Well."

The two hundred Apostles who jumped were now right in front of me.

I gathered my ki.

"Why bother with schemes when I can already count two, three, four or five directions with a single swing of my sword?"

A collision happened.

"Impudent!"

Screeeeech!

The first to strike with a hammer and clash with me was a

short warrior. She too was a user of ki manifestation, an Aura user. Dressed in traditional clothes adorned with plum blossoms, her short hair was neatly arranged, but that elegance and tidiness couldn't hide the warrior's rage.

"How dare you be insolent in front of Lord Mutia!"

"I could also speak without moving my tongue using telepathy. Shall I?"

"I'll smash your skull!"

"That would be problematic."

Whooooosh!

Another Apostle aimed for my side and swung their hammer down. It was a joint attack. Thud! I stepped on the ground and rotated in the air like a crescent moon. Then, I kicked the short-haired warrior's fingers with a kick.

"Damn!"

"Crap!"

The hammer barely grazed my back. The short-haired warrior was pushed back half a step by my kick. The two Apostles clicked their tongues and cursed.

Their first joint attack had failed.

"Shiny."

[Shiny responds with a 'Yes, hero.']

The two who took the lead in the vanguard were probably the most skilled in martial arts.

I estimated the average skill level of the Apostles.

"Let's open the real names for a change."

[The Goddess of Protection manifests the powers of the five swords.]

Swoosh.

Besides the sword I was holding, four more swords rose from the shadows. Shadow Swords. Like sticky blueberry jam thickened, the swords, coated in pitch-black shadows, began to circle around me.

[The Salvation Sword accepts the command of the King of Death.]

[The Sacrifice Sword accepts the command of the King of Death.]

[The Prayer Sword accepts the command of the King of Death.]

[The Pity Sword accepts your command.]

Alright.

These were the Constellation Swords that transformed Kim Yul, an ordinary student, into the founder of the Aegim Empire. Let's see if they can withstand this.

Without any hesitation, I swung all five swords simultaneously.

"Be careful!"

The short-haired Apostle shouted.

"That guy is immune to the [Blessing of Indestructible Body]! We feel pain if we get cut too! Be careful not to get-"

"Ah. If it were that easy, your sister wouldn't have lost."

Screams echoed.

"Right?"

Five streams of swordplay spectacularly unfolded in the air. "Ugh", "Ack! "Aaaah! Aaah!", the Apostles who were charging at me, those who were still leaping from above, and those trying to press me from the front, each of them clutched their throats or hearts and screamed.

"Ugh, ugh...!"

The short-haired Apostle glared at me fiercely. Even such a warrior was holding her throat.

[Pain without Wounds].

The second power of the Holy Swords, namely the Pity Sword, had stabbed the Apostle's throat.

"Cough! Urgh..."

She must be experiencing the pain of having her throat pierced by now. It was remarkable she could still look up at me without losing consciousness.

Koom. Koom.

Around me, Apostles who were cut by my sword and fainted from the excessive agony were collapsing. The hammers they dropped from their hands fell to the ground with a heavy thud.



"The second most foolish thing in this world is to gang up on me, and slightly more foolish than that is to do so with something like a hammer. How many can you swing at once with those coffin-sized hammers? Three, maybe?"

"I'll kill you...!!"

"Scary."

I sliced the short-haired Apostle's head with the Pity Sword. An invisible wound, or rather, pain, pierced right through the center of the Apostle's throat.

The Apostle collapsed as if her strings were cut.

"I won't inflict more pain than necessary on those who don't come at me further. Not piercing your eyeballs or ripping your internal organs is my consideration for you. However, I don't know how long my patience will last."

"....."

The Apostles hesitated and looked back at their god.

Mutia looked at me expressionlessly, holding the hammer aloft.

"You're capable enough to threaten the Magic Tower."

"Lady Goldencup is still alive."

I attempted to negotiate.

"It's true that I slashed Silvia. But now, Silvia has joined my family and is working as the head of the King of Death's servants. Her life now is probably happier than when she was under you. At least, it's more comfortable. Declaring vengeance on me is wrong..."

"Indeed, there are Constellations who think that way."

Mutia nodded.

"Have you ever considered the position of becoming a god?"

I blinked.

"Pardon?"

"You humans always make wishes. Make me rich, make me healthy. I grant wishes in return for your faith."

Swoosh.

As Mutia spoke, the Apostles retreated one by one. Then, they reorganized their formation around me.

'The god buys time while the believers form up.'

The maneuver was obvious, but I didn't stop it.

This was also part of the negotiation.

In exchange for my allowing this, Mutia, the Constellation, a god, willingly engaged in conversation with me.

"What if I twisted your wishes while fulfilling them?"

"Twisted how?"

"I grant your wishes. But, for those who wished to be rich, I give [the satisfaction of feeling rich without earning more money]."

"....."

"For those who wished for health, I endow them with a personality that is content with their current body. I give them a different personality, a different nature, to be happy and content with what they have now. I ask you, lad who claims to be a king."

The golden Constellation spoke.

"Is that also fulfilling their wishes?"

"....."

"There are many Constellations who think so. But I am different. If they only needed a lesson to be content with the present, why would they pray to a god? I only cherish the children who make wishes to me in that moment."

Indeed.

"I freed Silvia from the shackles of hatred and vengeance."

"Neither a wish made to you nor to me."

"I guided Silvia, who dedicated her life to killing, to another way of life."

"That life was not what she wished for."

"She would wish for her current life now."

"You must have brainwashed her."

"Is Silvia's own will not important?"

"The wish made at the moment of praying to me is more important."

"I saved Silvia."

"To me, that is the death of that child."

"How is change equivalent to death?"

"Correct. But that's the logic of your human world, not an excuse that a god should use."

Mutia raised her hammer.

Just then, the Apostles had finished reorganizing their ranks.

"A single exception leads to ten exceptions, ten exceptions lead to a hundred habits, and a hundred habits cement into a single life. King of Death. There are no exceptions in the life of a god."

"....."

"The child made a wish to me, and I accepted it. That's all. I

will reclaim the soul of that child you took in. I ask you, is there room for negotiation here?"

So it is.

"No. There's no choice but to fight."

At that moment.

"Peep."

The fox god reacted to my will.

[You are a believer of A Music Box Just for You.]

[A Music Box Just for You assigns you a quest.]

Proof that I, who belonged nowhere, now stand under the constellation of the fox god.

It wasn't a public quest issued by the Tower or a quest issued by the Constellation governing the stage, but my own Constellation embroidered the letters just for me.

+

[The Golden God]

Constellation: A Music Box Just for You

Difficulty: S

Objective: Defeat Mutia, the ruler of the 62nd floor. The Ruin-Harvesting Cow, Mutia is targeting a member of your family.

\*However, if the identity of Silvia Evanair is transferred to Mutia or your identity is transferred, you will be defeated.

+

The objective was simple and clear.



Thus, I swung my sword without hesitation.

Mutia, without a moment's hesitation, swung down her hammer.

Kooooom!

The divine will of a Constellation and my faith collided.

# Chapter 326: The God and the King (2)

---

My sword shadow and Mutia's hammer wind merged.

The Apostles did not just watch as we dueled though.

"Where do you think you're going!"

"How dare..."

"Do you think we'll just let you be! You damn heretic!"

Having reorganized their formation, the Apostles charged one by one. The fervor in their eyes was not mere madness or blind faith.

It was their devotion to the deity they believed in.

The righteousness to repay the blessings bestowed by their deity was blazing hotly in the eyes of the Apostles.

"Impressive."

I exclaimed in admiration.

"But I've already warned you."

I swung my sword with admiration. The five swords bit into their targets like a viper's fangs.

"-----!!"

Left eye. Right eye. Vocal cords. Back of the neck. The internal organs.

Wherever my sword passed, terrible screams followed in succession.

The [Pain without Wounds] had gouged out spots that brought unbearable pain which humans could not endure.

"Aaaah!"

And that was not all.

".....! .....!"

I remembered the spots where I had inflicted pain on the Apostles. And every time the Apostles, gritting their teeth and holding back groans, charged at me, I precisely hit the same spots again. I pierced through the pierced spots and slashed the slashed spots again.

"Hiuk, ugh! Ah, ah----"

Screams. More screams. And even more screams.

As Mutia and I exchanged blows, the area around us was filled with screams.

"You fight quite efficiently. To the extent that it's almost terrifying."

Mutia commented. It was a critique filled with sarcasm. I decided to return the favor with sarcasm as well.

"It's not as efficient as being ganged up on."

"Many humans insist on not killing, but your way of fighting, although it doesn't kill, inflicts pain worse than death. Perhaps, the very path you take to ascend the Tower is such."

"It's touching to see you consider humans. If only that compassion had extended to the guests at the wedding attacked by Lady Goldencup, I would have been more moved."

"Those were not my believers."

"Is that the end?"

"What do you mean?"

"I've seen your first, second, and third strategies."

Chaang!

I parried Mutia's strike.

"Is that all?"

I charged.

"Even if you are among the brightest Constellations in the Milky Way, that brilliance is not due to martial prowess."

Mutia attacked, and I dodged it.

"The prowess boasted by your Apostles is thanks to the [Indestructible Body]. They are nothing more than those who rush in, trusting their unharmed bodies. Therefore, they are no match for me, who can inflict pain on anyone."

I unleashed all five swords at once.

Sword wind.

The swords became a black storm, devastating the area. "Ugh!", "Ah", "Lord Mutia!" The Apostles screamed briefly

before being flung far away. Bang! Dozens of them were thrown against the walls of the colosseum, the sedimentary rock.

"I am the lord of a battle organization that has been dedicated to wielding the sword for thousands of years just to embody the Demonic Heavenly God Art."

There were Apostles who were not blown away by the sword pressure. They gritted their teeth and endured. "Eeeek...!" Some even slammed their hammers into the ground, using that force to hold their ground.

Impressive.

To them, I especially swung four swords, stabbing each one swiftly.

"My master sliced through the peak of a snowy mountain with a single sword stroke. My son, who is also my disciple, conquered a continent with his bare body. My daughter, my adviser, split the earth with one strike, and my family can bring down a spire of the Magic Tower with a single cut."

Then, there were no more Apostles standing.

[The Constellations watching the fight hold their breath.]

[The Lonely Seeker falls silent.]

[The Warhorse of the Eternal Plains falls silent.]

[The Incarnation of Love and Lust falls silent.]

In the artificially created hell at its very center.

I stood tall, looking down at the Constellation that lay on the ground.

"Lastly, I am a descendant of the Sword Emperor."

"And so, I have a question for you."

Grinning.

"Is that all?"



I smiled.

"If there's nothing more, please write a letter of surrender.  
I'll even give you my pen as a souvenir."

"How insolent!"

Mutia bared her teeth.

"I'll bring about your downfall!"

The golden eyes of the Constellation blazed with fury.

[The Ruin-Harvesting Cow requests a covenant from the  
Tower.]

[Sanctification.]

The golden eyes turned blood red.

[Approved.]

[From this moment on, this place belongs to The Ruin-Harvesting Cow.]

The sky turned red.

[She is the one who destroys and recreates; worship her.]

"She is the one who destroys and recreates; worship her!"

The Apostles who were thrown against the cliff, those who were kneeling in agony, all chorused in unison, even as if they were spitting out their last breath.

"She is the one who destroys and recreates; worship her!"

Again.

"She is the one who destroys and recreates; worship her!"

At the moment when the Apostles praised their deity for the third time.

[The Ruin-Harvesting Cow manifests its power.]

Creak.

My bones felt as if they were being crushed.

".....!"

It was a familiar sensation. The pain of muscles and blood vessels unable to withstand the Aura and breaking apart. I immediately tried to reduce the amount of Aura flowing through my body to adapt to this pain.

But there was no need.

‘The Aura disappeared?’

The Aura that had been frolicking in my blood vessels had evaporated in an instant.

-Kim Zombie!

I felt strength draining from my body.

-You've aged now!

I could ask 'What'. I could reply with 'What do you mean'. Instead of spending time on questions and rebuttals, I accepted the Guardian Spirit's words as the plain truth.

I looked at my face reflected on the blade.

"....."

I opened my lips.

"Indeed."

The voice that came out was unmistakably mine, but somehow it sounded a bit worn out.

A sword as clear as a mirror.

"There it is."

An old man of advanced age was reflected there.

The memory that flickered through my mind.

Like a broken tape recorder looping the same segment.

"Ruin-Harvesting Cow is 'Mutia'."

Or so the blond-haired priest boy had said.

The Heretic Inquisitor stroked his chin.

"Mainly governing the areas of [Destruction] and [Recreation]."

"Simple but powerful."

This statement has lingered long in my memory.

Not because it was a memorable recollection, but rather because it remained as an unresolved riddle.

-It's simple but powerful!

Why 'destruction' and 'recreation'?

Destruction was straightforward. Understandable. The image of Lady Goldencup swinging her hammer and smashing everything in sight was the very embodiment of a destroyer.

But recreation?

-It's simple but,

What part of Lady Goldencup's actions corresponded to 'recreation'?

-powerful,

And then I realized.

-isn't it!

The thing in this world that is both destruction and recreation.

-Primarily, it governs 'destruction' and 'recreation'!

Regression.

Or time itself.

-Lady Goldencup didn't need to show a glimpse of 'recreation'.

Yes, Lady Goldencup didn't need to display a fragment of 'recreation'. Her actions of escaping from a future where Raviel became the empress, returning to the past, and stealing the Crown Prince's heart under the guise of a mere baroness, were already a life that had been 'recreated'.

"—Time continuously destroys itself and also recreates."

After a brief recollection and quick deduction, I spoke with a voice seasoned with time.

"Handling time. Is that your power, Mutia?"

"Indeed. Your reputation precedes you."

The golden Constellation murmured. Unlike the previous sarcasm, this time there was genuine admiration in the voice.

"Though it is said that your sword is fierce, it's not as sharp as your mind."

"There was a reason your followers and Apostles are so loyal."

That's right.

Everything made sense.



I lowered the tip of my sword and looked around.

"These are the ones who wished upon you. Not for wealth or health, but for a single desire. To be taken back to the past. [Make me return to the past], fulfilling such wishes of humans."

"....."

"Everyone gathered here are regressors."

Mutia laughed.

"Indeed, it is so!"

The Constellation gripped the hammer tighter.

In this universe the most golden, valuable thing, time, was governed by a god with golden hair, befitting of their power.

"I am the Harvester of Ruins! To those who have nothing left but ruins, I promise the season of harvest again! A god who

brings fruition! King of Heresy!"

The earth and heavens trembled.

"I am the ruler of reincarnation and the keeper of aeons,  
Mutia!"

The sedimentary layers danced like serpentine tails.

"Kneel before me, lowly creature!"

[The Ruin-Harvesting Cow manifests its power.]

[Wheel of Aeons[1].]

[Your timeline will be altered.]

[Your possibilities will be fixed.]

"Return to your ruined place!"

The world, shifting into another scene.

『If you had never met the Sword Saint.』

The history I walked through was shaken.

『If you had never met the Sword Emperor.』

Rumble.

Beside me, the Guardian Spirit, the image of the Sword Emperor, suddenly vanished.

The luck that had been granted to me, one by one, disappeared.

And was replaced by the possibility of some unfortunate timeline.

『If you had never met the Heretic Inquisitor.』

『If you had never met Viper.』

『If you had never met the Countess.』

『If you had never met the Paladin.』

『If you had never met the Black Dragon Witch.』

Like layers of sediment being peeled away, my timeline was  
erased line by line.

『If you had never met the Goddess of Protection.』

Rumble.

The holy sword in my hand disappeared.

And so did the shadows that had been guarding me.

『If you had never met the Peony that blooms in winter.』

The Aura pulsing in my veins faded away into nothingness.

『If you had never met the Flame Emperor.』

Even the strength swirling in my muscles vanished without a trace.

『If you had just aged and withered away.』

『If.』

Before long, the surrounding scene had become desolate.

『If you were merely not the King of Death.』

They were ruins.

Looking closely, this was Babylon's back-streets.

Hadn't there been a fire that burned it down?

There were no proper buildings.

As an old man, I made this ownerless place my home, setting up a tent among the toothless pillars, surrounded by a toothbrush stained with soot, a yellowed paper cup, a crumpled cigarette pack that couldn't even be considered an antique, and other junk.

"Let me say it once more."

But no matter how desolate the surroundings, it wasn't as desolate as myself.

Hands that never held a sword.

Feet that never climbed the Tower.

A heart that never reveled in victory.

"Kneel before me."

Cough.

Weakly coughing, I was faced with the towering golden Constellation.

"Make a contract with me. Thus, return to the past before you dared kill my child."

"....."

"King of Heresy, renounce your throne. Cast aside your pride. Acknowledge the greatness of the power of time. Then, I shall forgive you."

"...It's a pity."

I coughed and curled the corners of my lips.

"What is it that you regret? Your insolence?"

"No...."

Squeak.

A cry was heard from somewhere.

"Your power."

Mutia turned around.

"Because, for the first time in my life, after winning..."

At the foot of the Constellation.

There was a small golden-furred fox.

"For the first time, I faced death against time."

At the moment Mutia's eyes widened.

『If you had never met your Constellation...』

"Sorry, but..."



The fox spoke.

"There's no such 'if'."

Tick.

"I chose to dream of your reality, Mister."

The clock turned.

[A Music Box Just for You manifests its power.]

Tick.

[The Universe's Vast Expanse.]

[The universe may be vast, but not so vast that music cannot play within it.]

[And I am not so small that I cannot play your song.]

[My universe plays for you, and only you.]

A sandstorm blew.

The ruins, the pillars of the ruins, the antiques, every trace of this life, until there were no traces left, were swept away into the sandy soil and desert of time.

Mutia looked around in confusion.

"What....."

"My power may be insignificant. It may have been reduced to nothingness by you. But at least, I can protect the reality that you walk in."

The fox smiled with its eyes.

"Begone, ox-head."

"This man's time belongs to me."

Squeak.

I stroked the fox wrapped around my neck like a scarf.

Beside me, the Guardian Spirit still stood with arms crossed, and the holy sword was still in my hand, and my feet had indeed stepped on the sixty-second floor.

"It has finally come to this."

My heart still beat for victory.

"Well..."

Grinning.

I still smiled as myself.

"Shall we conclude this, Mutia?"

[1] Aeon or Aion is a Hellenistic deity associated with time, the orb or circle encompassing the universe, and the zodiac. The "time" which Aion represents is perpetual, unbounded, ritual, and cyclic: The future is a returning version of the past, later called aevum. This kind of time contrasts with empirical, linear, progressive, and historical time that Chronos represented, which divides into past, present, and future.

# Chapter 327: The God and the King (3)

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The hellish time had stopped.

".....This can't be."

In an artificially constructed colosseum, surrounded by layers of sedimentary rock, [Ruin-Harvesting Cow] Mutia shouted, her golden wheat-like hair disheveled.

"There's no way this can be happening!"

Mutia took a step forward. The hammer swung, igniting fury.

It exploded.

[The Ruin-Harvesting Cow manifests its power.]

[A Music Box Just for You manifests its power.]

That explosion was blocked by the fox.

"But, upon closer thought, it wasn't like this couldn't happen."

"This can't be happening!"

"Ideed, upon closer thought, it was not like this couldn't have happened."

The fox narrated in a theatrical tone.

Mutia gritted her teeth.

"I am the Ruin-Harvesting Cow! That is my alias, and my epithet is 'The Eye of the Storm that Rages in the Sea of Governance'! Even if countless times pass by in all creation, I alone am like the eye of the storm, an absolute temporal coordinate that does not waver in any flow!"

"Absolute temporal coordinate, what is that? In Mister's world, there's someone called Einstein, wouldn't it be better to argue with him? Instead of doing this here....."

"King of Death! I know how insignificant you are!"

Mutia glared at me with fierce eyes.

As the power dissipated, the vigor in her eyes also faded, and Mutia's eyes regained their golden hue.

"I know your past!"

From those pupils wafted the scent of a blazing sun.

"You little child! You were nothing more than a seedling. A shabby one-room apartment! A cramped bed! Portraits of idols hung on the wall like laundry! Was it not because you had nothing that you adorned the emptiness with those idols, making it seem as if [something was there]?"

"....."

"You were in the ruins! You were truly in the ruins because you had never achieved anything. Before receiving the name of King of Death, you were certainly not lacking to become my follower! You were indeed the most suitable human to wish for the wish of regression!"

Is that so.

Mutia, the Constellation of time and regression, knows all about what kind of human I was before I entered the 4000 days of nirvana—all of my history.

'Of course, that's only natural.'

I accepted her omniscience.

'If she didn't know my past, the [what if] world that unfolded just now wouldn't have existed.'

Mutia cornered me by manifesting her power.

She brought me, who had aged without gaining anything.



In that process, various hypotheses were made possible by her power.

『If you had not met the Sword Saint.』

『If you had not met the Sword Emperor.』

『If you had not met the Flame Emperor.』

It could be the Sword Saint. Just knowing me, hypothesizing [if you had not met the Sword Saint] is possible.

But the Sword Emperor.

And especially, the Flame Emperor.

'Unless she knew my entire past, it wouldn't even be possible as a hypothesis.'

Then, how did this become possible?

How does [The Ruin-Harvesting Cow] know about my regressed history?

'Hamusutra was a Constellation that dealt with stories. It read the [story] of a human named me and found out about my regression. But how about Mutia? Because she herself is a god dealing with time and regression?'

As my mind rapidly touched upon guesses and moved through deductions, Mutia, with her face still full of rage, shouted.

"But what if your life, too, was ruined by another regressor from the beginning!"

It was a statement that inevitably shattered my train of thought.

"Excuse me?"

"Don't play dumb. You must have thought about it."

Mutia spread her arms.

"Why is my luck so bad?"

The words I had uttered.

"If only I had one good skill..."

Many people had uttered these words.

"Why can't I encounter even a single fortunate opportunity or a genuine chance?"

I took a breath.

And exhaled.

"If I said I had never thought that way, it would be a lie. Yes, I thought about it a lot. I didn't just think that, but also had a lot of resentment, and when the day was filled with resentment, the night was soaked in alcohol."

"You have arrived here just by acquiring one skill."

Mutia said.

"With amazing willpower, unyielding spirit, ceaseless passion, pouring your heart and soul into everything you encounter, and finally you have arrived at the feet of me, Mutia. Haven't you ever found it strange? That you, who seemingly had no particular talent, have paved your way here — doesn't it seem like a miracle, have you never doubted?"

"That is....."

"You would say it was [thanks to meeting good people]."

Mutia smiled.

That smile was as brilliant as molten gold, and it lingered.

"But no!"

At that moment.

I realized this was the [final scheme] she had prepared.

After breaking the ground and creating a colosseum where escape was impossible, attacking with two hundred apostles, pouring her power to age me, and still, if I hadn't fallen then.

As if to say, withstand this too, she had prepared this final blow.

-...It feels like you shouldn't listen to this.

Guardian Spirit murmured.

-I'm not sure what secret she intends to reveal, but I have a bad feeling. Whenever a Constellation harbors poison, it always leads to some pointless disaster.

'No, it's okay.'

I looked straight at Mutia.

'I will listen.'

I have delved into the secrets of countless people so far.

It was after I had prepared myself to take responsibility, and even though I had indeed shouldered it, how could that not have been a form of violence?

'If it's a secret related to me, I want to hear it even more.'

My secret alone cannot be sacred.

Therefore, as a hunter who possesses [Returner's Winding Clock], I boldly asked.

"What do you mean it's not?"

"You could have originally succeeded!"

What does that mean?

Not understanding, I asked again.

"I don't understand, Mutia. What do you mean I could have originally succeeded?"

"Foolish child! The reason you didn't encounter fortunes on the 1st floor and didn't grasp opportunities on the 2nd floor isn't because there were no fortunes or opportunities there."

Mutia's laughter grew louder.

Like the laughter of some ancient king cursed to turn everything he touched into gold, the laughter that the Golden Constellation unleashed was bizarre and, furthermore, desolate.

"You know of the tower! The tower up to the 10th floor is a refuge for those who have fled the world, a comfortable island, a land of opportunities. How could there have been not a single fortune for you to encounter!"

"....."

"Was the tower you looked up to such a heartless entity?!"

Thump.

[The Ruin-Harvesting Cow manifests its power.]

From beneath the ground of the colosseum, where there was only sedimentary rock, the pillars of a temple rose with a boom, a thud!

They weren't intact pillars.

They were remnants of an abandoned temple.

Eroded by wind and rain, like the teeth of an old man whose gums have partly receded, white pillars were implanted all over hell.

『If you had not met the Flame Emperor.』

Between the pillars of the temple, a scene like a screen faintly shimmered.

The first power to manifest was a hypothesis I had already heard.

『If the Flame Emperor had not met 'The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages'.』



That was a completely new hypothesis.

Above all, the subject was not me but the Flame Emperor.

『If the Flame Emperor had not obtained 'Returner's Winding Clock'.』

And then.

『If the Flame Emperor had not regressed through 'Returner's Winding Clock'.』

A world unfolded before my eyes.

『The Flame Emperor, having obtained the 'Returner's Winding Clock', regresses and buys a Sang-Ryun lottery ticket.』

Through the gaps between the pillars, a scene where I and the Flame Emperor brushed past each other was visible.

『As a result, you arrive at the Sang-Ryun lottery ticket

vendor one step later than in the 'original world', and the ticket that was supposed to win 4th place turns into a dud.』

A minor misfortune.

The me beyond the pillars sighed lightly and headed to the hunting grounds.

『Challenging with poor equipment, you sustain injuries that last a day longer than in the original world.』

It didn't stop there.

『By the time you had healed your injuries, the chest there was already empty.』

It wasn't taken by the Flame Emperor.

Because to the Flame Emperor, who had the ability to regress at will, that chest was too trivial to care about.

But to me, who was poor and weak, that equipment would

have been a significant help.

『You fail to acquire a skill card.』

Like a grain of sand thrown into well-functioning gears, my life gradually changed due to the regressor known as the Flame Emperor.

『Your efforts repeatedly end in failure.』

It could be described as a downfall.

『Your life arrives at its destination.』

Until eventually reaching that attic.

『But, if the Flame Emperor had not regressed through the 'Returner's Winding Clock'.』

What unfolded next was a world without that slight dissonance.

A completely different world.

『Your efforts are properly rewarded.』

A world with fruition.

『You acquire quite a good skill and reap the fruits of your efforts.』

There, I seemed to have gained 'the ability to converse with all monsters'.

『You are recognized by people.』

Thanks to the skill, the people of the tower finally realize that among the monsters roaming from the 2nd to the 9th floors, there are intelligent beings capable of conversation, and that they have built a grand civilization city underground to avoid humans.

『You pioneer a path.』

A fact completely unknown to us even now.

On the 5th floor underground, the sub-races were secretly building a city and living.

『You prevent several tragedies.』

As the only one who could converse with the sub-races, as a representative of humanity. As a messenger of death. As a mediator.

『You gain friends,』

After much trouble preventing incidents, the Black Dragon Witch playfully taps me on the shoulder. The Black Dragon Witch, with a sly grin, asks me if I'm up for a drink at a nice place she knows.

『And allies.』

Although my combat skills are far inferior to those of my current self.

Undoubtedly, a fulfilling life surrounded by people who recognize me, living together with those I cherish, was laid out in the crevices of the ruins' temple pillars.

"Young child."

Mutia said.

"This is your original destiny."

"....."

"The path you were originally supposed to walk, the destiny that was originally given to you."

My heart pounded.

"All of it, the Flame Emperor bastard took it all! He monopolized it! He hogged it!"

"....."

"The fortunes that were meant to be yours merely brushed past in vain, and the opportunities that were supposed to be yours slipped through his fingers!"

.....

"In that world—in the 'original' world. In the original. In the mainstream path, you had no reason to endure 4000 times of agony. You could have just lived a satisfying life, honing your inherently diligent nature."

Is that so?

"Do you understand, young child? It wasn't that you were unlucky."

Had I too been living a life distorted by Yoo Soo-Ha?

"You had your luck stolen by someone else!"

A resounding roar echoed through the hell's cavern.

"I'll send you back."

Mutia.

"To the real life you were supposed to live."

Certainly, this was a sharp blow.

But...

"The life you're living now is fake. An illusion. To play word games like [fake life] or [real life], you should have come to me before meeting Raviel, before meeting my master, before seeing the Black Dragon Witch's smile."

I glared at the blazing gold and said.

"The Tower Master said I wasn't living the best life. You say I haven't lived a truthful life."

I spoke towards the gold beyond.



"Whether a life is fake or real isn't determined by the order of time. Ruin-Harvesting Cow, there are people influenced by me, people I've been influenced by. That becomes love, friendship, a connection. People who walk with me, that is my true life."

I held the sword expressionlessly.

"I am 'us'. There are people who made me 'us'. And 'we' exist only in this world."

"....."

"Our true world is only here."

The Ruin-Harvesting Cow.

"And only here."

Mutia.

Power, regression.

"I've heard all the music your Constellation brings forth."

Scheme 1.

Shatter the ground and trap.

Destruction.

Scheme 2.

Drive into an artificial colosseum where escape is impossible.

Destruction.

Scheme 3.

Mobilize a hundred apostles for a combined attack.

Destruction.

Scheme 4.

Use the power of the Constellation to age the King of Death.

Destruction.

Scheme 5.

Show the original time to lure, to make him join her believers.

Destruction.

Aiming for at least two objectives at once, and thus, to defeat me, the successor of the Sword Emperor, with five schemes prepared, the Constellation that now stood before me had nothing left but the hammer to block my way.

"First."

"....."

"I'll take your pride."

A single flash was visible.

Certainly, Mutia must have gripped her hammer and swung it, perha

ps trying to counter my attack, but the outcome revealed to this world after a moment was tragic.

Thud.

A long horn.

Among the things attached to both sides of Mutia's forehead, the right horn rolled helplessly, caught up in a sandstorm.

"Ah....."

And then.

[The Ruin-Harvesting Cow's existence becomes faint.]

The brilliant golden light dimmed slightly.

# Chapter 328:

## Starlight (1)

---

-A masterpiece indeed.

Ancient times.

An era so distant that counting time lost its meaning, when even the epochs grew weary and time itself had tired out, everything came to a standstill. There was a temple where everything had halted, and in it lived a beautiful dragon.

---Who might you be?

It might not have been accurate to say it lived.

The golden scales that once dazzled no longer shimmered. The golden eyes that used to take one's breath away had long lost their focus. And the voice, how long had it been since it last spoke?

The dragon felt estranged by its own vocal cords. The resonance traveling from its lungs through its throat felt unfamiliar. The flesh enveloping its lungs was strange, the bones piercing through the flesh felt foreign. When it listened closely, the beating heart sounded alien.

The conclusion was clear.

-I asked who you are.

The dragon felt burdened by its own existence.

-Even if I answer, you won't understand. A name is merely an address used by those living in the same coordinates to inquire about each other's well-being. I come from a different place than you.

-A different place?

-It's called the Mainland World.

The human brushed back their golden hair with the back of their hand.

‘This is no ordinary human.’

The dragon's golden eyes narrowed.

From the slightest gesture to the thinnest glint in the eye. This human had no muscle they did not control, no posture without meaning, no voice without intent.

‘A monstrous being, indeed.’

And the dragon realized. Despite its rusted scales and worn-out heart, its instinct to assess others was still alive and breathing.

Confirming this fact, for the first time in a long while, truly a long while, the dragon felt pleased.

-What do you call a masterpiece?

-This place. The temple you reside in. You are the Dragon Emperor who grants the wish of regression. All humans who served you regressed without exception, and those who regressed naturally trod the path of success.



The good mood did not last long.

-Soon, those who did not serve you were treated as fools. You, I, those who cannot be called 'you' in the far distance, and people on the opposite side of the world who cannot call me, all came to worship you. This is the result.

The human looked around.

-A world where all humans have become regressors.

-.....

-No, perhaps a world where all humans wish for regression. No one possesses the advantage of time. Because everyone sought it, no one had it.

This world stood still.

Like statues stuck in Medusa's temple, humans did not move an inch, and the world, having no more aging or wearing to do, held its breath in a paused moment.

Except for a single dragon.

-How regrettable.

Only the dragon remained alone in a world where everything else had ceased, becoming the sole, unique deity, an immovable prime mover, lingering as a speck of gold.

-You merely granted the wishes of humans. When the god overseeing regression dominates the world, the end is an inevitable halt. A joke perhaps only social butterflies would appreciate.

-So? Have you come to mock me, human?

The dragon growled.

-If it's a challenge you seek, then say so. I shall not refuse.

-Imagine the landlord fighting with a tenant, it only leads to gossip.

-Landlord? .....Tenant?

-I am building a Tower.

The human clasped their hands together.

-It would be wonderful if you could join us there. Of course, you would have to bear several restrictions, Mutia.

-.....

-If a god must live.

Somewhere.

-Don't you think a god should at least receive two chances?

The sound of a clock ticking echoed.

The Ruin-Harvesting Cow thought so.

[The Ruin-Harvesting Cow's existence becomes faint.]

Mutia's horn was severed.

"O deity!"

"Lady Mutia!"

"Ah! Ahhh!"

"We'll kill you!"

The apostles of the Constellation screamed. They were shocked. Their rage was no less intense. Forgetting the pain they had suffered at my hands, which was certainly unforgettable, they gripped their hammers once more and charged in.

Bravely.

But flames care little for the courage of moths that fly into them.

"You have no right to talk to me about original roots, Mutia."

I swung my sword without taking my eyes off Mutia.

"Aaaaahhh!"

An apostle, whose shoulder was diagonally sliced just like theirs, screamed and was flung away due to the pain that mirrored their own. Many more apostles rushed in. Thus, the screams were incessant.

"Probably the [Returner's Winding Clock] I possess was also a skill created by you. Although it has strict conditions, it contains the power of regression, nonetheless."

"Hyik! Aaaaah! Ah, ugh! Ump,"

"In other words, you are the root cause of the Flame Emperor. If the Flame Emperor succeeded thanks to the [Returner's Winding Clock], and I lived an unlucky life overshadowed by that success, then you are ultimately the last cause. It's absurd for the one who ruined lives to strut around offering to fix them. It doesn't fit the principle."

"Aaaaaah!"

"Of course, I won't beg you to return my life. I have no intention of going back. But, how many people have had their lives twisted by your power?"

Thud.

I walked through hell, eliciting screams.

Breaking through the defenses created by the apostles, crossing the wall of bodies and the river of people, I approached Mutia.

"I have the right to punish you."

"....."

"Are you prepared to live on as a human? Golden Constellation."

"I..."

A voice leaked through Mutia's teeth.

"I did nothing wrong."

It was a precarious sound, like the wind blowing through an ancient canyon.

"Just... There was a child who knelt before my palace. A clear child. A transparent human. His... his mother was killed by a carriage, and he found it so unjust."

Screams resounded.

"He had no thoughts of blaming the noble in the carriage, no thoughts of revenge, just. Just to tell his mother leaving home, to be careful on the road, that it's easy to slip on the wet road, to walk carefully. To come back safely. Just that one sentence,"

Screams resounded.

"To let him say that. That heart was so delicate."

Screams echoed.

"What wrong have I possibly committed!"

All the masters of the ruins cried out.

"I merely knew how to do a bit more than you all! From birth, it was so, and as I grew, it became even more apparent! That's all there was to it! I did what I could. Was my birth a mistake? Was my life misguided? You... you dare... what right do you have to judge me!"

"You could have spoken first."

I did not stop my steps.

Despite the apostles' screams, numerous obstructions, attacks, and even facing the blazing eyes of the Constellation, I continued to walk.

"What?"



"I have no complaints about you granting Goldencup's wish. Silvia wished for it, and you responded. That's all there is to it."

Thud.

"Even if it ruined Raviel's life, I still have no complaints. Thanks to that, I met Raviel. All these events were carried out by me as the representative of [The Pond Where Memories Gather], the Great Librarian of All Knowledge, and the agent of Hamusutra."

Thud.

"You appointed Lady Goldencup as your agent. I became Hamusutra's agent and defeated Goldencup. That's the truth of the matter. Gods clashed, fought a fair duel, and a conclusion was reached."

Thud.

"Why do you object to that?"

"....."

"Specifically, why do you bear a grudge against me? If there had been any unfairness during the duel, you should have spoken to Hamusutra then. Why, just why did you silently accept defeat. However, now you request a rematch, not to Hamusutra but to me, who was merely an agent? No, it's not even a duel. You ambushed me on your own."

That's right.

It wouldn't be 'normal' for a Constellation to attack a hunter.

If a hunter had challenged a Constellation, it might be understandable, but for a Constellation of Mutia's caliber to personally pick a fight with a hunter is extremely rare.

Not because the Constellations are noble beings.

'The Tower Master must have set restrictions.'

Consideration for hunters.

Prohibition of massacres.

Actions permitted only when they fit with the stage gimmick, etc.

Even Mutia herself had exclaimed not long ago.

『Was the tower you looked up to such a heartless entity!』

There must be restrictions on the Constellations unknown to me.

This tower, setting the 1st to 10th floors as tutorial areas and the 11th to 49th floors as beginner areas, meticulously manages difficulty levels.

In some ways, it seems even more disadvantageous for the Constellations than for the hunters.

"I will ask."

"....."

"Mutia."

The reason Mutia could attack me in this tower.

Using the already concluded past event of the [Goldencup Incident], which was settled as a proxy war between Hamusutra and Mutia, to insist on a duel with me, even going to such lengths.

I quietly articulated my conjecture.

"Have I become a Constellation?"

"....."

Silence pervaded.

It was because the two hundred apostles had finally fallen under my sword, with nobody left to scream. It was an artificially created silence. It was not because my conjecture struck a nerve, silencing everyone in the coliseum hell.

Yet, the timing coincided so perfectly that it seemed as if my question silenced the entire 62nd floor stage.

"If I'm no longer just an ordinary hunter but have risen to the rank of a Constellation, then your actions all make sense."

No one answered, so I spoke.

"Though it's forbidden for a Constellation to arbitrarily attack a mere hunter, duels between Constellations would be subject to much looser rules. They are equals, after all. Peers. The tower wouldn't be so strict about that."

When did it start?

Exactly at what moment was I recognized as having a status comparable to a Constellation?

"Perhaps right after clearing the 61st floor?"

When I entered this stage, one 'strange thing' happened.

I didn't pay much attention to it at the time, but looking back now, it was suspicious.

All the Constellations simultaneously declared war on me, precisely on my forces.

『The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth swears to kill you!』

『The Incarnation of Love and Lust swears to tear you apart.』

『The Warhorse of the Eternal Plains prepares for war.』

『The Ruin-Harvesting Cow swears to annihilate you.』

Of course, the fox provoked the Constellations.

But just because they were provoked, would the Constellations, who had been eyeing me as a potential pawn, who had clearly watched in real-time the madness I unleashed on the 50th floor, suddenly turn their backs on me?

'It would be normal to think they were just playing around with the messages.'

However,

After the exchange with Mutia, my doubts deepened.

For some [certain reason], the Constellations no longer felt burdened by attacking me.

Perhaps Kim Gong-Ja, no longer a beginner—perhaps not even just an ordinary hunter anymore.

Perhaps even the Guardian Spirit, who had no intention or will to become a Constellation, somehow possessed the title of [Sword Constellation].

Perhaps becoming a Constellation is something that happens naturally, regardless of one's own will.

"Sword Emperor, sir."

-Yeah.

"How do the Constellations send those messages?"

Guardian Spirit chuckled.

-I've never done it, so I don't know. But I suppose just thinking about sending out a message would make it happen on its own? Your sword isn't in human form, but it uses messages freely. I doubt there's a complicated system involved.

"Indeed."

I nodded.

"Shall we give it a try?"

I closed my eyes.

In my mind, I envisioned someone I could recall without a hint of vagueness until the moment of my death.

'How are you doing?'

Suddenly, an image formed in my mind.



I had about a cup's worth of something inside me. Perhaps it wasn't water but a spoonful of white detergent po

wder. Just one spoonful of whatever was in that cup diminished.

Then.

[The Heaven that Gathers Wails sends his greetings to the Silver Lily Duchess.]

I opened my eyes.

"Yep. As expected."

"....."

Mutia was glaring at me, with her teeth clenched.

I smiled back.

"It works."

# Chapter 329:

## Starlight (2)

---

In the quiet depths of the Colosseum, I hummed leisurely.

"Repeatedly calling me and emphasizing 'young child, human,' turned out to be poison for you. You are a Constellation and I am merely a human. It seems you tried to plant such a perception subconsciously... but I'm a man too seasoned to be swayed by mere words."

"You bastard."

A terrifying sound emanated from Mutia's teeth.

"What difference does it make if a mere thing like you becomes a Constellation!? You, who don't even possess any power, dare to..."

"There is a big difference."

It wasn't my voice.

"Sorry, but I have to keep the contract."

It wasn't the voice of any of the two hundred Apostles lying in the Colosseum. It wasn't the voice of the Guardian Spirit or Holy Sword, nor the fox, and certainly not Mutia's.

I furrowed my brows.

'...I've heard it somewhere.'

I couldn't immediately recall.

On the other hand, Mutia seemed to immediately know who the owner of the voice was.

"The trickster..."

Looking up at the sky, the golden Constellation gnashed its teeth.

"It's not over yet! The preemptive strike I requested, it's still valid!"

"The validity wasn't set by [time]. You know, I know, and all the high-ups of the tower know. If you start messing with time, there's no end to it."

Above.

Looking up from below, the sky appeared as if a hole was perfectly cut out.

In the middle of that, a person dressed in loose-fitting clothes floated, looking down at us.

"Your surprise attack is recognized only as long as [the King of Death doesn't realize his own ascension]. Now that he's aware he's become a Constellation, there's no more advantage for you guys to enjoy."

The owner of the voice held a thin, abnormally long staff. With the middle, ring, and little fingers, he lightly twirled it.

A mage, perhaps?

The staff seemed fragile enough to break with just a bit of force, but the mage skillfully stirred it.

[The sixth pillar, The Staff of Time Immemorial manifests.]

Ah.

Only after hearing the message did I clearly realize where I had heard that voice.

An existence similar to [The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages]. Those who manage this tower and convene meetings to discuss issues when problems arise. One of the six subordinates of the Tower Master, a pillar.

"Hmm."

The mage glanced over and met my eyes.

"It's been a while, trickster."

"...Trickster? Are you talking about me?"

"Since you were young enough for your head to not to be dry yet, you've summoned us with your tricky schemes. It's trickster because you're tricky. I feel good swearing at you indirectly, and don't you feel good being cursed in a surprisingly cute pronunciation? It's a win-win, mutually beneficial communication."

"Eh? Uh? No..."

I don't think I have such a preference.

"There's quite a bit I have to discuss with you."

The [Staff] murmured.

With a voice as loose as a pencil without lead.

Without any hostility or malice, just like time or still water, the [Staff] spoke in such a tone.

"Before that, let's do what I must first."

The [Staff]'s staff lightly touched the void.

Crack crack crack—

That's when the sky shattered like a pane of glass.

"No!"

Mutia shouted.

"I cannot accept this! I appeal against the contract! Call a meeting! Discuss it! I, [The Ruin-Harvesting Cow], request that an agenda be set immediately to discuss the treatment of this matter—"

"Rejected."

Crack crack crack!

"I've allowed too much disadvantage to the newly ascended child because of your requests, Mutia and Hisimet Cretsu. Because of you guys..."



The sky, once dyed red, noisily shattered. The void broke into billions of fragments, scattering. As the wind blew, carrying the red pieces, it seemed as though the sky was bleeding.

[The power of The Ruin-Harvesting Cow has been suspended.]

[The Chains of Time that forcibly fixed your growth have been released!]

Once more, the sky shed its skin.

[The power of The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth has been suspended.]

[The Information Distortion that blocked some messages from reaching you has been released!]

The peeled sky was a black infinity.

Without the sun, crescent moon, or Milky Way, only a pitch-black darkness yawned in that place.

In the black-colored sky, a serpent covered in blue scales was hiding.

"Damn it!"

Sssss.

Like waves in the night sea, the dark blue scales rippled.

The snake was huge enough to occupy a corner of the sky, and alone it created a sea in a sky devoid of the Milky Way.

"I knew this would happen!"

The serpent's eyes were triangular.

Unlike humans with white sclera and pupils, the giant snake shone with blue pupils on black sclera.

"I was told attacking before he's fully aware of being a Constellation would give us a chance! It's my fault for being deceived by that cow-headed brat!"

-This is getting interesting, Hisimet Cretsu.

The Guardian Spirit twisted his lips and crossed his arms.

-Your alias is [The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth]. You oversee information distortion, manipulation, exposure, riddles, contradictions, labyrinths, and secrets. You acted like you were interested in that zombie, but it was an act, huh?

"Ah...."

Only then did I realize the truth of this battle.

"Two Constellations plotted to attack me before I grew stronger than I am currently? Aiming for the gap before I awoke to the powers and such of a Constellation, trying to break me in one go."

Regretting the lack of moonlight in the pitch-black night, I drew a crescent moon with my lips.

"One is a Constellation who controls time. The other is a Constellation who controls information. Thanks to the two of you joining forces, I didn't even hear the message that I had

become a Constellation. What a perfect match."

"...Grr!"

The serpent with reversed eyes bared its fangs. Its upside-down eyes poured out a terrifying light, glaring sharply at Mutia.

"You were so confident, so it's your fault! Deal with it yourself!"

"What."

"I know nothing of it!"

Blue flames wrapped around the snake's body.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth flees to its own world!]

Literally tucking its tail, it fled.

"You foolish thing!!"

Left alone beneath the ground, Mutia spat blood from her mouth and shouted.

"If I am subdued, the next target will be you! It's your turn! Whether it's death or survival, we must settle it here, and yet, do you think fleeing will grant you even six more days of life? Do you think it will allow you to enjoy your power even for one more day? You imbecile, worse off than dead!"

"Well, whatever. I'll just take a day off and then go up."

"....."

Mutia was at a loss for words.

I smiled broadly.

"If a day seems too harsh, how about I take a full week off for you? After all, you two formed an alliance just to catch me. It wouldn't be right for there to be bad blood between you two. I'll considerately give you that much."

"Ugh....."

"Whatever reason you two had for banding together to attack me, I'll hear it out eventually... Uh, I'll find out later."

Even if you don't tell me, capturing [The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth] and giving it a good beating will suffice.

I meant it that way, and it seemed Mutia understood it in that sense too. The hammer it held in both hands hesitated.

"Surrender."

"....."

"I won't say that I'll accept your surrender without any punishment. I will take what needs to be taken. But I won't add emotion to the fact that you ambushed me while blocking my sight and hearing and double the weight of the punishment. I promise you that."

Hesitation swirled in Mutia's eyes.

Mutia, who had prepared five or six plans just to capture me, now truly had its back to the wall. With [The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth] abandoning it and fleeing, there weren't many options left for Mutia. My suggestion of surrender had narrowed those few options down to one.

"What do you want?"

"Goldencup. Transfer the identity of Silvia Evanair to me completely."

I started with the most obvious condition.

"Don't ever claim ownership of Silvia again. Don't raise objections regarding the fact that Silvia belonged to my family."

"....."

Mutia's lips twitched. Neither a yes nor a no came out. We both knew this was just the first demand.

"And?"

"You must also help in capturing [The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth]. What world does that Constellation live in? How can we break through easily? Release all the information you know."

Still, Mutia's lips did not utter either confirmation or denial.

The second demand was also quite easy.

Hisimet Cretsu had betrayed Mutia first. What could be easier in this world than betraying someone who had betrayed you? Because it was so easy, Mutia must have guessed there were heavier conditions yet to come.

"Is there more?"

"Kneel."

"....."

"In front of the Apostles watching, make it clear that I am stronger than you, that I have defeated you, and that you have surrendered to me."



Drip.

Blood flowed from Mutia's mouth.

It wasn't from biting its lips. It was from the teeth crushing each other so hard that the gums couldn't bear it, biting down so fiercely that wounds opened between the canines and molars.

"You, as a Constellation, have an aesthetic."

I continued to speak.

"A kind of law, or a self-discipline. Excuses like 'even though my body kneels, my heart remains steadfast' that common humans might make don't work for you."

It was similar to pride but different.

A Constellation is an entity made of power. Perhaps the power is the reason for a Constellation's existence.

To the heart of a human, it's the core.

For me, who possesses the return skill, for Mutia, [the Constellation of Return], to kneel is to acknowledge my superiority in the same realm, just as a general might admit defeat to another general, or a musician might concede to another musician.

Could the Guardian Spirit ever kneel to another swordsman?

After kneeling, could the Guardian Spirit still claim to be the supreme swordsman of all time?

The condition I imposed on Mutia was laden with the weight of a fortune.

"If you refuse..."

And it was precisely as heavy as a life.

"I will take the other horn you have left."

"....."

"I'll give you 3 minutes."

Three minutes passed.

A death-like silence accumulated at the bottom of hell.

Just before about 160 seconds had passed, the only noise that rang out made the silence all the more eerie.

[The Ruin-Harvesting Cow manifests its power.]

[A Music Box Just for You manifests its power.]

I could tell what Mutia was attempting.

It tried to stop time.

Mutia couldn't come to terms within 180 seconds. There

wasn't enough time. It needed the luxury to ponder. It tried to forcibly extend the unpermitted time, but it was thwarted by the fox.

"....."

And thus.

"I, Mutia."

An unsettled heart leaked out through Mutia's hands.

"The Ruin-Harvesting Cow."

Thud.

A crack formed where Mutia knelt, and holes were dug in the ground where its hands were placed, following the five fingers.

"Surrenders to..."

Blood dropped.

Blood that flowed from its mouth, down its chin, and dripped, drip, drip, seeped into the holes dug by Mutia's fingers.

"The Heaven that Gathers Wails... I surrender."

I nodded.

"Yes."

I looked down at the Constellation pressing its forehead to the ground.

"Then let me ask you, Mutia."

"Why did you collude with Hisimet Cretsu to attack me?"

There was a moment of silence.

As the holes dug by the fingers deepened and more blood flowed into them, turning the ground redder, Mutia opened her mouth.

"You are tied to us by fate."

"Today is the first time we

've met."

"But it can be said we've been entangled since your beginning."

I tilted my head.

"Why is that?"

"[Returner's Winding Clock]."

Mutia answered.

With words I never expected.

"The very creators of that return skill you possess are none other than me and Hisimet Cretsu."

# Chapter 330:

## Starlight (3)

---

“Huh?”

I blinked in surprise.

“You guys made the [Returner’s Winding Clock]?”

“...Yes.”

Mutia answered. While saying 'Yes', the noise of teeth being grinded got mixed in, so the accurate pronunciation was closer to 'Yegrss'.

However, I was a man generous even to the defeated. I kindly pretended not to hear. I had the right to ask Mutia anything I was curious about, whether she grinded her teeth or not after all.



“My skill was obtained from the Flame Emperor. The Flame Emperor, as far as I know, received the skill from [The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages]. It's the first time I am hearing that you were involved in its creation.”

“It's like a movie.”

“What?”

“I said it's like the movies you enjoy watching.”

The golden Constellation looked up at me with eyes full of hatred. The reason for such an angle in its gaze was because Mutia was still kneeling. Because, well, I had the right to demand the loser to keep their knees touching the ground.

“To make a movie, there needs to be a director, a producer, and sponsors. An EX-grade skill is equivalent to a blockbuster movie in your terms. [The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages] is like the director of that movie... or rather, closer to a producer.”

“Hmm.”

I recalled a memory.

「I'm really sorry! King of Death!」

「It was me who gave the skill to the Flame Emperor!」

At some point, the princess had told me this while hitting her head against mine.

I see.

So it wasn't the princess alone who made the skill from.

“What was your role then?”

“...I am adhering to the etiquette that the loser must answer the winner's questions. But may I stand up now to answer? It's embarrassing in front of the children.”

“Eh, standing is more tiring than sitting. Just tell me as you are.”

“Damn you.”

Mutia scratched the ground with her nails.

“One day, the princess came to me and said she wanted to make a regression skill. As regression falls under my domain, she needed my permission first.”

“A domain dispute?”

“Something like that. I initially refused but eventually agreed on the condition that it would be a skill that could only regress [just one day], and only if accompanied by a severe penalty.”

Penalty.

“And then, that snake bastard interfered.”

“[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth].”

“Exactly. That snake bastard.”

It seemed Mutia thought she had the right to call the traitor whatever she wished. A reasonable assertion. I respected that right.

The golden Constellation spoke.

“The snake bastard suggested that the skill be activated only upon death.”

"....."

“I found the penalty interesting and agreed, but it wasn’t just that. The snake bastard, the Constellation governing secrets and labyrinths, wanted not just any death, but a [labyrinth activated upon death].”

Labyrinth. Maze. Or trap.

I pulled out the skill card of [Returner’s Winding Clock] and looked down at it.

+

## [Returner's Winding Clock]

Rank: EX

Effect: Activated automatically on death. You will return 24 hours back in time from the moment of your death. Your memories and stats are preserved while returning.

\*However, there is a greater penalty the higher your rank.

\*Skill copied from Yoo Soo-Ha

+

“...So that labyrinth was a trauma?”

“Correct.”

Mutia nodded.

“The snake bastard said, [People's lives are often compared to paths. Like having walked a long way. But to others, that path is twisted and an unfathomable puzzle. Other people's lives, their pasts and their paths, I consider them the ultimate mazes.]”

The great snake had said.

「 Humans are contemptible beings. 」

「 But each harbors a palace within their heart, hiding a maze. 」

「 Which is a void palace, isn't it? 」

While conveying the snake's words, Mutia gnashed her molars.

“A truly snake-like suggestion. So we decided to install the maze of death in your skill.”

"....."

“Perhaps it wasn't just the two of us involved. The Tower Master...”

Mutia was continuing her story when she suddenly furrowed her brow and looked up. Floating in the sky, now turned black from its original blue, was one of the pillars, [The Staff of Time Immemorial].

“...Is it alright for me to speak up to here?”

“Huh? Ah, it doesn't matter to me.”

The mage holding a thin, long staff yawned as if bored.

“The King of Death has already met the Tower Master directly. He's practically been granted the highest security clearance. He probably even understands the language of the original world.”

“What? He directly met the Tower Master?”

Mutia raised her eyebrows and turned to look at me.

The look in her eyes seemed to say, 'What kind of person are you?'

“What exactly are you?”

“Who knows. Even if I don't know what kind of person I am, it seems I'm someone [The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth] and [The Ruin-Harvesting Cow] should kneel and talk to.”

“You fucking... No, never mind. Let's not speak of it.”

Mutia sighed.

“Anyway, since the princess is also the Tower Master's daughter, it's possible she used powers from other Constellations as well, not just from the snake bastard and me. By asking the Tower Master, that is.”

“Hmm.”

“So your existence is indeed troublesome.”



The golden eyes glared at me.

“Because of you, both the snake bastard and I are in danger.”

“Eh?”

“As long as you're alive and well, I can't fulfill the wishes of my believers. No. My very faith is shaking!”

I tilted my head, still not understanding why Mutia and Hisimet Cretsu held animosity towards me, even after hearing the whole story of how my skill was created.

“You can't fulfill your believers' wishes because of me? Why?”

“You connected the time with that Silver Lily or whatever!”

Mutia growled.

“Regression should be exclusive, do you understand? The value of regression is established by the fact that only I have

returned to the past. If someone else knows that time has been reversed, the value of regression, my power, plummets! Yet! You and Silver Lily drew a [Line of Time] together!”

“...A Line of Time?”

“You return, and Silver Lily knows. Silver Lily returns, and you know! No matter what, one of you realizes [time has been rewound]!”

Ah.

“Are you talking about [A Certain Returner's Love]?”

“That's right!”

Mutia shouted, engulfed in anger.

“Even if I fulfill a believer's wish and regress them, they can no longer enjoy an exclusive position! Because of you two! Do you understand? I can no longer claim absolute power over time. My power has been compromised!”

As Mutia raged on, I went over Raviel's skill in my head.

+

[A Certain Returner's Love]

Rank: EX

Effect: For a returner, love is like poison. No matter how much they struggle, they can't share time with the one they love. Thus, a certain returner had a burning desire, 'Let my beloved keep her memories.' This desire reached the tower and was granted.

You share a timeline with your beloved. If your lover goes back a day, you go back a day. If you go back a day, so does your lover. This is the vow of a ring. This is a marriage of time.

May fortune be with both of you.

\*However, it only activates when you and your lover mutually love each other.

+

“I see.”

I understood the whole picture.

“If only I were the regressor, it would be fine. It would also be fine if Raviel were the only regressor. But because we share each other's timelines...”

A sort of line connecting each other.

From now on, even if a new regressor is born, they cannot ignore the red line of time we have drawn.

If a new regressor goes back to the past, Raviel and I will immediately know that [the world has been rewound].

There can longer be a regressor who monopolizes time.

Except for Raviel and me.

“I was curious why that skill was ranked EX, but... there was indeed a reason for the highest ranking.”

“Because of you two, my position as a Constellation has plummeted!”

“Yes, I see why you're hostile towards me.”

Of course, it wasn't something I needed to concern myself with.

Nor was it something Raviel needed to worry about.

“Why would anyone make something like [Returner's Winding Clock]? It's all self-inflicted.”

“Don't laugh! It was the princess who first mentioned making it, not me!”

“I'm not laughing. Anyway, you were the one who attached the trauma penalty, weren't you? Raviel having [A Certain Returner's Love] is, if you think about it, thanks to the trauma penalty. Hmm. I'm a bit sorry to say... but this is entirely your own doing from start to finish.”

“Damn the Tower! Damn the princess!”

[The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages manifests.]

“Did someone call me?”

“No one called you! Get lost, you false god!”

“That's so mean...!”

[The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages disappears.]

For a brief 6 seconds, someone popped their head out from beneath the ground and then vanished right away.

It was agreed that no one would mention this incident.

“Well, leaving aside the reason you attacked me...”

I glanced at the spot where the princess had disappeared and

said.

“What about Hisimet Cretsu? What made that Constellation anxious enough to form an alliance with you?”

“Hmph. Why don’t you ask that traitor directly?”

Mutia turned her head away.

“Thanks to you, my power is already tattered. I can't even create a new regressor anymore, and even if I could, I'd have to get your consent first. That's no longer fitting for a respectable Constellation. ...I am resentful.”

“Mutia!”

“We have no one but you, Mutia! We would never serve another Constellation!”

“We will remain loyal until the end of the world!”

A few of the two hundred apostles who had regained their

senses cried bitterly. Mutia looked around at them, sighed deeply, and said.

“...Anyway, find out about Hisimet Cretsu's circumstances yourself. I've adhered to the manners expected of a loser. I wish you wouldn't insult me further.”

"Fair enough."

I had proven to be stronger than Mutia in the domain of regression through this duel.

If the flowing times within this Tower were to be described in a history book, only the timeline of Raviel and me would be the main chronicle, and the timelines produced by Mutia would be relegated to biographies.

'I've gotten everything I could out of Mutia. Now it's time for...'

I turned my gaze.

To the sky.



Floating there, watching the conversation between the victor and the vanquished, was [The Staff of Time Immemorial].

“O Pillar.”

“I’m listening.”

“Two Constellations senior to me conspired to ambush me. I received no prior warning, and I even had to figure out I had become a Constellation on my own. The latter is especially unfair, isn’t it?”

“[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth] used its power to collaborate with [Ruin-Harvesting Cow] to achieve that.”

“But that doesn’t change its unfairness.”

“That’s right. And that’s exactly why I appeared as the judge.”

The pink eyes gazed down at me.

“If you want something, say it. If I find it reasonable, I’ll grant it.”

“Yep. I’m supposedly at the level of a Constellation now. Well, I won’t throw a tantrum.”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“I’m currently on the 62nd floor, right?”

“Yep. Unless both of our memories are severely damaged.”

“What I want as a reward is very simple.”

Grinning widely.

I smiled with all my might.

“Please appoint [The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth] as the manager of the next 63rd floor stage.”

“Oh.”

[The Staff of Time Immemorial] slightly tilted its head.

“That’s an interesting request for a reward. Why?”

“I detest the fact that it fled during the battle.”

“It could be seen as a wise action, couldn’t it?”

“To betray a comrade you promised to stand with is utterly despicable.”

“There might be room to see it as a wise action as well.”

“More importantly, since it chose to fight me, I have the right to conclude the matter. From the perspective of justice, karma, and resolution, you should consider my request.”

“If the world worked on rights, there would’ve been no need for the Tower.”

[The Staff of Time Immemorial] stroked its staff.

“This is the Tower, after all. Alright, I’ll grant it.”

At that moment.

[The Constellation observing the story in secret is shocked.]

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth protests against the unjust treatment!]

Although it had fled in body, it had left its eyes and ears here.

The protest messages poured in, but [The Staff of Time Immemorial] didn't even blink. To be precise, it blinked only when it felt like it.

“It’s not really unjust.”

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth screams that this must not happen!]

“I’m a Pillar. It can happen.”

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth vows to never forget this incident!]

“It’s not about not forgetting, but about not being able to forget, right? Probably.”

Okay.

“Little Fox.”

“Squeak?”

“The stage is cleared. Let's move on.”

The fox, transformed into a scarf around my neck, waved its tail once.

[Quest Clear!]

[The 62nd floor has been c

leared!]

[You will be instantly transferred to the 63rd floor as per your wicked wish.]

Then, a message close to a scream resounded.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth cries out that this must not happen!]

Of course, the response I had to give was predetermined.

“It will.”

And then, a whirlwind of light swallowed me up.

# Chapter 331: Glass Palace (1)

---

[You have entered the 63rd floor.]

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth detects your presence and becomes enraged!]

Sandstorms enveloped me before settling down.

Like a hand that grabs only to release after a moment.

Feeling the scent of sand grains polished by the wind and dried by the sun, I straightened up confidently.

"There's really no need to say it through messages anymore, Serpent."

I didn't use telepathy.

My opponent is a Constellation that governs all riddles and secrets.

Peeking into unseen places and eavesdropping on unheard sounds must be easy for them. In other words, an expert in wiretapping.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth shivers its scales at your rudeness!]

Hmm.

I squinted one eye.

"Perhaps negotiation is possible. I, for one, am a man who tends to get along surprisingly well once spoken to. Instead of hiding and spending an eternity, why not have some tea time and chat?"

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth scolds you for attempting to butter it up!]

As expected.



'It has no intention of revealing its voice, even in death.'

I looked around.

'It's probably being cautious so its location isn't exposed by its voice. Having witnessed Mutia being defeated by me... It probably doesn't have the courage to show itself before me. Now then... should we start a game of hide and seek from now?'

The Labyrinth.

I was surrounded by towering walls.

It was debatable whether to call them 'walls' because I knew of no 'wall' that seemed capable of reaching the stratosphere, let alone extend beyond it.

Moreover, the sky was sealed in a dome. It was as if an eggshell covered the earth. Climbing the walls would likely only lead to being blocked by the shell of the sky.

'The ground?'

It was made of wood.

The wooden floor swirled with patterns akin to snake scales.

I tried swinging my sword as a test, but both the walls and the floor remained intact, undamaged. They were probably designed to be very hard to destroy.

"...Is this stage shaped like a maze itself?"

I muttered.

"This is troublesome. The serpent will keep changing its position. While I'm unfamiliar with this place, the serpent knows it inside out. If it just keeps running away, there's no way for me to catch it..."

"You don't need to worry about that."

A voice came from behind me.

The reason I didn't reflexively swing my sword to attack was

that I had heard this voice before.

"The Staff of Time Immemorial?"

"Just call me a mage. Because I am a mage."

With a face that looked like it had never smiled, [The Staff of Time Immemorial] spoke. The mage was yawning, maintaining a distance of about 6 meters from me.

"It's not really a big deal. I'm just the greatest mage in the world, that's all."

"No, I think that's quite an impressive achievement..."

"No, it's not a big deal. Before becoming a Pillar, I slaughtered thirteen Dragon Emperors alone, conquered seven Dragon Kingdoms, and was the first to reach the Void Pole, the root and starting point of the world, planting a flag there. But, I was just a mage, nothing more."

"Are you just trying to brag to me now?"

"King of Death. Do you know why people who have achieved great success are incredibly humble? Once you reach such a position, being humble makes others feel inferior. While making others feel inferior, I remain completely innocent. Only those in power can afford to be genuinely humble. In that sense, it's not surprising that successful people are humble. What do you think? Have I enlightened you?"

"The only thing I realized from your words is that your character is rotten..."

"Congratulations. You've realized a lot already."

Clap. Clap. Clap.

The mage clapped his hands. Not with his hands, but with his mouth. In other words, he moved his mouth to make 'clap, clap, clap' sounds. Listening to the mage's mouth clapping, I sensed that this Pillar was also an extraordinary lunatic.

"Let's get back to the main point. Why don't I need to worry?"

The mage took out a piece of paper from his pocket and wrote something on it.

The paper read [Main Point].

The mage attached the paper to the wall, took three steps back, then three steps forward again.

"Ta-da."

"....."

"I've returned."

I decided to calmly ignore the events of the last approximately 15 seconds. When dealing with a lunatic, one must arm themselves with madness too.

"Right. Insane mage. Why don't I need to worry?"

"Constellations are unfair beings. They are so powerful that ordinary humans can't possibly oppose them, not only in physical strength but also because their very existence is grand."

The mage spoke as if he were the only sane person around.

"But even within that unfairness, there's a hint of fairness."

"Fairness?"

"Yes. A riddle, no matter how difficult, is a riddle because it has an answer. A labyrinth, no matter how complex, is a labyrinth because it has an exit. A riddle without an answer is just an annoying string of sentences, and a labyrinth without an exit is merely a tedious sequence of locations."

The mage muttered expressionlessly.

"That wouldn't be any different from the 'ordinary human' lives that Constellations look down upon."

"....."

"Even if it's a twisted answer. Even if it's a warped exit. The role of a Constellation, no, the very essence of a Constellation's existence is to provide answers to a world without answers and to create doors in a life without doors."

In other words.

"Hisimet Cretsu... The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth won't run away, will it?"

"Every palace has a throne. A labyrinth is also a palace. A king who flees from the throne is no longer a king."

I see.

I nodded and then glared at the surrounding walls.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth clenches its teeth.]

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth manifests its power!]

And then, as if responding to my provocative gaze, the world transformed at that moment.

The world was still made of walls.

But they were no longer walls that blocked my vision and remained unseen.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth requests a pact with the tower.]

[Sanctuary designated.]

[Approved.]

The outer shell of the walls melted away.

[From this moment, this place belongs to The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth.]

The shell peeled away, revealing glass beneath.

Transparent glass windows.

No longer blocked by sight, they allowed for a free view inside. Whether intentionally or not, I looked through the glass and saw...



"...Mannequins? Figures?"

Numerous dolls were displayed inside the glass walls.

The expression "countless" was quite literal here.

The glass walls, tall enough to reach the sky and so vast their ends were unknown, formed a glass labyrinth. In each glass window, the dolls were densely lined up, layer upon layer, row upon row, creating an elaborate display.

[He is the one who conceals and reveals, worship him.]

Creak.

A mannequin hanging near the closest glass window suddenly lifted its head.

Its mouth opened.

"He is the one who conceals and reveals, worship him."

To the left, right, and above the mannequin, other frozen figures began to open their mouths.

"He is the one who conceals and reveals, worship him."

Then the dolls surrounding them.

"He is the one who conceals and reveals, worship him."

From the alleys' dead ends, the straight paths, the winding corners, dozens, hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of mannequins, and infinitely more beyond my sight, creaked and groaned behind the glass, opening their mouths.

"If you dare seek me, then try."

The voices of thousands and millions layered together.

Each doll's distinct voice created a discordant harmony.

"One among these is my true body."

"....."

Among them.

In this place where hundreds of millions, or perhaps even more, dolls were displayed, The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth was hiding.

I smiled slightly.

"For a game of hide and seek, it seems too biased against the seeker."

"It's still a fair game, nonetheless."

A doll displayed on the glass wall to my right moved its lips.

"If you cannot find me, simply admit defeat and leave. Or you might as well wander in my glass palace forever!"

Each doll had its unique features.

Some were as detailed as action figures, or rather, they were so lifelike that they could be mistaken for real. They had faces. They had eyes. They appeared vividly alive, yet their expressions remained unchanged as if time had stopped for them.

Others were no different from mannequins. Some were wooden dolls. The others were faceless, expressionless marionettes with exposed joints.

The dolls varied in their level of detail. From perfect finished products to those that seemed barely touched by a sculptor's knife. Numerous puppet dolls hung from strings, each assuming different poses.

But one thing was common.

『I am the murderer who killed the neighbor's child.』

Every doll held a sign.

『I betrayed my best friend.』

This was their one similarity.

『I committed adultery with a priest from the temple.』

『The one who plotted the poisoning of the Grand Duke was me.』

『I killed my father.』

『I hate the noble who took me in.』

『I conspired with the enemy of my lord to destroy my own family.』

The dolls' signs varied in content.

Some were serious; others were trivial.

"...They're all secrets."

I easily realized what the signs meant.

"Things people don't want to show others. Confidential information they don't want revealed. Each person has at least one secret. And with that, you can deduce the person's identity."

"Well done, you're quick-witted."

Creak-crack.

A puppet in front of me opened its mouth. The noise from its joints, presumably intended by The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth as a mocking laugh.

"These are all individuals who once prayed to me for a wish. They have all, at least once, relied on my power. My realm is vast, incomparable to a newly born star like you!"

"I don't particularly desire to create such a vast world..."

Hamusutra was a grand library. Mutia was a sand temple. And Hisimet Cretsu is a glass exhibition hall?

"What kind of wishes do you usually grant?"

"[Please, tell me the weakness of that detestable person.]"

"....."

"[Make sure no one knows what I did.] [Please.] [So that I can kill him without anyone finding out.] [So they can't uncover my past, no matter how hard they try.] [That summer incident.] [Make me appear utterly innocent.]"

Creak, crack.

Seven mannequins simultaneously sneered.

"Every human has once deeply wished for such things in their heart. You humans have many secrets you wish to reveal, but even more that you wish to conceal!"

Hisimet Cretsu.

The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth.

Keywords are snake, egg, labyrinth, secret, riddle, paradox,

maintaining and securing secrets.

Locks and keys.

Exposure.

"Of course, I faithfully keep their secrets as they wish. Under my power, they enjoy the blessing of not having their most dreaded secrets exposed, but here, their hidden secrets are blatantly displayed!"

I nodded in understanding.

"That's why you could be related to my skill [Trauma Penalty]."

Seven mannequins simultaneously tilted their heads.

"Hmm?"

"A person's past is the epitome of secrets. The deepest scars held in one's past are the perfect keys to understanding them."



I took a deep breath and continued.

"The Tower Master mentioned that this power originates from 'All Lives' and traces back to an ancestor, a disciple of Hamusutra. But at the same time, the aspect of 'peering' in my skill connects it to your power."

The mannequins burst into laughter.

"Ah, indeed! Correct! Yes, a person's past is a [memory] and thus a [story], but it is also a [secret]. You have excellently exposed that."

From the corner of my vision, a mannequin creaked and raised its hand.

"A wise expositor should be rewarded."

Wooden fingers pointed somewhere.

"Rejoice. I shall bestow upon you a small gift."

"Is it a hint about your location?"

"You'll know when you see it."

I followed the direction indicated.

There was another mannequin pointing somewhere else with its finger, and so I walked the same path, repeating it sixteen times.

And then...

"....."

I paused momentarily upon re

aching the destination.

"How do you find it, young star?"

Through the thin glass, a doll moved its lips.

The marionette was intricately crafted.

It had a voice and face I recognized well.

"Do you not wish to know this child's secret?"

There...

A doll identical to the Paladin was on display.

# Chapter 332: Glass Palace (2)

---

I knew.

"It's a pity."

For a long time, I thought I knew.

"Think about it. Whoever, whatever being created this tower must have put in tremendous effort."

"It should be a moment to marvel and admire."

"But we've become too accustomed to everything by the 10th floor."

Always maintaining a stoic expression, hidden behind a helmet, making immense effort to show as little of her face as

possible to others.

Always clad in armor.

"I thought I had a good poker face."

"Kim Gong-Ja, do you possess a mind-reading skill?"

Someone who has built even more formidable walls within their heart.

"No choice then."

My companion.

Patricia.

Our noble and pure Paladin.

"I have the ability to detect lies."

"It's the skill that helped me rise to the position of deputy guild master of the Vigilante Corps."

"Doubt is a poison that eats away at humans, and truth is the most powerful antidote. We may not be able to regain the trust we've lost so far, but at least we can cooperate on the 12th floor."

Just before the decisive battle with the Demon King of Autumn Rain.

After years, the excitement among the hunters who had finally broken through a stage was palpable. So much that they easily fell into the Demon King's trap. The possibility that 'the quest itself could be a trap set by the Demon King' was overlooked.

When it was announced that someone had betrayed us and sided with the Demon King, the leaders of the major guilds readily suspected each other.

"How foolish...!"

"I told you! Don't choose the Demon King's reward. Yet... stupidly!"

"Fine. As the master of Black Dragon, I declare here. I don't know who dared to betray us, but I'll gift that person the most painful death."

It was a time when the trust among us was yet to be established.

The Heretic Inquisitor interrogated people in the Temple's basement under the guise of heresy, the Black Dragon Witch's assassins roamed the nights of Babylon, and the Countess was busy encroaching on the capital of other guilds.

And above all.

"Ah, I get it. I get the atmosphere. The air. It's the feeling from when we were conquering the early stages of the tower..."

"That's true. Reminds me of the days when the 5 great guilds were actually 10."

"Many died back then. Killed many too, didn't we?"

Everyone was nothing more than a mass murderer.

Everyone knew it too well.

"Paladin! Start interrogating everyone with [Lie Detection] right now. Don't leave anyone out! If even one person refuses to answer or tries to evade the question, I'll kill them right here and now!"

Thus.

"I was planning to do that anyway."

I knew.

"First, I'll start by clarifying that I am not the traitor."

Someone like you would never forget the mass murderers.

It's impossible to be persuaded or forgiven.

If you lack the power to punish the mass murderers now, you will wait until that power accumulates. You will be patient. Whether it takes 5 years or 10 years, you will persevere



until the moment of opportunity arrives.

"I'm quite confident in my poker face."

"I have some skill in maintaining a poker face."

Making others think [the Paladin is a reliable person].

Even if you miss the opportunity, you won't show any regret.

Even if the opportunity comes, you won't show any excitement.

You will do what needs to be done.

"Life is truly unpredictable."

"Reconciling with the Black Dragon Witch and becoming friends again, improving relations with other guild leaders..."

"Really."

"It's unbelievable."

I've thought I knew for a long time.

When I faced a doll that looked exactly like the Paladin in a dead-end alley of the 63rd floor's glass labyrinth— when I saw the paper sign the doll was holding.

I wasn't surprised.

Not at all. Not even a little bit.

"I have..."

The sign was written in a simple script.

"Planned 17 different ways to assassinate all my comrades."

That was exactly the Patricia I knew.

Creak.

"Are you surprised?"

The doll, identical to the Paladin, moved its lips. The serpent, revealing neither its form nor voice, whispered through the doll.

"Such devotion. Technically, Constellations are prohibited from directly interfering with humans who haven't reached the 50th floor. Therefore, they make indirect contact through skills and blessings."

"....."

Indirect propagation of faith.

From the standpoint of Constellations, skills and blessings are merely tools.

There are far more worlds that fail to reach the 50th floor than those that do. Far more.

From the Constellations' perspective, it would be a waste to let the faith resources of so many worlds go unused.

Therefore, they create skills and distribute blessings, like the [Blessing of the God of Snakes] I once received as a hidden stage reward, using their powers.

"But this human was desperate."

Creak, creak.

As I filed away this new information, the marionette Paladin spoke as if delighted.

"Although I don't particularly enjoy giving special treatment, this human was indeed 'special' to me. Such fervent prayers hadn't been seen in quite a while! Over ten years ago, this human bit her lips until they bled, praying to a god they didn't even believe in."

During the Tower's major purge.

"Grant me the power to execute evil in secrecy," they prayed.

"....."

"Essentially, this human wished to become an assassin! Secret killings. Concealed executions. Planned murders. Although I don't govern death, all conspiracies and assassinations are touched by my power. I gladly lent my strength!"

I muttered bitterly.

"So, [Lie Detection] was a skill you gave."

"Yes. And that's not all!"

The doll produced a grating sound.

"This human's skill set is practically a list of my glorious powers. They can see how much others like them in numerical form. When revealing their skills to others, they can distort and manipulate the descriptions as they wish. Secret detection. Information distortion. Manipulation. Strategy. Isn't it beautiful?"

"....."

"You thought your comrades were trustworthy, but they were plotting your death!"

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth] taunted.

"They never approached you with genuine kindness. Not a single one."

Perhaps.

"What do you think?" The serpent Constellation asked.

"Before you even heard their stories, they were already planning your demise, devising perfect methods to kill you, Kim Gong-Ja. Even before you were known as the King of Death!"

Yes.

"This is the true nature of the friendship you hold so dear!"

Even the most inconsequential dagger can hurt when it grazes the flesh.

Even if I already knew, even if I had already come to terms with it, even if what I'm hearing now is nothing but provocation aimed to shake me, meant to push me to the brink because that's the only chance the other side has, even if I know all this...

A blade is a blade, and a wound is a wound.

It hurts, even if it's a lie.

"If you wish, I can keep silent about these secrets and not divulge them."

Then the question is.

"Even if you don't wish it, I can lay bare all their secrets right before your eyes!"

Can I endure it?

"Fear what should be feared. You humans, you should be wise enough for that. You've been granted a name far beyond your destiny. Lay down that sword..."

"What do you know?"

The doll's artificial eyes turned towards me.

"What?"

"What makes you think you know so much about Patricia?"

I took a handkerchief from my pocket and fiddled with it.

A white handkerchief with silver thread embroidery.

Feeling its soft touch, I calmed my agitated emotions by tracing the patterns with my fingers.

Lowering my heart's temperature.



"You know far less about Patricia than I do."

"Ha! You didn't even know what murderous plans those things had!"

"Patricia used Yoo Soo-Ha."

"...What?"

I recalled a memory.

It felt like a distant past.

The moment I decided to undergo 4,000 days of regression, Patricia was there at the scene.

"Water ability users, don't use your skills alone!"

"Right, time it together! Right!"

Yoo Soo-Ha had set the back streets of Babylon ablaze.

Amongst the top rankers, only the Paladin and the Master Alchemist rushed to the scene of the fire. The Paladin might not have known, but that was the first time I saw her.

The two rankers talked amidst the flames.

"It's strange. Why hasn't the Saintess arrived yet...?"

"She mentioned she had something tonight. I'm not sure what, but it's probably a date. She's been spending a lot more time with the Flame Emperor lately."

"...I don't like that Flame Emperor."

Of course, both of them knew Yoo Soo-Ha.

"The Saintess should be with someone better, I think."

And.

"There's no one better than the Rank 1 holder. Who else could she possibly meet?"

The Paladin didn't speak ill of Yoo Soo-Ha.

Someone who should despise Yoo Soo-Ha more than anyone, if there was anyone in the world who should hate Yoo Soo-Ha, it should have been her, but she showed no signs of contempt.

"Welcome, Flame Emperor."

On the contrary, she was polite.

"As you can see, there's been arson in the old slum area. Could you please help?"

She was respectful.

"What's in it for me?"

"Tomorrow, headlines in every newspaper and broadcast around the world will read, 'The Flame Emperor, a Great Deed

in Extinguishing a Fire.' It will shock the public and improve your image at the same time."

Why?

Why did she do that?

Because she was deceived by Yoo Soo-Ha's acting, tricking everyone including herself, leading to frustration and resentment?

"When the Saintess attempted to poison Yoo Soo-Ha, he fell for it once but then returned through regression to take revenge on the Saintess. At that time, Yoo Soo-Ha believed for some reason that 'the person who ordered my assassination was the Black Dragon Witch.'"

"What? ...What are you talking about?"

"Who suggested that idea to him?"

Someone wanted to use Yoo Soo-Ha to eliminate the Sword Saint.

That someone wanted to use Yoo Soo-Ha to get rid of the Black Dragon Witch.

Someone wanted to instill a desire for revenge in the Saintess, irreparably damaging the relationship between Yoo Soo-Ha and the Black Dragon Witch.

"Who could have suggested that?"

In the IF scenario shown by the Tower Master, the great guilds collapsed.

The Heretic Inquisitor was killed by a terrorist who infiltrated the Temple, and the Black Dragon Witch was also dealt with by an assassin.

The Heretic Inquisitor and the Black Dragon Witch were people who valued security above all else.

How could a terrorist and an assassin not only enter the tower but also infiltrate the core of the great guilds?

"The guild that examines and vouches for the identities of those entering the tower is the Vigilante Corps. Conveniently,

they were under Patricia's control."

How?

"If the Tower Master wanted to prove to me that 'Yoo Soo-Ha could change,' why show me a fantasy? If you're going to show a fantasy, why not show the most perfect world? Why show a broken world to me?"

Because the Tower Master cannot ignore human desires.

Even if it's blood-stained resentment, Patricia's wish was to deliver just retribution to the mass murderers.

The Tower Master simply couldn't ignore that wish.

"....."

For a long time, I thought I knew.

"The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth."

I spoke up.

"You know far less than you think you do."

"....."

"You want to suggest that the trust I've built is nothing more than a sandcastle, to reveal each of my companions' secrets one by one, to push me to a point where I can trust no one, not even myself. That's what you want."

But.

"I know far more than you think I do."

About Patricia.

About my companions.

"I know the expressions they've shown and even the expressions they've never shown. I know everything about them, even the things they don't know about themselves."

It's not because they seem incapable of such acts, or because I believe they wouldn't do such things that I trust them.

I grasped my sword.

"I'm by their side to ensure that those capable of such acts don't, and to ensure that those who could do such things don't end up doing them. That's why I'm here, and that's why they trust me."

"You..."

"There's no blade among the secrets you could reveal that could shatter me."

"Insolent brat!"

"Human beings are not dolls meant to be displayed in your glass garden."

With all my might, I struck the ground of the labyrinth with my sword.



"No one lives to be displayed to others, and no one has the right to display another."

The glass world shattered around the point of impact.

"Let's bring you down now."

The world of glass split apart.

# Chapter 333: Glass Palace (3)

---

"You lowly thing!"

Hisimet Cretsu urgently exclaimed.

"What on earth are you doing!"

The Constellation no longer used Patricia's doll to make its voice heard. Beyond the windows surrounding me, hundreds and thousands of dolls screamed in unison.

"Do you think my existence will fade even if you overpower me with force!"

The outcry of thousands was a scream that seemed to tear the heavens apart.

"I am the master of all secrets! I posed a problem to you, and you accepted my challenge! It's a duel. This too is a duel. Do you understand! Your petty blade breaking through the glass and tearing the ground solves nothing! You cutting the Gordian Knot<sup>[1]</sup> is not acknowledged! Never! Just wait, the judge will eventually declare my victory.....!"

"I'm not Alexander."

I twisted the hilt of my sword.

"I'm doing this because I have the correct answer."

The sword blade, already deeply embedded in the ground, twisted with a violent roar. Cracks spread like a spiderweb around the sword. It was over in an instant.

"What do you mean, an answer... Stop! Stop it! You're not using force now but violence! Violence is essentially assault! Do you understand! Assault!"

"Yes. If you insist on resisting, I'll give you the answer that you and I both know."

Find Hisimet Cretsu's true body in the world of the Glass Palace.

This was the task given to me on the 63rd floor.

And as soon as I heard the task, no, even before I heard it, I only cared about two things.

"I thought it would either be the sky or the ground from the start."

".....What....."

"These dolls are all controlled by you. What this means is simple. The moment I'm killed by one of these dolls, Hisimet Cretsu, I'll see your trauma."

I lifted the corners of my mouth.

"That's what you truly want, isn't it?"

"Claiming to rule all secrets, well-versed in labyrinths and

mazes, you are that Constellation. You're also the very person who designed the trauma penalty. I may not know exactly how you did it, but one thing is for sure, [Your trauma is a labyrinth from which it is terribly hard to escape]."

".....Eeek! Eeeeeek!"

That's right.

All the dolls were merely bait.

'Logically' thinking, among the countless dolls covering the entire world, finding Hisimet Cretsu's true body would be impossible.

Only by using my 'illogical' skill, [Returner's Winding Clock], could I possibly find the true body.

If I enter the trauma and see Hisimet Cretsu's past, I will naturally learn about that Constellation, and understanding its habits and nature, I will naturally realize where it has hidden itself.

"It's not working."

Therefore, in this stage, [Trauma] is the fastest shortcut and the only key.

"If you dare challenge me in the domain you're most confident in, I'm not that foolish!"

And thus the most dangerous [trap].

"All the dolls are bait! Exposing Patricia's secret to provoke me was to tempt me into hastily taking the easiest shortcut as my emotions intensify! If I hadn't met the fox constellation on the 61st floor, if I hadn't fallen into triple-layered dreams, I might have overlooked the danger of trauma!"

I was already aware of how dangerous a 'Constellation's Trauma' could be.

Haven't I lived through half the lives of Raviel and my master?

The gap between the 61st and 63rd floors was too short to forget those lessons.

"Bad timing, you venomous snake!"

Crackling!

The cracks engraved in the ground widened further. The cracks became crevices, and the crevices split open, revealing a gap. Just a bit wider and it would be an abyss, just a moment longer and it would be a cliff's edge. An earthquake-like tremor occurred.

"And you were foolish!"

"Can't you hear me telling you to stop! You! Even if the human race is such a lowly race that it cannot understand human words, you cannot ignore the decrees of the Constellations! Listen to me!"

"Being able to move the mouths of all dolls, controlling them at will, wherever they are, whatever doll they may be. That means— you are, in a [higher place] where all dolls can be seen, or in a [lower place] where all dolls are supported!"

"Listen to me!"

"I'll tell you the answer to the riddle you posed!"

The earth split open.

"The very ground of this Glass Palace is your true body!"

The exhibition halls made of glass shattered noisily.

"This world's ground is your skin! No, your shell!"

Feeling the intensifying earthquake,

I recalled the fact I had confirmed immediately after falling into the labyrinth.

'The ground is.'

'Made of wood.'

'A wooden floor with patterns swirling like snake scales was spread out.'



Every riddle comes with a hint.

The fact that the pattern of the ground I was standing on resembled snake scales could have been seen as just [the Serpent's World-appropriate interior].

Or perhaps it could have been seen as [the old skin shed by a snake as big as the world].

"Accept my answer! Master of the Labyrinth!"

The gap widened, and the ground sunk.

The dolls displayed in the exhibition hall also fell.

Countless white shards of glass fell like petals.

Billions of wooden dolls fell like branches.

"I hereby expose your secret at this place!"

"Ugh.....!"

Alias, The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth.

True name, Hisimet Cretsu.

And its true identity is.

"[I am here!]"

Jormungand[2].

A monster so huge it could swallow the entire world, eventually wrapping around the edges of the world, biting its own tail with its mouth.

A snake that made up an entire world.

"I am the victor of this duel!"

"Ugh.....!"

And then the ground crumbled.

The ground, as vast and thick as to be mistaken for the actual ground, the old shell, tore apart.

"You, bastard.....!"

Beneath the torn shell was nothing but endless darkness.

It was the deep sea, but there was no water, so one could not swim.

It was space, but physical laws did not apply. Endlessly hidden, forever concealing the inside of an eggshell.

"You! You! You, King of Death! You dare to!"

There was a snake there.

"Dare to defeat me, Hisimet Cretsu!"

The snake coiled around the entire abyss, covering the whole universe. When the snake opened its mouth, a hellish abyss opened up.

Only two eyes.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth's existence manifests.]

Two eyes shining with bright red hostility were the only light in this deep sea.

In a world where only its gaze was allowed, without any other form of light— It lay within its old shell, using the exterior it created as walls. This circular world was probably the deepest palace.

That's why it is the Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth.

Anyone can build this palace in their heart. Anyone can become the sole ruler sitting on the throne. The massive monster, being the king of a world governed only by itself, inside a palace ruled by no one else, roared like an old tyrant.

"Rising through the ranks by flattering Hamusutra, you mere human!"

The snake's tail lashed out at me, immeasurably large.

Perhaps, it really had no size.

This place was Hisimet Cretsu's depth and heart, the dwelling of its heart. In the world it created, only it was gigantic, and the only existing thing was itself. This vast abyss was no more than a wick to be split apart.

"Aha!"

Therefore, I sliced through it.

"How light! So light! Even a mere flick of the finger from the venomous snake weighed a thousand times more than your tail flick!"

With my single strike, Jormungand's tail was severed. Blood sprayed, and an infinite red dyed the world, casting a brief dusk upon the abyss, even if it was but a fleeting moment.

"-----!"

The scream added more red to the bloody waves.

"Peep."

Timely, the fox coiled around my neck let out a small cry.

[A Music Box Just for You grants you a quest.]

As I fell and Jormungand crouched at the bottom, sand grains formed letters between us.

+

[The Shedding God]

Difficulty: S-

Objective: Defeat the ruler of the 63rd floor, [The Eyes

Dwelling in the Labyrinth] Hisimet Cretsu. Hisimet Cretsu has exposed your companion and insulted your honor.

\*However, if you die even once to Hisimet Cretsu, you will be defeated.

+

"This is why it's convenient to serve a Constellation!"

"Pop."

"Why did I ignore such convenience until now!"

Swoosh—

I continued to slice through the snake's attacks. I didn't avoid them. Even as Hisimet Cretsu constantly thrashed its body to strike, bit with its fangs, and spat poison from its mouth, I countered everything without retreating an inch.

"Ugh, ...Eek! Eek! Aaaagh!"

With every swing of my sword, blood burst forth.

The darkness of the abyss welcomed the red dusk.

"Aaaaagh, ah, aaaaaah!!"

The echo resonated in the world, which should have been self-contained.

The screams overlapped and overlapped.

Endlessly, like waves crashing against the cliffs by the sea.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth's existence becomes faint.]

Like the waves eroding the rocks surrounding the sea.

Creak, crack!



The snake's screams gradually cracked the eggshell surrounding it.

"Aaaaaaaaah!!"

Though it was a world wide enough to contain its mind, it was too shallow to withstand its own screams.

Eventually, every palace is a house destined for destruction.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth's existence becomes faint.]

Just as every dynasty inevitably marks its era with the forecast of its downfall.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth's existence becomes faint.]

The kingdom of the Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth, built by the tyrant named Hisimet Cretsu, surrounded by walls of dolls' bodies and pillars of human secrets, declares its end at this moment.

".....Ugh..... Black. Ugh....."

The snake's moans flowed softly.

"Everything..... All will be exposed. Everything....."

This place was no longer the deep sea that refused the bottom.

Light seeped through the wound-like crevices.

Under the light more ominous than shadows, Jormungand shrank to just a slightly larger snake size.

"If you attack me, the more you attack, the fact that you possess the return skill... not just in the world you live in! But also your companions, your son, your daughter, and not just them... everywhere my faith reaches! Every world! Yes, the entire tower! I'll expose everything!"

"....."

"If I get hurt, that very moment will also be the day of your downfall. Do you understand? You know, right? All the successes you've achieved will be belittled as mere results of your returns. Your-your blood will be utterly devalued. No one will respect you, as if they knew it all along. Your blood. Your time. Your dedication. Everything will be treated as if- as if it never existed."

"....."

"Do you understand!"

The snake was truly small.

If inflicting wounds is all you know how to do.

"Really, you, do you truly understand my authority!"

A stone lying on the road, a blade placed there by chance.

A piece of metal.

It was no different from such existences.

"Let's do that."

My wounds may still be wounds, but.

You too shall remain a mere piece of metal forever.

"I have Raviel, a family, and friends. Just as I stay by Patricia's side knowing her secret, Patricia will continue to stay by my side even after knowing mine."

"....."

"While you play eternity here, I've gained people through shedding blood."

It wasn't enemy blood.

It wasn't thin blood either.

There was no blood that wasn't red.

"Hisimet Cretsu."

"Ugh..... Ugh....."

"I shall end you."

As soon as I spoke, the snake screamed as if being torn apart.

"Let's do this then!"

I silently raised my sword.

"I'll protect your secret! I'll ensure that absolutely no one, nobody knows you possess the return skill... with my authority over secrets! Forever! I'll hide it deep within my shell! How about it!? This should satisfy you enough...!"

I raised it high.

"Is that not enough for you!? What, you, no, Gong-Ja! When you entered Hamusutra's domain, didn't you use the protection of the God of Snakes!? How was it!? Convenient, right!? What if you could use that power unlimitedly!? Huh!? How about that!?"

I lifted it to its peak.

"That's not all! My life has been as long as my body! My powers are just as deep! I can give you more powers! There are! I can! I, Hisimet Cretsu, am saying this!"

I paused for a moment, then,

"Let's talk! Like people! Beings with intellect should interact not with fists but with words. Now! Let's agree! Let's talk! Let's wisely resolve this situation, so, ah, you brat, young star! No, great star! Sir! Really, just listen to me for a moment.....!!"

I swung it down without hesitation.

In the next moment, as the world split in two with a tearing scream, the snake was bisected.

[1]: The cutting of the Gordian Knot is an Ancient Greek legend associated with Alexander the Great in Gordium in Phrygia, regarding a complex knot that tied an oxcart. Reputedly, whoever could untie it would be destined to rule all of Asia. In 333 BC Alexander was challenged to untie the knot. It is thus used as a metaphor for a seemingly intractable problem which is solved by exercising an unexpectedly direct, novel, rule-bending, decis

ive, and simple approach that removes the perceived constraints.

[2]: Jormungand / Jörmungandr is the Midgard Serpent (also World Serpent) in Norse mythology who encircles the realm of Midgard. He is the son of the god Loki and the giantess Angrboða and brother of the great wolf Fenrir and Hel, Queen of the Dead.

# Chapter 334: The Constellations' Auction (1)

---

Right after slaying a Constellation.

Let's digress for a moment.

I'm not sure if this is the right time to bring up such a story, but what does it matter?

I had the right to blabber on as I pleased.

So... long, long ago, back when dinosaurs roamed the Earth and selling tobacco targeted at them was quite profitable, it was said that every stationery store had a 100-won gacha machine.

During this era, gachas enthralled children.



Of course, I wasn't even born at that time, so I know little about the gacha craze.

But I do wonder if the older generation was captivated by gachas to the extent that, as time passed and dinosaurs became extinct, they started gacha-ing on their cell phones. I harbored a highly reasonable level of suspicion even from my distant childhood.

Why bring up gachas all of a sudden?

Of course, there's a perfectly logical reason.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth's existence becomes faint.]

The moment I sliced through the massive serpent in a straight line.

"Kieeeeek!!"

From within the body of the snake, that is, from inside the severed halves of the snake's body, a very small snake, barely distinguishable from an earthworm, popped out with a 'pop'

sound.

"....."

Hmm.

Slicing through a gigantic snake only to have a much smaller snake spring out.

At that moment, I was reminded of gachas that pop open to reveal a toy inside.

Why? Just because.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth manifests.]

The snake that crawled out from the corpse of the serpent was small enough to fit in the palm of my hand. Sorry to keep comparing it to an earthworm, but it looked like it could get bullied by a slightly larger earthworm.

However, its scales resembled waves.

Its distinct inverse eyes radiated color powerfully, even from its tiny body.

"Uuum.....".

In the end, I could only mutter logically.

"Could you be... the true form of Hisimet Cretsu?"

"Kieeeee-!!"

The earthworm-sized snake cried out pitifully.

[The Snake Dwelling in the Labyrinth cannot hide its outcry of indignation.]

The snake, bending its body, repeatedly hit my palm with its upper body, seemingly trying to express its [injustice] to the greatest extent possible.

If I had seen this scene alone, I might have felt a bit sorry for it.

"No way, seriously? This earthworm is 'The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth'? Amazing."

However, a natural-born aggro magnet from the Constellations was coiled around my neck.

"What do we do with this one, huh? What should we do? If it goes in front of its followers in this form and shouts, [I am the Constellation that governs all secrets! The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth!], instead of gathering faith, the faith it has gathered so far would fly away like a wild bird, wouldn't it?"

"This...!"

"This? Did you say this? You're still not in your right mind! Maybe we should quickly call the Apostles and have them give this god a proper nourishment. Ah, calling the Apostles shouldn't be too hard, right? Hmmm? Huuum? If I press here, will the alarm go off and the communication open...?"

"This god...!"

On my palm, the real snake shed tears drop by drop.

It seemed quite upset.

"Please don't reveal this form to my followers... I beg you! Please!"

"Hmm."

I scratched my cheek.

-Hey, Kim Zombie.

Meanwhile, the Guardian Spirit spoke softly.

-Calm down a bit.

'I haven't gotten excited, have I? I'm just the same as usual.'

-The same, my foot. You got all worked up because your friend was insulted. Don't try to fool me. Fool a ghost instead. I am not a ghost, after all.

The Guardian Spirit sighed.

-My, my. There's no one as emotional as this guy, honestly. Nobody knows that. He just lives and dies by his emotions, sigh.

"....."

Right.

As much as I hate to admit it, the Guardian Spirit's banter worked.

It worked a lot.

"Hmm."

I gently touched the handkerchief once.

The emotions and the desire for revenge that had been heightened by the recent fight calmed down in an instant.

By the time I nodded my head, I had completely returned to my normal state.

'Thank you. I've calmed down.'

-There you go.

'Yes. Now that I'm settled, hmm. Let's see.'

[The Warhorse of the Eternal Plains laughs uproariously at this scene!]

[The Lonely Seeker slams his desk in shock at the scene before him.]

[The Incarnation of Love and Lust laughs for the first time in ten years, saying she hasn't laughed like this before.]

First, I need to deal with them.

"Excuse me, but from now on, I would like to have a conversation only between Hisimet Cretsu and myself. There

might be discussions about strategies for conquering stages and such, which could be considered military secrets. I am very grateful for the interest shown by the various Constellations, but I kindly request that you withdraw for today."

Fortunately, the Constellations immediately complied with my polite request.

[The Warhorse of the Eternal Plains withdraws.]

[The Incarnation of Love and Lust requests that this scene be recorded on video as she withdraws.]

[The Lonely Seeker disappears, unable to stop laughing no matter what.]

Good.

The outsiders have been dealt with.

Now it's time to get to the main topic.



"Hisimet Cretsu."

With a voice devoid of any emotion, I was able to bow respectfully to the small snake on my palm.

The snake seemed a bit flustered too. If a real snake had an expression, it would probably be embarrassment.

The real snake spoke.

"Hi-Hisimet Cretsu... whose power lies in secrets and revelations. The Constellation that governs labyrinths and mazes. O, King of Death. The Heaven that Gathers Wails."

"Yes."

I nodded.

"As you said, my name is Kim Gong-Ja. I'm a newcomer who has just grabbed the tail end of a Constellation. I have a few things to ask, do you have a moment?"

"...Ye-Yes, of course. Speak."

Hisimet Cretsu shrank on my right palm, visibly tensed.

I sighed once more and said.

"Why did you try to attack me? And in alliance with Mutia, no less, launching a surprise operation?"

"...It's for a similar reason to that bitch. Because of you, that bitch can no longer grant the wishes of humans who pray for reincarnation indiscriminately. She has become a power that requires your permission, which is utterly ridiculous. That's no longer a Constellation. It's even less so a god."

The small snake god's lament, of course, was also directed at itself.

"The two most common wishes my followers make are: [Please let me know that bastard's secret]. [Please ensure that no one knows my secret]. From my standpoint, both wishes are equally important. 99% of the reason why my followers rely on me and send me their faith is because of those wishes."

"Did a problem arise then?"

"Indeed. All because of you!"

The real snake howled.

Again, it was just a real snake.

Even if a real snake howled, it had no force, only causing a breeze that barely brushed my hair.

"...Keuk."

Realizing this, the snake made an aggrieved expression and began to mutter softly.

"I provided my followers with the utmost security. Except for me, Hisimet Cretsu, no one else could handle my followers' secrets. But then..."

"Ah."

I realized.

"The Trauma Penalty? Don't tell me that's what caused a security breach?"

"Er... ..Yes..."

The real snake buried its head in my palm. Thump. Thump. It wasn't bowing to apologize to me, but rather punishing itself in regret for its foolish decisions.

"Thanks to you, essentially everyone's past can be uncovered! No secret can stand before you. They're like a treasure chest that requires a bit of effort to open. And in your hands, you have a golden key that can unlock any chest!"

"Indeed."

"I can no longer guarantee [perfect secrecy]... My Apostle, on the 50th floor, had his entire past exposed due to trauma while under your influence, and the security barriers and systems I had set up did not function at all. They were completely useless!"

I see.

I nodded.

"Your power has been irreparably damaged."

"Exactly! And, as I said before, it's all your doing!"

"I said the same thing to Mutia. It was you who created [Returner's Winding Clock] with such a structure in the first place. You made it lightly, thinking it would be fun, didn't you?"

"Ugh..."

"In other words, this is poetic justice. You were arrogant and careless, not knowing how your actions would come back to haunt you, and finally, the arrow returned to pierce your own back."

A classic theme in myths.

"Consider it a blessing to have been defeated by such a divine cliché. It was destined to end this way from the start."

"Kuueeeee... Kieek..."

As I stroked the small Constellation-turned-snake with my finger.

"Is the discussion roughly settled?"

Thump.

"It's been quite a while since I've seen the egg of the Serpent God. It's quite amusing. Strictly speaking, it's not the egg but the inside of the egg. The interior of a completely sealed cocoon looks like this. Heh."

[The Staff of Time Immemorial].

One of the six pillars in the tower, and the only one.

"Mage."

"Yep. I was the judge for this duel, so I should rightly determine the winner and loser. Congratulations! The winner is the King of Death. The loser is 'The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth.' This result is irrevocable and engraved in the tower. I, as one of the pillars, guarantee the outcome of the two of you."

The mage spoke to us and closed one of his eyes.

"I'm also the pillar responsible for floors up to the 70th floor. So, within the 70th floor, I can arrange the stages quite freely."

A slight premonition of unease crept in.

"Wait. By free arrangement, you mean...?"

"Simple. A tenant can choose to leave and take the deposit, or leave without it, the landlord doesn't have to stop a tenant from leaving tenant, and doesn't have to prevent a tenant who wants to come."

Thump.

The mage tapped the air with his staff, and a hologram

unfolded.

A cartoonish map of the 61st to 70th floors.

My face was drawn on the 61st, 62nd, and 63rd floors, along with the fox coiled around my neck. Our faces were caricatured, somewhat comically.

The 64th, 65th, 66th, 67th, 68th, 69th, and 70th floors were different.

Faces I had never seen before reigned as the masters of the stages.

"Now."

The mage danced a little with his staff in hand.

"For exactly six minutes from now, free trade is allowed from the 64th to the 70th floor~."

The mage's playful words were filtered through an



emotionless message and echoed throughout the tower.

[Free trade is now possible from the 64th to the 70th floor.]

[The time limit is 06:00.]

[Tenants and prospective tenants, please feel free to trade.]

"....."

What exactly was happening?

As I stood dumbfounded, staring at the hologram the mage had created, unable to comprehend the situation.

[The 64th floor stage is up for auction.]

[The manager of the 64th floor, 'The Righteous Nine-Tailed Fox,' promises to hand over the stage management rights to anyone who wishes, with no need for a deposit, monthly rent, or anything!]

Huh?

I wasn't sure how the trade between Constellations worked, but from my human perspective, that seemed like an incredibly unreasonable deal.

[The next in line after the 63rd floor is the 64th floor.]

But the very next moment, I understood the cause of this unprecedented stage tenancy auction race.

['The Righteous Nine-Tailed Fox' would rather give away the stage management rights for free if it means escaping from that King of Death's path!]

[The 65th floor stage is up for auction.]

[The manager of the 65th floor, 'A Goose is Still a Goose When Flipped,' flaps its wings and flies far away!]

[The 66th and 67th floor stages are up for auction.]

[The managers of the 66th and 67th floors, 'The Rubber Duck that Oversees the Ocean,' deflate themselves and sink deep into the sea!]

The cause of this unheard-of stage tenancy auction race was none other than me.

Kim Gong-Ja.

# Chapter 335: The Constellations' Auction (2)

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[The 68th floor stage is up for auction.]

[The 69th floor stage is up for auction.]

I listened blankly to the messages ringing in my head one after another. I was so stunned that my face might as well have turned into a fish face, like that of a crucian carp pancake...

No, that pun isn't quite right.

Let's just keep watching blankly.

[The 70th floor stage is up for auction.]

"Stop."

Finally, the last floor among the stages available for auction was listed.

The pillar of the tower, the Staff of Time Immemorial, carved its mark.

"Beyond that is not the territory I govern. If you want to escape from the King of Death, you should look for another pillar. There might be Constellations who don't know who I am. And Constellations who have never even heard of a 'pillar,' but consider this a special case and....."

The message cut off, and silence fell all around.

"Now then, shall we find someone to buy the items up for auction?"

It wasn't long.

"I'll explain the gist of the auction."

With a tap, the Staff of Time Immemorial prodded the void with the tip of the staff.

"As you know, the King of Death is a [Hunter], in other words, a challenger climbing the tower towards the hundredth-floor, the [Apex of Heaven]. Though not fully bloomed yet, he is also a Constellation known as 'The Heaven that Gathers Wails.'"

Indeed.

So in the tower, a 'hunter' refers to those who climb the tower.

"From now on, it's not a battle between a teacher giving a test and a student taking it, but a fair fight between warriors."

The mage's voice was low in pitch and temperature.

Like the sound of a piano playing softly outdoors on a winter day.

Many Constellations dwelling above the tower became spectators for a moment, listening to the song of the mage.

"I believe every warrior has the right to flee from a duel."

The mage's eyes were silver.

"A sword should be wielded only by those who wish to use it in a duel."

Eyes resembling the color of a blade looked at me.

"So, who wants to duel with the King of Death?"

"....."

"Among the numerous Constellations, who is the beast that hasn't forgotten the joy of victory? Who is the snake that, even after ascending to the sky, cannot shed the pleasure of its scales scraping against the ground? What kind of light is being scattered by the star that refused to be embraced by the Tower Master?"

With a tap.

The mage rolled his tongue inside his mouth.

"Floor 64. The auction begins."

[The Blazing Bird of Immortality places a bid.]

As soon as the mage finished speaking, there was someone who sent a message.

[The Blazing Bird of Immortality warns not to outbid if you don't want to die.]

The mage tilted his head.

"Well, using that tone might actually provoke others to pounce due to spite."

[The Blazing Bird of Immortality advises participating in the auction from the next stage if you don't want to die.]

"Good. Much better."



I had difficulty finding the difference between the two statements, but it seemed the mage detected a meaningful difference.

An unknown Constellation continuously poured out messages.

[The Blazing Bird of Immortality proposes an opinion on the method of the auction.]

[The Blazing Bird of Immortality says it's better to appoint a manager for up to the 70th floor at once, and as the King of Death clears each stage, the next floor should be auctioned off.]

[The Blazing Bird of Immortality very logically argues that if the King of Death loses at the 64th floor, only the Constellation that bid for the 65th floor would turn into a bird.]

"Hmm..."

The mage closed his left eye.

"That makes sense."

[The Blazing Bird of Immortality reminds everyone that it always speaks the truth.]

"Let's assume that's true. But the most important part is still left."

The mage looked up at the sky.

"What's your bid? How much do you want to pay for the manager's rights?"

[The Blazing Bird of Immortality answers.]

[Everything it has.]

The mage nodded.

"There's no reason not to accept. The manager of the 64th floor will be changed from 'The Righteous Nine-Tailed Fox' to 'The Blazing Bird of Immortality.'"

And with that, it was over.

The mage turned to look at me.

"King of Death, proceed to the next stage."

"....."

The fox that had coiled around my neck chirped.

The fox fluttered its tail, asking for my opinion.

"Sure, I have no reason to refuse either."

I put the snake, Hisimet Cretsu, that had been resting on my palm, back into my pocket. And lightly ignored the snake's low hiss as I nodded.

"Frankly, the snake lacked a satisfying bite. Please, God, I ask of you."

"Chirp."

At my words, the fox didn't hesitate and immediately declared.

[Quest Cleared!]

[The 63rd floor has been cleared.]

[A Music Box Just for You will give you the same quest from the 64th to the 69th floor as the previous stages.]

[You will be instantly transferred to the 64th floor according to your request.]

The sandstorm wrapped around my sight.

-Zombie.

As the scent that crossed the desert wrapped around my nose and swirled throughout my body during that brief moment, the Guardian Spirit directly spoke to my consciousness.

-I climbed up to the 99th floor, but I didn't know about the pillars. Thinking back, it's not that I never encountered a pillar. I must have forgotten after meeting one.

'.....'

-These things called pillars or whatever probably have the [authority to erase memories related to themselves].

Indeed.

That must be the case.

-Perhaps even after this ordeal ends, that is, after you climb up to the 70th floor, all memories might vanish.

That's possible.

-But the likelihood is low.

The Guardian Spirit said.

-You met the Tower Master. No matter how great those pillars are, they shouldn't be able to erase the time imbued with meaning by the Tower Master.

His voice was calm yet filled with regret.

-You and I walked different paths.

The Sword Emperor said.

-Go that way.

Finally, the sandstorm completely obscured my vision.

-No one will look down on you as weak anymore!

And so, I opened my eyes.

[You have entered the 64th floor.]

Upon opening my eyes, it was all grey.

A land where only ash stretched endlessly to the horizon.

[The Blazing Bird of Immortality manifests!]

In the center of that world, a bird with its entire body aflame, a phoenix, was fluttering its vast wings.

"—I was resentful."

A strong smell clung to the mucous membranes of my nose.

It was the smell of burning.

The bird, whose entire body was aflame, could easily envelop the world with its two wings. The wings traversed between heaven and earth. Due to the burning wings, there was no distinction between up and down.

Looking up or down, everything was reduced to ashes.

"The Sword Emperor ascended the tower with a momentum that sprang up everywhere, and I ignored him. I looked down on him. Thus, I lost the opportunity to compete with the highest-ranked warrior the tower has ever seen. I was resentful, very resentful."

I gripped the hilt of my sword.

"I understand why you participated in the auction."

The phoenix's eyes looked down at me. It was unclear whether it even had eyes due to its entirely engulfed form. The phoenix was burning ceaselessly, leaving no part untouched by flames.

So perhaps the phoenix was glaring at me not with the eyes of the flesh but with the eyes of the soul.

"You are the successor of the Sword Emperor, I hear. Is that true?"

"You have selective hearing even amidst the flames, focusing only on what suits you."



"Good. This is a good opportunity. I cannot allow myself to be resentful twice."

The phoenix flapped its wings.

All the ash that had settled in the world was stirred up by the fluttering, swirling around.

Ash fluttered down, touching even my cheeks.

"I am the fire that burns fire. An omen of disaster, a bird of disaster. I wish to be the last fire left in the world."

"I am the King of Death."

I wiped the ash off my cheeks. My mouth felt gritty. Ash had swept in, filling my throat. I willingly chewed and swallowed the remnants left by the fire, showing respect for the duel.

"I am the sword that wishes to break other swords."

There was no point in further conversation.

The judge who had followed me onto the stage, the Staff of Time Immemorial, stood between us.

The mage raised the long staff and tapped the ground lightly.

Taking that subtle signal as a cue, I dashed across the ash-covered ground.

"Hisimet Cretsu, fulfill your promise."

The loser of the previous stage responded to my command.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth manifests its power.]

Squirm.

The snake crawled out of my pocket and wrapped around my wrist like a bracelet. The snake had sworn to assist me in conquering the tower and was now fulfilling that promise.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth exposes the enemy's information.]

In the flow of aura, time slowed down, and within the sluggish current, characters were etched before my eyes.

I could see the true name of the enemy.

The Blazing Bird of Immortality.

Taotie[1].

Then, the origins of the phoenix were embroidered in the void.

In one stroke.

The writing of Hisimet Cretsu was as serpentine as its body, yet as distinct as the light in its inverse eyes, making it easy to read.

+

Taotie is fire.

If water flows downward as the righteous path, fire goes against it, signifying a rebellious heart. Taotie's fire represents emotions.

Fire grows by consuming others and does not see the world around it. Therefore, Taotie governs only blind emotions, such as [hatred], [disgust], and above all, the [pleasure] that melts away in showing oneself off.

It screams as if it's about to die at any moment but never dies, instead, it kills only others.

If I was addicted to the pleasure of observing others, Taotie was addicted solely to the act of displaying itself.

A being that demands only its own attention but, in reality, cannot burn on its own unless there is something else to consume.

Its names are [The Fire that Burns Fire], [The Self that Consumes Itself], [Blindness].

Merely a blind fire.

+

Indeed.

I instantly pierced through the identity of the phoenix.

"You weren't just resentful because you couldn't fight the Sword Emperor."

The phoenix's wings fluttered.

In other words, the phoenix opened its eyes.

Although it had a form far removed from a human, I was confident in reading [the expression of fire] better than anyone.

The angles at which the flames enveloping the Constellation bent, the lines where the fire split, and the signs of embers flaring up allowed me to see its psychology.

"You were just resentful that you couldn't participate in the

'event' called the Sword Emperor. It wasn't about the duel between warriors at all."

"....."

"You just wanted to have the business card of having fought the Sword Emperor once. Just not having that business card was enough to make you resentful. Jealous of the past Constellations who had that card, envious of the Constellations who lost to me, and jealous of the genuine desire of the Constellations who could truly compete with me, you wanted to join in."

I whispered and swung my sword.

"You're probably pondering not how to defeat me but how to stage the most impressive scene to imprint yourself on the other Constellations."

".....!"

The phoenix couldn't refute my words. It wasn't that it didn't want to refute but that it couldn't.

Not because it had nothing to say, but because it had no time to say it.

While it took a moment for the Constellation to utter a word, I spilled a dozen. The Constellation had no chance to counter.

And if that was the case with the voice, what about the speed of the sword?

"You must have been the Constellation who gifted the flame skills to Yoo Soo-Ha."

The Sword Emperor once said that the Demon King of Autumn Rain, Ester, was a D-class Constellation.

Purely in terms of strength, this phoenix would be about the same. D+ to C- class.

"I have no time to entertain someone who has no intention of dueling with me."

In a flash.

I conveyed two meanings in one go.

"Disappear."

And I cut down the Constellation that could have become Yoo Soo-Ha's god.

Screams followed.

If it took years to cut down the Demon King of Autumn Rain, this time it took not even seconds.

"The 64th floor. The duel is over. The winner is the King of Death."

The Staff of Time Immemorial, which had witnessed the whole ordeal, declared.

In the midst of t

he swirling ash, the voice gently settled.



"Then, let's immediately start the auction for the 65th floor."

[1]: The Taotie is an ancient Chinese mythological creature that was commonly emblazoned on bronze and other artifacts during the 1st millennium BC. Taotie are one of the "four evil creatures of the world".

# Chapter 336: The Constellations' Auction (3)

---

I have a plethora of Constellations.

It's a sentence that could become a novel title with a bit of tweaking. Something like [My Infinite Constellations] or [I Have 999,999,999 Constellations].

That's to say, I am laden with the burden of numerous sins.

"Cheep."

Firstly, around my neck hangs the fox god.

[A Music Box Just for You] awes coiled around my neck.

While the god had grasped the world's time, it had seized mine in exchange. A testament, perhaps? The fox perpetually used its tail as a scarf, gently constricting my breath.

Its authority is 'Absolute Interference Immunity'.

No one can deny or distort my time.

That alone may seem simple, but through it, I've gained immunity to the unfathomable 'changes in causality.'

"Kee... Keekuk..."

And on my wrist, a serpent.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth] hung like a bracelet.

The snake emerged from the egg it had crafted, compelled now to gaze beyond its world. It's time for it to not comprehend the world with its mind, but to awaken to it with its body.

Perhaps the silver lining was the vastness of knowledge it holds in its head, or rather, the most extensive of all.

Its authority is 'Total Revelation of Secrets'.

No adversary can conceal their secrets from me. Origin. Source. Roots. Strengths and weaknesses alike.

There might be foes lacking in information, but none remain devoid of secrets.

-Oh, what a field day for you, our Kim Zombie. Immunity to status ailments and now holding a real-time monster manual in your grasp.

Behind me stood the Guardian Spirit.

[The Sword Constellation] was present.

Let's just skip this gentleman.

[The Goddess of Protection feels it's time to sort out the

hierarchy.]

And lastly, there was Shiny.

[The Goddess of Protection points out that everything in the world is ordered by seniority. The first Constellation to join the hero was herself, and she entered through the most proper route, thus, the fox and snake should rightfully address her as their senior.]

[The Goddess of Protection openly declares that although she is lenient and generous towards humans, she remains strict towards the Constellations.]

Shiny is... what exactly?

Really, what is it?

How did she manage not to show its quirks during her time with Kim Yul? Or did her quirks only bloom after meeting me?

-Zombie, they say a sword takes after its master. When it was the Constellation Killer's sword, it had the heft of the Constellation Killer, but after becoming yours, it's as light as a

rabbit's fur. Whose fault do you think that is?

I couldn't possibly know.

A true mystery.

"...No bids?"

Off to the side, [The Staff of Time Immemorial] spoke.

"Was my voice too soft? Let me repeat. The 64th floor has been cleared. It's now the 65th floor's turn. If there's a Constellation wishing to bid for the stage, please do so promptly. We can't wait forever."

Indeed.

There's a reason I started boasting about my own Constellations. It's because no one else was participating in the auction.

I felt like an auction item too expensive to sell.

"Sigh..."

Even after three minutes, the auction didn't proceed. The mage sighed in disappointment.

"Everyone's too scared. Petrified. After the Phoenix got knocked down by the King of Death in one hit, they're utterly frozen in fear. This is why modern Constellations are said to lack resolve. In the past, they were a bit more..."

On and on.

Meanwhile, the hierarchy war between the fox god, the serpent, and Shiny heated up fiercely.

[A Music Box Just for You inquires politely about the well-being of the intelligence within the skulls of these B-grade Constellations.]

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth merely points out, as a matter of objective fact, that it may have been defeated by the King of Death, but not by you lowly beings.]

[The Goddess of Protection mentions B-grade and argues

that being an actual B-grade makes one the strongest, citing Earth's comics as evidence.]

[A Music Box Just for You scoffs at using B-grade comic writers as a reference.]

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth threatens to reveal your ages.]

[The Goddess of Protection encourages this, as it would only prove that she is the youngest.]

"Cheep?"

"Keeek?"

-Brrr.

It's noisy.

They are so damn noisy!



Having three Constellations in one place just makes for an endless noise fest?!

[The Goddess of Protection offers a brilliant idea to you.]

What is it?

[The Goddess of Protection reminds you of the very obvious fact that she is also a Constellation.]

"Yeah... So?"

[Then, she suggests that she could also bid for the stage and win the auction.]

"Huh?"

I blinked.

"...Wait. Is that even possible?"

[The Goddess of Protection assures you that there is no violation of the rules as she unsheathes her blade.]

"Ah, don't unsheathe that. I got cut. See, I'm bleeding... Anyway."

My mind raced. Fiddling with the hilt of my sword, I carefully calculated every detail.

"But to win the auction, you need something of value, right? Like faith or something, as a wager? That's like currency for Constellations. Do you have money?"

[The Goddess of Protection smiles triumphantly.]

Shiny explained as follows:

1. Originally, she was a Constellation overseeing [Protection] and [Immortality], quite a high-ranking one.

2. During that time, the Constellation Killer established the Aegim Empire. She became the de facto Guardian Deity of the Aegim Empire, securing a lifetime pension, so to speak.

3. But just then, Kim Yul sealed her away.

4. Her believers continued to send faith, but since she was sealed, she had no opportunity to use it. It was a situation where deposits were made, but no withdrawals could happen, so the faith just accumulated like in a savings account.

5. After eons, the hero unsealed her.

6. When she finally checked her neglected account, oh my?

Shiny shimmered brightly.

[The Goddess of Protection is confident there's no Constellation with a cash reserve to match hers.]

In short, Shiny had become a deposit-rich aristocrat.

"Indeed... Being sealed was a blessing in disguise, in a sense."

[The Goddess of Protection declares she will demonstrate her status.]

That seemed more like reckless spending than demonstrating status, but I couldn't quite point that out.

Either way, Shiny did what she could and wanted to.

[The Goddess of Protection places a bid.]

The other Constellations, previously urged by [The Staff of Time Immemorial] to participate in the auction, turned their attention this way. Even the usually nonchalant mage had a flicker of shock in his eyes.

If I were to translate that subtle expression into human language, it would probably be 'Really? Are you seriously going to stoop that low?'

"King of Death, are you really going to stoop that low?"

My translation skills haven't waned, it seems.

"Yeah, but it's not me doing it. It's my sword."

"Thieves also say it was their hand that did it."

"No, it's different. I might be the nominal owner, but that doesn't mean it has no free will. It wants to do it, so how can I stop it?"

"But still, you know, there's something called moral integrity..."

[A Music Box Just for You breaks its savings account.]

The fox growled from around my neck.

[A Music Box Just for You places a bid!]

The mage fell silent.

I protested.

"It's not me. It's my scarf."

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth places a bid.]

"My bracelet just..."

"Oh, I really..."

The mage rubbed his forehead.

"These damn balsamic vinaigrette creatures. Fine. When has life ever gone the way I planned? If there's no violation of the rules, do as you please."

[The Goddess of Protection doesn't care who else bids; she only wants to know who bids the highest.]

"Ugh."

The mage sighed.

"...I'll change the manager of the 65th floor to the 'Goddess of Protection.'"

[A Music Box Just for You protests that this cannot be!]

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth is astonished at how much was spent.]

Despite my lack of involvement, the sheath of the holy sword rattled slightly.

[The Goddess of Protection sends a pitying look at the loose purse strings of her juniors.]

And as expected, chaos ensued.

[Quest Cleared.]

[The 64th floor has been cleared.]

[The manager of the 65th floor assigns you a quest.]

+

## [The Hero's Swordsmanship]

Difficulty: B

Objective: The ruler of the 65th floor, [The Goddess of Protection] Hwiya, demands that you strike a pose of [The Hero's Swordsmanship].

\*However, if the [Goddess of Protection] finds the pose unsatisfactory, you must strike the pose again.

+

Hmm.

I held my sword at an angle, much like a transforming robot drawing its weapon for a climax scene.

Fittingly, the moment I angled the sword, a brilliant flash...! erupted from the blade.

[Quest Cleared.]



[The 65th floor has been cleared.]

"Incredible."

I shivered.

"This is just too sneaky..."

"It's you who's being sneaky."

The disgrace didn't end there.

[The Goddess of Protection demands that her juniors address her as 'senior.']

[A Music Box Just for You immediately jumps into the auction for the 66th floor stage!]

Refusing to acknowledge this, the fox cried out, and the serpent hissed in protest.

[A Music Box Just for You places a bid.]

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth places a bid.]

[The Goddess of Protection sighs in pity.]

[The Goddess of Protection places a bid.]

What is it...

What exactly are they doing this for...

-Mascot battles are meant to heat up.

The Guardian Spirit chuckled. He was the spitting image of a neighborhood guy enjoying a spectacle.

-Let them be. They're sorting out their hierarchy among themselves. This is a form of loyalty competition.

"I didn't ask for this kind of loyalty, though..."

-They're saying they'll clear stages for you without you having to lift a finger, and you're questioning their loyalty? Just gratefully suck up the honey.

It was a rather ambiguous honey.

As the chaos intensified,

[A Music Box Just for You pours in its fortune!]

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth reveals its hidden savings account.]

[The Goddess of Protection doubles her bid.]

The mage rubbed his forehead.

"...I'll change the manager of the 66th floor to the 'Goddess of Protection.'"

A fox and a snake cried out as if the sky was tearing apart for a brief moment.

+

[The Dance of the Sword]

Difficulty: B

Objective: The ruler of the 66th floor, [The Goddess of Protection] Hwiya, demands that you perform a sword dance.

\*However, if the [Goddess of Protection] finds the dance unsatisfactory, you must dance again.

+

The 66th floor was a serene plain. It was night, with a solitary moon hanging in the sky.

Under the unusual moonlight, I began to dance with Shiny in hand. I must have looked quite mad...

[Quest Cleared.]

[The 66th floor has been cleared!]

It was remarkable.

"Congratulations, King of Death. You're the first hunter to smash through stages in this manner since the Tower was erected."

"I wish I'd be the last as well."

"Let's see how the next floor's auction goes."

The mage grimaced.

"Alright. Let's start the auction for the 67th floor."

[A Music Box Just for You places a bid!]

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth places a bid!]

[The Goddess of Protection places a bid!]

And then, at that moment,

[The Reddest Sommelier places a bid...]

Finally, a new participant appeared. The mage's eyes sparkled, and he immediately raised his staff high.

"Awarded! The manager of the 67th floor will be changed to 'The Reddest Sommelier'!"

"Cheep?!"

"Keeek! Keeek!"

"No complaints. I'm both the host and the judge. Bids are confidential, so I can't disclose them. That's the rule I just made."

The mage shouted.

"Hey, King of Death! Hurry up! Before he changes his mind!"

And so I did.

[You have entered the 67th floor.]

[The Reddest Sommelier manifests.]

Ever heard of crocodile tears?

The notion that crocodiles shed tears while munching on their prey, thus becoming a synonym for insincere sorrow. What's the point of crying after you kill, they say.

"Sniff... Sniffle..."

But the crocodile tears falling before me seemed genuinely heartfelt.

"Sniff... Sob... Sniffle..."

It was a crocodile dressed in a cape.

The crocodile, seemingly built to walk on two legs rather than four, pounded the ground with its hands. Cloaked in not just a shoulder cape but also a fine suit, it would have passed for a respectable gentleman if not for its crocodile head.

"Why, oh why, has this befallen me...!"

The Crocodile Gentleman was sobbing uncontrollably.

"Despicable, King of Death! How low can you stoop! To engage in such underhanded tactics! You sho

uld've quietly waited for other Constellations to join the auction, maybe for 100 or 200 years! Why! Why couldn't you wait for that bird to arrive before hoarding the stages!"

"You were planning such a vile delay tactic, weren't you..."



"Lowly creature! Never have I seen one as vile and despicable as you!"

It wasn't me, but he kept going on about it.

# Chapter 337: Blood and Wine (1)

---

"So, what will you do?"

I flicked my holy sword. The Crocodile Gentleman, already sobbing miserably, swallowed a scream upon seeing the tip of my blade.

"What do you mean, what will I do? What are you talking about?"

"Regardless of the circumstances, you've bid for it and won. Now, we must determine who deserves to become the Constellation of humans, whether it turns out to be a boon or a curse. That's why you've come before me, isn't it? Because you don't want to lose that faith."

"....."

"A duel? One-on-one? A fair fight?"

The Crocodile Gentleman stared at my blade. Gulp. The massive throat of the Crocodile, covered in scaly leather, trembled.

"Deal?"

"Wait, hold on a moment! I didn't come here to fight you one-on-one. Despite my appearance, I am a Gentleman."

"Then why are you here?"

"Even if it comes to surrender, my good sir, we must at least have a conversation, mustn't we? We should know who we're dealing with before deciding whether to cook or boil, right?"

I raised an eyebrow.

"Hmm."

"You must not know since you've stormed through from the 50th floor to here in no time, huh? Among the Constellations residing in the upper floors, there are connections, networks. It's somewhat similar to the world of humans. See, even 'The Ruin-Harvesting Cow' collaborated with 'The Eyes Dwelling in

the Labyrinth' to attack you!"

The Crocodile Gentleman pulled out a handkerchief from his suit pocket and kept wiping his forehead. Although it was impossible for a Crocodile to sweat.

"In short, you're saying you're afraid to fight me?"

"That's not it... Yes, damn it. I am scared! Ah! So frightening! Happy now? Where did such a creature come from all of a sudden!"

Why are you angry with me?

"Let's try to settle this through conversation, shall we? Through words. Do you know how many divine powers you've consumed by now? Keep that up and you might get indigestion, young man. Mutia's return, Hisimet Cretsu's information, and whatnot, countless Constellations..."

"Eating one more of you won't make my already upset stomach any worse."

"Of course, that's a damn fact..."

The Crocodile shed tears.

He was an honest Gentleman.

"However, looking at you, young man, you seem quite transparent. Or at least trying to be. You are. Then, shouldn't we first try to resolve this through dialogue, as is the proper way?"

Just as I adopted a contemplative pose:

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth cautiously speaks to you.]

I looked down at my wrist.

There, coiled like a wristwatch, was a tiny snake.

"Hisss."

Raising its tiny head, the snake seemed anxious, as if worried I might strike it. It was quite cute, despite being the

notorious villain who turned countless humans into mannequins for display.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth says, it might be unnecessary meddling but.]

What? What is it?

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth secretly informs you that everything the Crocodile Gentleman has said so far, without exception, has been a lie.]

"....."

I slowly shifted my gaze.

In front of me, the Crocodile was still dabbing at his non-sweaty leather with a handkerchief.

Both my eyes and the snake's pupils were fixed on him.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth makes a judgment.]

"Of course, we don't expect to understand each other right from the start through dialogue. Dialogue, communication, isn't just about exchanging words. It's a kind of grand achievement, isn't it?"

[False.]

"Perhaps the essence of dialogue is sharing time with each other. Time. Giving time to each other. A 30-minute conversation won't mean much to someone who has lived 30 years without the other. But what about after a year?"

[False.]

"After a year since the first conversation, if we talk again, and then 10 years later, 20 years later, the two people's time would have overlapped for 20 years. That's a new life, comparable to the past 30 years!"

[False.]

"I don't think I can earn your trust right from the start. But... I hope to be a Constellation worth your time, worth getting to know slowly. How about it, King of Death."

The Crocodile blinked.

"Would you grant me the opportunity to have a dialogue with you?"

And the snake also blinked.

[False.]

I slowly smiled.

'Interesting.'

I gently stroked the head of the still trembling snake with my finger. The snake cried out softly, as if it might sink into the ground at any moment.

'Everything up to his last words was a lie. Even the question [Would you grant me the opportunity to have a dialogue with you?] contains a lie... There's no need to think about it. The very word [dialogue] is a lie, isn't it?'



[That's correct.]

'He's not asking for a chance to talk to me but for a chance to finish me off. That's his true intention.'

[It seems so.]

So, these are the infamous Crocodile tears.

I smiled at the Crocodile Gentleman.

"Alright."

The Crocodile Gentleman's eyes lit up.

"Let's prepare it. A place for dialogue."

It was soon revealed that the 'dialogue' the Crocodile Gentleman spoke of wasn't a one-on-one conversation.

It was a meeting also attended by Constellations whose divine powers were threatened by me, Constellations whose territories overlapped with the domain I would govern. In other words, Constellations whose feet were already on fire.

[The Reddest Sommelier has won the bidding for the 67th floor's management rights.]

[The Eternal Dance of the Twins has won the bidding for the 68th floor's management rights.]

[The Noble of Dry Fingerprints has won the bidding for the 69th floor's management rights.]

Several Constellations sat around a long table, waiting for me.

Not just a long table, but an excessively long one.

The table stretched endlessly, converging towards a vanishing point on both sides. The space arranged for this meeting of dialogue extended lengthwise along the table. Although we could sit facing each other, that was all; to cross to the other side, one would have to use their body, not just words.

"Come, take a seat! King of Death, welcome!"

The Crocodile Gentleman greeted me warmly.

"All of us here wish to have a conversation with you. It may seem this way, but everyone is shy, and it's only because I led this gathering that they finally showed up. Hehe. It's natural for people, big or small, to be shy."

[False.]

I already knew.

Without losing my smile, I surveyed the faces introduced by the Crocodile Gentleman.

"First, it's an honor to introduce you to the 'Eternal Dance of the Twins.' It's a very rare case of twin Constellations among the stars."

The twins seated at the far end of the table nodded simultaneously, in perfectly the same moment and angle.

"Nice to meet you." "This is the first time."

Even their timing of speaking overlapped.

One had a higher pitch, and the other lower, but they harmoniously created a chord. It was just ordinary speech, yet a harmony emerged. The twins, expressionless, were interlocking their fingers tightly.

"Interesting, isn't it?"

The Crocodile Gentleman chuckled.

"Both are not Constellations on their own, but together they form a complete Constellation. Maybe they're actually one person but appear to be two. Who knows? Next is....."

"I am the [Noble of Dry Fingerprints], child."

A gorgeously dressed Constellation spoke bluntly.

The Constellation looked at me with eyes full of hatred.

The eyebrows were furrowed, the forehead wrinkled, and the corners of the mouth twisted grotesquely.

"I expect nothing from you."

Perhaps this hatred wasn't specifically directed at 'me.'

That expression was aimed at an unspecified many. The anger might have solidified at some point, becoming a part of his skin.

It was less about hating someone and more about hating something, and that something would inevitably be his own life.

"Only one thing."

The [Noble] glared at me.

"I wish you could understand my situation."

"Alright! Alright! Let's save those stories for later!"

The Crocodile clapped his hands hurriedly, his short arms making the applause seem comical.

"First, to commemorate the successful convening of this meeting! Let's raise a toast!"

As he clapped, bang! The doors of the meeting room flew open. From there, butlers dressed in tailcoats entered in a line.

The butlers were holding bottles that appeared to be wine.

"Very, very precious wine."

The Crocodile licked his lips.

"True to the epithet 'The Reddest Sommelier,' I am quite picky about alcohol. Brewing human emotions into alcohol. This is my blessed divine power."

The butlers seemed perfect in every way, except for one glaring absence.

Their chests were empty.

It reminded me of a famous mouse cartoon featuring Swiss cheese. The butlers had holes right through the middle of their chests.

"The more desperate the heart, the more life seeps into the emotion, the fresher the aroma and the richer the taste when brewed into alcohol."

There was no blood dripping or intestines visible from the butlers' hollowed-out spots. It was as if they were cleanly cut out like in cartoons. One of the butlers approached me and tilted the bottle.

"I always wander in search of humans' concentrated emotions, their true hearts. So, you may call me the Constellation of sincerity. What do you think, King of Death?"

Drip, drip.

Red liquid filled my cup.

"Aren't we similar in some ways?"

"....."

"Cheers!"

The Crocodile Gentleman opened his jaws wide. With his short arms, he couldn't hold the cup and drink on his own. He just opened his mouth, and a butler poured the wine directly into it.

Gulp.

The thick Crocodile skin quivered as he swallowed. Gulp. Red wine leaked through his teeth, staining the Gentleman's neck and white shirt.

"Delicious!"

That one word must have been the truth among all the lies.

"Disgusting smell."

The [Noble], with a twisted expression, elegantly tilted his



glass.

"....." "....."

The [Twins] didn't use a butler to drink nor did they lift their cups. They sipped the wine through each other's lips, fingers still interlocked.

Not a single drop of the red liquid spilled. The timing of their swallowing and the movements of their throats were identical.

Perhaps even the rhythm of their breathing was the same? The [Twins] weren't drinking wine; they were simply ensuring they didn't lose each other.

"....." "....."

Not just now, but in everything they do. To them, all events that pass by are merely a white backdrop, and the only fact they always prove, the only truth they seek to confirm, is that they haven't lost each other.

So...

"Indeed."

I put down the glass.

The level of the red liquid in the cup hadn't changed at all.

Leisurely, I looked over at the Constellations seated across the table.

"You are indeed similar to me."

The Crocodile Gentleman dressed in a suit.

[The Reddest Sommelier].

He, who takes the hearts of others and revels in emotions.

"It's clear that the more established I become as a Constellation, the more troubled you become."

The noble dressed in splendid attire.

[The Noble of Dry Fingerprints].

He, who feeds on hatred and builds his frame with anger.

"That's why I'm glad."

The two, fingers interlocked.

[The Eternal Dance of the Twins].

They, who need nothing but the acknowledgment of the other.

"I'm glad that it's me, not someone else, who will bring about your downfall."

"....."

The Constellations stopped moving.

The [Noble] stared at me with his cup still at his lips. The [Twins], still with their lips pressed together, rolled their eyes simultaneously to look at me.

"Hmm."

The Crocodile Gentleman slowly closed his mouth and wiped away the wine that had flowed between his teeth with a handkerchief. It wasn't sweat but blood from others that he needed the handkerchief for— to wipe away the warmth of someone else's life.

"Why, I wonder?"

The Crocodile looked at me with eyes filled with cracks.

"If you intended to be hostile from the start, there was no need for conversation. There was no n

eed to accept my invitation and come here, only to face three Constellations at once and invite trouble."

"Regrettably."

I gripped the hilt of my sword.

"That statement will soon become a lie as well."

The Constellations leaped at me all at once, aiming to confront me.

# Chapter 338: Blood and Wine (2)

---

The Crocodile Gentleman bared his long snout just before charging at me.

"O Tower! Fulfill the promise!"

Behind the crocodile, dozens of butlers lined up. Clang! The wine bottles they were holding fell down. Clang. Shattered glass scattered everywhere. Stained with red wine, the fragments bloomed like petals of flowers with a shade of red that reflected the mountains.

[The Reddest Sommelier requests a covenant with the tower.]

[Sanctuary designated.]

[Approved.]

It was the manifestation of the Crocodile Gentleman's power.

[From this moment, this place belongs to the Reddest Sommelier.]

[He who sucks blood and spits it out, worship him.]

It was a thick fog.

Glass fragments twinkled and scattered in all directions. Red. Where they passed, crimson mists followed. A red haze blossomed into the world.

"I am strong to the weak,"

The Crocodile Gentleman chuckled gruesomely. That's what the laughter of a crocodile sounded like.

"And stronger to the strong!"

And then, we collided. Bang! The crocodile's staff and my

holy sword clashed. Of course, I intended to slice through him in one stroke with my aura. However, the crocodile, engulfed in red mist, seemed unharmed.

"Hmm."

I frowned.

"You didn't seem like a martial artist."

"To be honest, you don't quite look like a martial artist either, young man! You'd fit more as a butler than a swordsman! What do you say? I'm recruiting butlers, fancy a change of employment?"

"I'm already committed to becoming a Consort for the Ivansia Ducal Family."

"Pity! I'll build you a new house in the grave!"

I increased my speed a bit more. I unleashed a tri-pronged sword attack. Bang! Surprisingly, the Crocodile Gentleman kept up with my speed. With one hand, he adjusted his tie, and with the other, he swung his staff, blocking my sword.



'What's this?'

Honestly, it was surprising.

'Was he capable of attacking me? His skill level seems low.'

Just when I wondered if I had misjudged my opponent's strength, the bracelet on my wrist, shaped like a serpent, vibrated.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth manifests its power.]

[Exposure.]

[Your opponent's power has been revealed to you.]

Hisimet Cretsu. The Constellation that governs information, now my subordinate, Jormungand, had exposed the enemy's true nature.

Letters appeared before my eyes, wriggling like a snake.

+

[Evil Parasitizes Good]

Owner: The Reddest Sommelier

Effect: The power of a vampire disguised as a crocodile. A truly simple yet annoying power that turns the strength used against him into his own.

It collects the lives, emotions, and souls of others. If you feel a genuine connection or believe you are equals while opposing him, it's merely an illusion. He will savor the look of delusion in your eyes. His true nature is that of a parasite.

The Reddest Sommelier is a parasite among parasites, and no one can withstand his power alone.

+

I let out a laugh.

"So, it wasn't martial prowess."

"Hm? Ah, hmm! Oh dear. Hisimet Cretsu, is it!"

The Crocodile Gentleman clicked his tongue as if it were troublesome.

"So, you were not only captured but have also offered information to this young man! O greatest serpent! Aren't you ashamed! I have always respected you, yet instead of seeking revenge against the one who defeated you, you have submitted! Disappointing!"

[That's a lie.]

The serpent bracelet hissed sharply.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth points out that 'I have always respected you' is particularly false and gnashes its teeth.]

There's a reason why it's hard for Constellations to cooperate.

"Twins! What are you doing! It's your turn!"

But here, that difficult cooperation was happening.

"Don't," "Order us around."

From behind, the twins kissed. The angle of the lips and the direction of the heads were identical, causing their small noses to press against each other slightly. But without caring a bit, the twins slowly separated their lips, looking into each other's increasingly distant eyes.

"O Tower." "It's a promise."

For the first time, the twins uncrossed their fingers.

[The Eternal Dance of the Twins requests a covenant with the tower.]

Sararak.

The twins' hair, which had been tinged with gray, changed.

One turned stark white, and the other pitch black. The White one and the Black one were clearly distinguished.

Such stark black and white.

As if the world itself had split in two between them.

[Sanctuary designated.]

[Approved.]

"Excellent!"

Someone moved upon seeing this. It was the Crocodile Gentleman. The crocodile leaped backward in a flash. Tat! I launched a chasing strike, but it was blocked by the crocodile's swirling staff.

"Futile, King of Death! Your realm becomes my realm!"

The Crocodile chuckled deeply.

"As the master here, I generously accept the twins' intervention!"

The crocodile retreated, and one of the twins dove into the space he left. It was a tag-out. The white twin, The White one, swung a fist at me with an expressionless face.

[From this moment, this place belongs to the Eternal Dance of the Twins.]

[Joint ownership has been recognized.]

I thrust my sword forward.

[They who are harmed and harm in return, worship them.]

Cleanly.

The tip of my sword pierced through The White one's shoulder.

"Ah! Aaaah, aaaaaah!"

The White one clutched his shoulder and screamed. Unlike the Crocodile Gentleman, who easily blocked my attack, The White one showed no such skill. One half of the Constellation writhed in agony, shedding tears.

As I wondered why he had charged so recklessly, the moment I harbored doubt,

"It's okay."

Far beyond the table, standing still, The Black one smiled gently. Her pitch-black hair, which seemed to swallow even gazes, whispered.

"You're not hurt."

".....!"

The White one's eyes filled with bloodlust.

"I'm not hurt!"

It was madness more intense than pain.

The White one swung his fist. It was as if he had forgotten that his shoulder was pierced. I naturally extended my sword to deflect the punch and, at the same time, cut off the enemy's arm.

"Ah, hee?! Uh, ugh, aaaaaah!!"

And right after I severed the arm, I realized.

"It's okay."

The wound I had opened in his shoulder had already healed completely.

"You haven't been damaged."

I unleashed my sword strikes. Left, right, overhead, with a speed that the opponent couldn't possibly follow, I launched a relentless offensive. The enemy's limbs were torn apart. Each time, The White one screamed. And each time, from a distance, The Black one softly whispered.



"You haven't been hurt, right?"

"Ugh! Yes.....!"

Where an arm fell, another grew. Crumbled knees stood up again. I didn't hesitate and aimed for the opponent's neck, but it was in vain. That neck, too, shed its skin and grew anew.

The Black one chuckled.

"You're noble. No one can harm you."

"Except for you!"

"Ah, right. Except for me."

The black screams and white whispers mingled, muddying the air.

"We are complete."

I narrowed my brows.

'Tricky.'

It was meaningless to inflict fatal wounds.

At this very moment, The White one, battered and torn, swung his fist. I turned him into even more of a rag, but the enemy recovered in no time.

"You're not hurting! You're nothing! There's nothing to be concerned about!"

The Black one charged incessantly with eyes filled with madness.

What kind of strategy would work? As I pondered, new letters were carved before my eyes by the serpent.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth manifests its power.]

[Exposure.]

[Your opponent's power has been revealed to you.]

And the power of the twins was laid bare.

+

[The Twin's Complete Pact]

Owners: The Eternal Dance of the Twins

Effect: A power that completes the world. If I interpret the world you see and you interpret the world I see, the world is complete in itself.

A spell that closes off the world. If I aim to collect 'everything' and expand my size to match the breadth of the world, the twins adjust the world's breadth to their size by not collecting 'anything'.

Attacking one of the twins is futile if the other half remains unharmed. This applies to both physical and mental attacks.

+

"....."

So, if the vampire parasitizes, the twins coexist.

Is the former a [Dealer] and the latter a [Tanker]?

"I have no choice."

Then, The White one and The Black one, if I strike both twins at the same time, that should do it.

I instantly extended the shadow of my holy sword. The four swords that unfolded were the power held by the [Goddess of Protection], the sister swords. Whisk! While dealing with The White one, I leisurely sent the remaining swords with my swordsmanship towards The Black one.

"Ah!"

The White one's eyes widened. Even if the wounds were

nullified, The White one's martial arts themselves weren't impressive. The White one couldn't stop my shadow swords cutting through the air.

"No!!"

"....."

Seeing the four swords rushing towards her, The Black one did not move an inch. She just watched with a gentle smile. There was a reason for that.

"O Tower."

The last remaining party member of the enemy, [The Noble of Dry Fingerprints], closed his fan.

"Fulfill the promise."

His voice, laden with aura, echoed momentarily.

[The Noble of Dry Fingerprints requests a covenant with the

tower.]

[Sanctuary designated.]

[Approved.]

[From this moment, this place belongs to the Noble of Dry Fingerprints.]

The Crocodile Gentleman shouted in a telepathic voice in desperation.

"I have nothing to do with this!"

[Joint ownership has been recognized.]

A curtain spread on the table blocked my attack for a moment. Chiang! One of the four swords was deflected. Three remained. The sister swords flew through the gap created by their deflected comrade.

It was at that moment that the Noble's power was activated.

[He who is resented and despised, worship him.]

My swords sliced through The Black one's body.

Clearly, they cut through.

"Hic?! Th— ugh, aaaaaah!!"

But the one who screamed wasn't The Black one.

"Ahah, ugh... aaaaaah....."

It was The White one.

Right before me, The White one, who had been swinging his fist, suddenly knelt down and wrapped his arms around himself. Thud. Blood flowed from parts I hadn't cut.

I realized that all those wounds were exactly where The Black one should have been injured.

"Indeed."

I took a step back.

"There's no need to request an exposure from Hisimet Cretsu."

And I raised my hand to retrieve the sister swords.

"Is it damage transfer?"

"That's right."

[The Noble of Dry Fingerprints] spread his fan.

"I can transfer the wounds one has received to another. If it's justified, that is."

"It's interesting. It's never justifiable to shift wounds onto others."



"I see it differently."

The Noble glared at The White one.

"Uh, black....."

The White one was still groaning, holding his wounds. But the Noble's eyes, looking at The White one, were filled with the same hatred as when he looked at me.

"It's your fault. It's all because of you."

"Ah...?"

"If you had stopped the King of Death, your other half wouldn't have been slashed. There would have been no danger to your other half. It's because you're powerless, because you're weak. Wretched. Despicable. Born lacking. Thus, everything is your fault. If blood must flow here, it must only be yours."

"....."

The sharp words ruthlessly stabbed The White one.

The White one, with a stunned face, looked up at his other half.

"It's okay."

The Black one was gently smiling.

"You're not to blame."

"Ah....."

"Everything is the fault of this King of Death who attacks us. You just wanted to protect me. You wanted to protect us. You're not at fault at all."

A few words healed the wounds.

New flesh sprouted, swallowing the blood.

The White one, as if never fallen, stood up with quiet hostility in his eyes.

"....."

I looked around.

The Reddest Sommelier.

The Eternal Dance of the Twins.

The Noble of Dry Fingerprints.

A complete dealer, a complete tanker, and a perfect supporter.

"Oh dear, didn't I say so, young man?"

The Crocodile Gentleman spun his staff like a stage clown.

"Do you understand what it means to face three Constellations at once? Remember? Although you realize now, it's too late. Just fall from the night sky and loathe your foolish past."

"Indeed."

I nodded.

"Facing Constellations determined to attack together is not easy. I was slightly impressed."

"That's good! Falling in despair is better than losing in admiration, at least it provides some self-satisfaction."

"However, it was wrong to say there are three Constellations."

"Hmm?"

The Crocodile Gentleman blinked.

"What do you mean?"

"You don't know me well, Sommelier. My specialty isn't one-on-one duels."

I gripped the holy sword.

"Since the days of slaying Demon Kings, I've been good at winning gr

oup fights."

Light flowed from the blade.

[The Goddess of Protection requests a covenant with the tower.]

The Crocodile Gentleman had his mouth agape in shock, but that brief gasp did nothing to halt me—or rather, 'us'.

[Sanctuary designated.]

[Approved.]

The Tower's voice boomed.

[From this moment, this place belongs to the Goddess of Protection.]

# Chapter 339: Blood and Wine (3)

---

The Goddess of Protection is composed of five fragments.

Those pieces now emitted light around me.

[She is the worshiped one,]

The Idol Sword.

The Goddess is always revered by the people. She bears it. She is the one who is expected. The one who must meet those expectations. The one who must proudly hold her head high until the end of the world.

For she is a monarch.

[She is the compassionate one,]

## The Pity Sword.

The Goddess always understands the wounds of the people. She takes them in. Even if her flesh is not wounded, her heart is pockmarked with injuries of others, storing nameless screams in her heart.

For she is a monarch.

[She is the tester,]

## The Prayer Sword.

The Goddess always makes judgments. She selects. She tests whether those who petition her hold sincerity. Whether they whisper falsehoods to deceive. To ensure that genuine pleas are never buried under false accusations.

For she is a monarch.

[She is the sacrificer,]



## The Sacrifice Sword.

The Goddess always suffers. She volunteers. As her time is devoured, others' time flourishes, and as her pain deepens, others' lives brighten. Meaningless suffering is not permitted for her.

For she is a monarch.

[She is the savior,]

## The Salvation Sword.

The Goddess always saves others. She forsakes herself. She places parts of herself she wished to protect, her tastes, pleasures, preferences, aesthetics, on the cold scales. On the other side of that scale are others. Other people. To elevate others, she continuously lowers herself. She must lower herself.

Thus.

[Worship her.]

She is a monarch.

[The Goddess of Protection manifests.]

My sword shone brightly.

Someone screamed.

It was the Crocodile Gentleman.

"Five? More than the four promised sayings?"

The gentleman widened his eyes in disbelief, staring at me as if he couldn't believe it.

"It can't be! Impossible! The Goddess of Protection... Hwiya must have been the constellation first torn apart by the Constellation Killer! It must have been divided into five pieces!"

A cry of astonishment leaked between the crocodile's large teeth.

"Even if you somehow collected and assembled the fragments, the final piece would still remain! The last fragment was still with the Constellation Killer! How on earth did you manage to obtain the sword of the Constellation Killer...?!"

Indeed.

Kim Yul had knelt before me long ago, yet the Crocodile Gentleman was completely unaware of this fact. Perhaps it was only natural. There would only be a few constellations that could know this, like the [Ruin-Harvesting Cow] that had seen through my past or the [Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth] that had read my information.

"It's a trick... Yes! It's a trick! King of Death! You were not only the King of Death but also the King of Necromancy! But such tricks won't fool us—"

"I have never played nor allowed games with my existence."

A voice interrupted the Crocodile Gentleman's words.

It wasn't mine.

"It's been a while."

Light leaking from the holy sword twisted and formed a shape. Radiance filled the area. Somehow, the light wasn't blinding, instead, one could keep watching it indefinitely.

Crackle! Crunch. The light intensified. Not only the holy sword I held but also the Pity, Prayer, Sacrifice, and Salvation, the four shadow swords, shattered into light and were sucked in.

"It has been a long time since I have manifested fully in one body."

And then, giant wings spread out.

"King of Death."

There were five pairs of wings.

"You are my hero."

A thunderous noise resounded.

A table was blown away as one pair of wings unfolded. Crash! When the second wing unfolded, the walls of the assembly hall shattered. The ceiling split as the third wing spread. The fourth wing stirred a gale, and the fifth, the last wing, covered the skies of this world.

[The Goddess of Protection manifests her authority.]

The angel obscured the sun, and five shadows were cast upon the earth.

"I will fight alongside you."

Those shadows were the authority of the Goddess.

The territory cast by the 'Goddess of Protection.'

A world of shadows, where the sun was ousted, the sky was fended off, and only the white wings reigned as the sole light, had descended here.

"—I refuse!"

The Crocodile Gentleman screamed as if vomiting blood.

"Hwiya! The one who became light in the shadows! The 67th floor doesn't belong to you! It's mine! Ours! [The Eternal Dance of the Twins] and [The Noble of Dry Fingerprints], and me, [The Reddest Sommelier], are the true masters of this place! Your sanctuary will lose its light here!"

The crocodile's outcry wasn't just a desperate act.

[The manager has rejected joint ownership.]

[The Goddess of Protection does not own this place.]

The sky turned blood red.

The sun that illuminated the 66th world twisted away from its familiar form. The sphere that emitted white light suddenly turned black. Line by line, as if a child had colored it with a crayon, it was painted black.

[The Reddest Sommelier manifests his authority.]

A black hole.

Where the sun once was, now only an abyss remained.

"Overflow!"

From the hole, vast like a giant well, gushed a liquid thicker than water and stickier than alcohol. Gurgle! It was blood. Red blood flowed endlessly from the well in the sky.

"Look at it! Every single drop forming this torrent of blood was collected by me! They are my lovely followers!"

The Crocodile Gentleman raised his arms. Drip! Blood poured from the sky.

Blood pooled in the small palm of the crocodile, overflowing through the thick webbing.

"This is my temple! My sanctuary! No one can deny me,"

"Is that so."

The Goddess of Protection folded and then spread her wings horizontally.

Light burst forth.

The white wings, like the cross-guard of a sword, cast shadows as if the body extended straight was a blade.

The flickering sword, the Goddess of Protection Hwiya, spoke.

"Then, I shall cut."

[The Goddess of Protection manifests her authority.]

[The Goddess of Protection is the manager of the 65th and 66th floors.]

Hwiya reached out her hand.



Her fingers, curled like hooks, pointed towards the Crocodile Gentleman.

[The Goddess of Protection invades the 67th floor!]

And then, five rays of light burst from the tips of each fingernail, striking the Crocodile Gentleman.

[This world is not subject to beginner protection.]

[The battle for floor control commences.]

[Currently, a battle for control is underway between The World of the Lone Child - The World of the Silver-Lily - The World of the Moonlit Night and The World of the Banquet - The World of Ying and Yang - The World of Demonic Realm.]

"Arghhhhh!"

The crocodile screamed.

The five rays of light carved into his body, like fissures in the

earth spewing lava, were [squeezing] out the crimson wine from the crocodile's body.

"The souls are dense."

The Goddess of Protection remarked.

"Only beings capable of ruthlessly sucking the essence from the heart can squeeze out such blood. Even a beast that eats flesh would feel compassion for its hairless young, and even a scaled beast would stop hunting when satiated, yet."

[The Reddest Sommelier's existence becomes faint.]

"You were no more than an insect."

[The Reddest Sommelier's existence becomes faint.]

"Damn it, damn it! Being betrayed and split by humans you chose yourself! A trash that couldn't even handle an unheard-of lower constellation!"

"Yes. I was such a being."

Hwiya calmly accepted and let go of the crocodile's scream.

As if a master swordsman deflecting an opponent's strike.

"But before that, I was a founding monarch who established an empire."

The deflected blade, like a butterfly, whirled around, spun, and struck the crocodile's shoulder three times.

"Aaagh!"

[The Reddest Sommelier's existance becomes faint.]

[The Reddest Sommelier's existance becomes faint.]

"Stop!!"

Startled by the sudden turn of events, the allies of 'The Reddest Sommelier' sprang into action.

The Noble of Dry Fingerprints shouted at the Twins.

"It's your fault! Why are you frozen? If you had fulfilled your role properly, 'The Reddest Sommelier' wouldn't have been injured like—"

"Is that really so?"

Of course.

The Goddess of Protection also had allies.

Swoosh!

"There's a simple weakness to [skills that activate upon targeting someone]."

The constellations widened their eyes.

In the blink of an eye, my fist was racing through the air.

"Go ahead, try scooping out rainwater with both hands."

My fist plunged directly into the crocodile's stomach. Boom!

The vibration pierced through the crocodile's body and spread like a wave in the surrounding air.

Droplets of blood were mixed into the formless wave.

"Kuh, hah...!"

"Your stomach is sturdy. It's not punctured yet."

I swung my fist again.

"It shouldn't be like this. It's embarrassing."

Thump!

The same blood that was scattered around stained my knuckles.

"As the owner of Hwiya, I should at least be able to match Hwiya."

Once more, I delivered a punch.

"Keugh, eugh...!"

A hole was punctured in the crocodile's stomach.

Thus, even if the Noble of Dry Fingerprints transferred the damage inflicted by Hwiya's sword strikes to the crocodile, the amount of wine gushing from the crocodile would not decrease.

[The Reddest Sommelier's existence becomes faint.]

[The Reddest Sommelier's existence becomes faint.]

[The Reddest Sommelier's existence becomes faint...]

"Ah,"

The sky opened up.

As more wine burst from the crocodile's belly, blood gushed from the hole in the sky. Like a broken sewer during the rainy season, the blood gurgled continuously.

[The Reddest Sommelier can no longer maintain his authority.]

A small crocodile, swept away by the crimson flood, might have been the final fate of the sommelier.

[Initiating rank adjustment.]

[The Reddest Sommelier's alias has been revoked.]

[The quest on the 67th floor has been cleared!]

[The result of the floor control battle has been updated.]

[The 67th floor is now under the control of The Goddess of Protection!]

Good.

I turned my head. There, the goddess floated. We exchanged glances, with the crocodile's shed skin between us.

"Hwiya."

"Yes, hero."

That was the end of our conversation.

I dashed towards the left. Hwiya flew to the right.

Only the crocodile's shed skin remained in the middle, swallowed by the crimson flood and swept away somewhere.

"...Ah!"



At the end of the space where Hwiya flew, stood the White one.

At the end of my path stood the Black one.

"If attacking one side is meaningless,"

I threw a punch towards the Black one.

"Then attack both sides simultaneously."

Hwiya swung her wings at the White one.

[The Noble of Dry Fingerprints manifests his authority!]

Though the Noble of Dry Fingerprints tried to transfer the simultaneous damage with damage transfer—

[The manager has rejected joint ownership.]

[The Noble of Dry Fingerprints does not own this place.]

Just as the crocodile did, the Goddess of Protection, now the manager of this floor, repelled that authority.

"Damn it,"

[The Noble of Dry Fingerprints invades the 67th floor!]

"Too late."

One step ahead, collisions occurred on both sides of the battlefield.

It was a fight that was disadvantageous for the Twins from the start. The Twins were merely performing the role of a tank. Their martial prowess was not remarkable.

On the opposite side, Hwiya swung her multiple pairs of wings simultaneously.

Striking down.

The White one was shattered to pieces.

"It's okay."

The Black one, facing me, spoke to the White one.

"You're okay."

Even as I approached, the Black one did not resist. Perhaps he lacked the ability to resist. The Black one's focus was solely on the other half.

"You're okay. As long as I'm here. You are...."

"Right."

I swung my fist.

"As long as you are here, that is."

The storm of punches struck.

The Black one was fully exposed to my attack. Unable to continue saying he was okay, his shoulder and chin were hit.

With the Black one's words gone, there was no one left to negate the damage to the White one.

"Aaaaah!"

The White one fell first. Unable to deny the accumulated damage and the wounds that could no longer be negated, the White one finally fell. Splashing! Into the blood-red surface of the water, which now extended to the horizon, the White one helplessly collapsed.

The fate of the Black one was no different.

"Ah...."

The Black one collapsed onto a rock, body shattered by my punches.

"To grit your teeth and rise again is an incredible feat."

I looked down at the Black one.

However, the Black one's gaze was not directed at me. Below the fluttering wings of Hwiya, it was towards the White one dimly submerged in the water. It gazed continuously towards its kther half.

"Each time, if you had become a little stronger, I wouldn't have won today. But instead of chewing, you spat it out. That's all."

"....."

The Black one smiled faintly. Finally, the Black one turned its head, its eyes lacking focus and pupils, filled with nothing but darkness, and looked up at me.

"Some people in this world cannot become stronger."

I nodded silently.

Without a word.

After a moment, the Black one spoke again.

"You guys can become stronger."

Its lips held a smile.

"Die. All of you."

That was the curse left by the Twins' constellation to the world.

[The Eternal Dance of the Twins's becomes faint.]

[Initiating rank adjustment.]

[The Eternal Dance of the Twins's alias has been revoked.]

The bodies of the Black and White ones simultaneously

disintegrated into specks, turning to ash. Where the Black one had lain, a one-winged parrot raised its head.

[The quest on the 68th floor has been cleared!]

[Updating the result of the floor control battle...]

Yes.

I turned to face the last remaining constellation.

"You!"

The Noble of Dry Fingerprints was furious.

But his anger was futile.

As proven in classic games, a lone support left behind can do nothing but quietly take a portal.

A support refusing to take the portal only ends up highlighting their name on the scoreboard.

The Noble of Dry Fingerprints must have understood this fate as well.

Still, he glared at me with eyes burning with hatred. Splashing, splashing. The sound of blood splattering as I approached him, and Hwiya flying in from behind, everything reflected in his eyes seemed hateful.

"There is no constellation left for you to pass your damage onto."

The Noble of Dry Fingerprints looked at Hwiya.

[The Noble of Dry Fingerprints manifests his authority.]

[The Goddess of Protection refuses.]

[The authority has been nullified.]



Perhaps, the Noble of Dry Fingerprints attempted to transfer the damage he was about to receive to Hwiya, but this process required the consent of the other party.

Naturally, Hwiya refused.

The Noble of Dry Fingerprints glared at me.

[The Noble of Dry Fingerprints manifests his authority.]

[The Noble of Dry Fingerprints has chosen you to bear the damage he is about to receive.]

[Do you accept the choice?]

I shook my head.

[The authority has been nullified.]

The Noble of Dry Fingerprints gnashed his teeth.

"You must understand me."

"....."

"It's not my fault. It's not a mistake. It's your fault, yours and the tower's. Everything is rightfully so. Therefore, you must understand my situation."

I reached out my hand.

Gradually, Hwiya disintegrated.

The five pairs of wings detached one by one, turning into five swords. The five swords merged again, condensing into one holy sword.

"No."

I grasped the hilt of the holy sword.

"Your presence in the tower is already proof that the Tower Master has understood you."

"You dare—"

"Enough. More than enough."

The sword traced an arc.

Something heavy plunged into the crimson water with a splash.

[The Noble of Dry Fingerprints's existence becomes faint.]

[Initiating rank adjustment.]

['The Noble of Dry Fingerprints's alias has been

revoked.]

A chicken fluttered on the water's surface where a heavy object had fallen. It was a chicken with a red comb. The chicken, dyeing its white feathers red, swam past my feet.

Thus.

[The quest on the 69th floor has been cleared!]

[Updating the result of the floor control battle...]

The alliance of the three constellations fell under my blade.

[You have earned the right to challenge the 70th floor.]

The path to the seventieth stage was now open.

# Chapter 340:

## Absolute Music (1)

---

[You are being transferred immediately to the 70th floor as per your request.]

I was engulfed in a sandstorm without hesitation.

[You have entered the 70th stage.]

The scent of sand, heated by the sun since the dawn of time, lingered at the tip of my nose.

The smell of the sun.

During my childhood, in a meager playground where we played, there was a languid scent that emanated from the palm upon a sudden glance. The fragrant loam. The heated body and mind from the recent decisive battle calmed down.

There was also a message I hadn't heard in a while.

[The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages blesses your ascent.]

Had she been watching my battle from somewhere?

Imagining the Princess lounging on a sofa, munching on potato chips while watching, brought a smile to my face.

"You're at ease, judging by your expression."

Before me stood another Pillar.

[The Staff of Time Immemorial] was sitting there.

"It's been quite some time since a challenger has shown up in the lobby that I manage. The one who backed you up, the Sword Emperor, when he came up here, he wasn't as composed as you..."

The mage furrowed his brows.

"...No. He was even more carefree than you. Perhaps it's such individuals who succeed in ascending."

"I'm curious. What kind of expression did he have?"

"The kind that asked if guests don't get offered a drink here. He actually said that, with some rather innovative swear words, but I won't go into those details."

I clicked my tongue and glanced back at the Guardian Spirit, who gave a "what?" kind of look.

-I don't remember doing that. Of course, as soon as I entered here, I thought it seemed quite unremarkable, to the point where it seemed there wouldn't be anything worth getting, but anyway, I never said that.

"Of course, the Sword Emperor himself wouldn't be able to recall."

The mage spoke as if he heard the Guardian Spirit's grumbling. He probably didn't actually hear it. He possessed the intelligence to preemptively predict things that weren't audible, taking it for granted.

"It's not just the Sword Emperor whose memories were stripped away. Everyone who meets us Pillars for the first time in the tower loses their memory. Even the memory that a stage auction just took place fades quickly."

"....."

"That's right, King of Death. Except for you."

The mage leaned on his long staff.

The 70th floor was a white world without mountains or rivers. However, it differed from the [Purely White Waiting Room] where the Princess had stayed. Sssrrrk... Large and small cubes turned as if they were Rubik's cubes.

Some cubes were as large as the moon, while others were smaller than a fist.

Sssk. The cubes moved continuously, meshing like gears. The cubes blended with the white background, protruded with sharp angles, and then disappeared into whiteness again.

Just like that, gathering for a moment before returning. The



simple cycle repeated eternally was the celestial and physical body of this world.

"What do you desire from me?"

"The one who wished for oblivion was the Tower Master."

The mage started from the east and groped his way to the west.

"The Tower Master, Jaa Soo-Jeong, the Amethyst wanted the tower to be entirely yours. Or at least, she wanted you to believe so. It's better if the traces of the administrator don't show."

"For someone with such intentions, you send us blessings via messages every time we climb a stage."

The mage smirked wryly.

"Selfish, isn't it? The Viscountess can't stand not letting you know that someone is by your side. A god wants to exist only when you need them, that's the nature of it."

Cubes moved slowly behind the mage.

"I can't save the Tower Master."

"....."

"Everyone chosen as a Pillar is the same. In a way, what the Constellation Killer is to you, we are to the Tower Master. We owe a debt. We leaned on her for our lives. All we can do is help the Tower Master. Zuraqua... everyone born in the same world as the Tower Master, the kingdom, are bound by fetters."

The mage looked at me.

"But."

"It's different for someone who comes from outside."

I had guessed what the mage was about to say.

"Like the Sword Emperor. Like me."

"Exactly."

Silver eyes sank.

"King of Death, it's not that I don't erase your memory. I can't. You've earned that status and authority on your own. If you wait a thousand years, ten thousand years, until a million years decay and ten million years pass, there will come a human who will ascend to the 99th floor. Plenty of times. Someday, even the 100th floor will be broken, but a being who acquires a position like yours, it's uncertain when it will be allowed again."

"....."

"You are a miracle. You sprouted from a gap created by the Princess, through a seam woven by Mutia and Hisimet Cretsu, nourished by the rain Hamusutra provided. You caught the loophole in the web spun by the Tower Master. And I have no intention of waiting for the miracle of life to bloom in the universe once more."

I asked again.

"What do you desire from me?"

"Only what you will come to desire."

It was at that moment.

The mage lifted his staff and touched the void. A corner of a cube that had popped out from the white background was touched by the staff.

"Up until now, you have fought in your [specialization] area."

The cube was dyed in color.

The cube, turned yellow, had its sharp edges worn away. No, they melted. It seemed like paint flowing out of a balloon pricked by a scale.

Unlike the balloon, the cube's capacity was infinite.

"From now on, you will have to struggle in [non-specialized] areas."

The yellow paint melted down, wetting the floor.

First, at the feet of the mage.

Then, across my shadow.

"The areas you haven't been particularly interested in until now."

And to the horizon.

The ground beneath was dyed bright yellow.

The yellow was more gentle than gold and as soft as a wheat field.

"A Constellation of martial arts doesn't mean it's only worshiped by warriors."

Walking on the color of wheat grains, the mage looked down.

"Even a merchant who has lived a life completely detached from martial arts might find himself in a dark alley fighting a

robber. A musician chasing love might duel with a rival. Music, medicine, magic, academia, agriculture, commerce, navigation..."

Human figures were reflected in the yellow waves. Someone was striking the ground with a pickaxe, while another turned their ship's bow toward an unnamed sea. Tiiing! There was also a man plucking the strings of a violin-like instrument.

"These are the professions you must be willing to reach out to if you wish to become a Constellation."

"Well, to put it grandly, that's it. Simply put, these are non-professional, amateur fields for you."

The corners of the mage's mouth twitched slightly.

I realized belatedly that it was a smile.

"So, whether you've cleared the stage or not, naturally, we need to call in an [expert] to judge, right?"

The mage struck the ground with his staff.

Whoosh!

Light burst forth, and a vague silhouette formed within it.

"Hmm?"

It was the shape of a person.

"Uh? Hmm? Uh-uh-uh----"

Perhaps they were in the middle of a meal. Someone summoned by the mage appeared still sitting, and with a metallic clang! they bruised their buttocks.

"Ouch! Oh, this is, what. Is it the Black Dragon Witch? Or the Heretic Inquisitor? It's troublesome to summon me like this without an invitation."

What was notable was the remarkably stable falling technique. Despite being suddenly summoned and falling in an entirely unprepared motion, that person immediately rolled on the ground and stood up.

And then our eyes met.

"Oh?"

"Yikes."

Both the other party and I knew each other all too well.

"What is it, Kim Gong-Ja? Did you summon me? I didn't know you had learned summoning spells."

The polished armor shone brightly.

There was only one acquaintance I knew who wore armor in everyday life.

"...Patricia?"

"That's right. I was worried for nothing. I thought some emergency had arisen, and I was summoned in haste, so I was momentarily tense."



It was indeed the Paladin.

"And for the record, Kim Gong-Ja, you're the only friend who didn't make a Patrasche joke after knowing my real name."

"Uh, this might not fit the current situation, but I'll ask anyway. What is that?"

"What...? You don't know Patrasche?"

The Paladin looked shocked.

"Are you in your right mind?"

"Why do I have to be treated like this..."

"This is serious. It's a sign of the end of the world. Kim Gong-Ja, what exactly do you know? What were you born to know? And you call yourself a representative hunter of our tower? I suggest you deeply reflect on your life. After reflecting, watch [A Dog of Flanders] and cry. The reason you have tear ducts is precisely for that."

"Okay. Now I'm certain this isn't the conversation we should be having in this situation."

One thing was clear. Even after meeting after a long time, we didn't ask about each other's well-being but questioned each other's sanity, indicating that our relationship was 360% friendly.

Why 360%? Well, because it came full circle.

"King of Death."

While Patricia and I were puzzled, [The Staff of Time Immemorial] spoke up.

"I'll tell you the quest you need to solve from the 70th floor."

Both of us turned to look at the mage.

"Make that person your believer."

"....."

"From the 71st to the 79th floor, one person per stage. In total, you need to recruit at least 9 followers. That's your first mission as a Constellation."

The mage moved his lips.

This time, it was a clear smile.

"A Constellation without believers doesn't exist."

The people fell silent.

-Indeed. I understand everything perfectly!

In other words, the ghost, rather than the people, was a bit noisy.

-That explains why those Sword Emperor Sect folks clung to me. Huh? If a religion worshiping me as a god were to be established, I would have personally stormed in and destroyed it, saying, "Hey, brats, why are you turning a perfectly alive person into a ghost on an altar?"

'But you are a ghost, aren't you?'

-Not at all! I wasn't!

The Guardian Spirit snorted.

-I knew something was off. I thought it was just because I was so awesome that people naturally started worshipping me. Tsk. Now it seems I was going through this quest from the 70th to the 80th floor without realizing it.

‘Huh?’

-Yeah, yeah. That pillar or whatever said, [Memories will be erased]. I had a strange feeling that my memories were distorted after clearing the stages. In the end, I successfully created followers, leading to the birth of the Sword Emperor Sect, but I conveniently forgot the process itself.

It sounded plausible.

While the origin story of the Sword Emperor Sect was inadvertently revealed, [The Staff of Time Immemorial] opened its lips.

"Originally, the 70th to 80th floors were extremely difficult hurdles. In most cases, hunters of the tower, just like the challenger are chosen as examiners, and usually, the challenger doesn't get along with those hunters. They're desperate to fail them."

"Haah..."

"Even the most skilled hunters usually fail here. Or they wander here for hundreds of years. But maybe things will be different for the King of Death."

Indeed.

The mage also explained the stage's gimmick to the Paladin. At first, the Paladin tilted her head, not understanding, but soon she grasped the whole picture.

"In short, if I worship Kim Gong-Ja as a god, the 71st floor will be easily cleared."

The mage nodded.

"That's right, child."

"Does worshipping a Constellation require any special conditions? For example, do I need to worship from the depths of my heart, sincerely, or offer my soul, and only then can it be said that I [worship]?"

"No. If the King of Death struggles on the 71st floor and you [acknowledge that's enough], then it's over."

"Good."

The Paladin turned to look at me.

"Gong-Ja."

"Yes."

"Take a good look at my face."

As always, her expression was very serious.

"My name is Patricia. Right now... I am the human who will make you a god."

"I appreciate it."

What's with this?

"I don't ask for anything from you. Go to the 71st floor and live as you wish. Or, just breathe. Breathing should be something anyone can do without failing. It's okay. I will make you a god."

Why, despite the serious expression and tone, does this make me want to po

ke her in the chest and start a squabble right away?

"Even if you do something stupid... I will accept you as a god. Because that too is a form of god."

"Did we really become friends after all this time?"

The first candidate for a follower was quite extraordinary.

# Chapter 341:

## Absolute Music (2)

---

"Alright, let's leave the chit-chat there."

A staff wedged itself between the Paladin and me. Turning my head, I saw the [Staff of Time Immemorial] looking at me impassively.

"Listen to the final explanation before you ascend to the 71st floor."

"Ah, yes."

"King of Death, the world you are about to enter is already dominated by Constellations. However, it's different from before. You have no need to fight the Constellations."

I tilted my head in confusion.



"Why? Are they good Constellations?"

"Well, to be precise, it's not that you 'can't fight' them. Until now, you've only met Constellations with personalities. Relatively, Constellations that are close to human forms. But from the 71st to the 79th floor, [Constellations without personalities] reign."

Without personalities.

"Are they like objects or plants, then?"

"Something like that. You could say they are the laws of the world itself. The important thing is that you have no way to fight those Constellations. Unless you've reached the realm where you can freely wield the Sword Heart, it's not possible."

"....."

"I specifically summoned this knight among your comrades for a simple reason. The 71st floor is, how should I put it, a world dominated by music. It's what you'd call a Heaven of Music."

"Hoh."

The first to react to the word 'music' was Patricia.

"Indeed, I must be the right person for the job. Not to brag, but I am among the most excellent musicians in our tower. My concert was sold out this time as well. An excellent choice."

Patricia crossed her arms and looked confidently at the [Staff of Time Immemorial].

The reason for her confident gaze... I wasn't quite sure. Ever since she started performing jazz again, Patricia had become much, much more liberated than before.

"I don't see why you're bragging to me. Anyway, yes. King of Death, you will also become a musician in the Heaven of Music and live on."

"Do I have to be a musician?"

"There's no freedom of career choice. In the Heaven of Music, every being is a musician. Don't think that every world will be as free and vibrant as your neighborhood."

What a harsh world.

"Even though I've learned a bit of piano from Patricia, I'm still a complete beginner..."

"Most Hunters are like that. Outside their field of expertise, they're all amateurs."

The mage looked as if wondering what the problem was.

"That's why so many Hunters despair in the 70th floor region, right?"

".....Indeed. You have a point."

"Don't worry, Kim Gong-Ja."

Patricia patted me on the shoulder.

"Didn't I say? Even if you show the most embarrassing side of yourself, I plan to stamp a pass without any conditions. Unless it's a Blood Fire Play. It's practically impossible for you

to move me with ordinary music anyway. Relax your mind."

"That was oddly offensive."

"One should be humble about their talents... For example, Kim Gong-Ja, one could say you lack talent in fashion. Your leather fetish is quite severe."

"I don't want to hear that from someone who wears armor 365 days a year?! Besides, this style was designated by Anastasia! Don't complain to me!"

"Indeed."

The mage nodded deeply.

"You and your friend could chat endlessly if left alone. I'll have to send you by force."

Squish, the ground beneath my feet gave way.

[The Staff of Time Immemorial is transporting you.]

Looking down, my feet were sinking into a floor that swayed like yellow paint.

"Uh? Wh-What?"

"Off you go."

I sank up to my waist in an instant. Right before I was completely submerged, Patricia urgently shouted at me.

"Kim Gong-Ja! Even if you lack talent in fashion, I don't mind!"

"Patricia....."

"Because you also lack talent in your face. Your fashion and face are a perfect match."

"Let's see each other after clearing the 71st floor."

And then I fell through the bottom.

[You have entered the 71st stage.]

[You are stepping into a place where you should not be.]

[A certain penalty has been given.]

I opened my eyes.

It was a village that seemed like it could come to mind when one thinks of 'heaven,' resembling a fairy-tale elf kingdom painted in watercolor.

It was very quiet.

And deathly still.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth manifests his authority.]

[General information about this stage is revealed to you.]

It was the first time I set foot in this world, but there was no inconvenience in gathering information. The supreme Constellation Hisimet Cretsu had submitted to me, after all.

Before I could take a second breath of this world's air, texts appeared.

+

[Heaven of Music]

Floor: 71st

Constellation: The Maestro Singing of Heaven

Difficulty: B~A+

Description (Lv.1): Everything in this world revolves around music. If you wish to buy something, you must 'play music' for the seller. The better the music, the higher the price, and the worse the music, the lower the price.

The nutrients consumed by the inhabitants of this world are also solely music. Waking up in the morning and listening to music fills them with nutrients, and not hearing music for a week leads to starvation. Currency. Food. Power.

Think of everything as being made of music.

+

Everything made of music.

'It's much more convenient than before.'

After taking Hisimet Cretsu as my subordinate, the trouble with gathering information disappeared. Is this why the Constellations so feared having their authority taken away? Even I, who am a newcomer in the Constellation realm, am growing unstoppably.

'Now, how to strategize... Hm?'

It was while I was planning my route in my mind.



[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth manifests his authority.]

[Exposure.]

A new message arrived, slightly different this time.

[You have not met the conditions to acquire hidden information.]

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth forcibly satisfies the conditions!]

[Hidden information has been revealed!]

Wriggle, wriggle!

The letters that appeared in front of me suddenly decomposed and reassembled. Like black worms wriggling their bodies, the characters changed into new meanings.

[Heaven of Music]

Floor: 71st

Constellation: The Maestro Singing of Heaven

Difficulty: B~B+

Description (Lv.2): Not every Hunter enjoys the fortune of living for hundreds of years. Some die. Many people die. Have you ever thought about where the souls of those who die in the tower go?

This is the heaven where the souls of those who have died in the tower arrive. The afterlife. The so-called underworld of the tower.

+

I blinked my eyes. What?

"The underworld?"

Astonishment blossomed in my mouth, and my tongue stiffened. But regardless of my surprise, Hisimet Cretsu continued to embroider the characters. The thread snake coiled around my wrist, flicking its tail.

The torrent of information did not stop.

+

There are nine levels of the underworld in the tower.

They are known as the Nine Heavens.

Even if the humans of the tower die, if they wish to remain somewhere instead of disappearing completely, they will wander the Nine Heavens. The heaven which they will wander in is entirely dependent on the hunter's last wish.

This is the 71st floor.

The first heaven. The Heaven of Music.

+

At that moment, as the information continued,

"■■■■!"

The characters suddenly stirred. The thread snake flicked its tongue. Then, it raised its head high and glared into the void.

Hisimet Cretsu seemed stressed, to say the least. I wondered why it was suddenly trying to bite at the empty air, but the reason soon became clear.

[You have not met the conditions to acquire hidden information.]

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth forcibly satisfies the conditions!]

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth forcibly satisfies the conditions!]

I grasped the situation. Something invisible was interfering with Hisimet Cretsu's authority.

Whether it was interference from the system or obstruction by the Constellation governing this stage, I couldn't yet tell. But Hisimet Cretsu was not at all diminished in vigor. "■■! ■■!" It bared its teeth, threatening that something.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth forcibly satisfies the conditions!]

[You have earned the right to view hidden information.]

[Hidden information is revealed!]

Finally, the turmoil among the characters settled.

Hisimet Cretsu snorted, as if saying 'How dare something so insignificant try to block me?' Then, as if boasting that its existence was now far more valuable than the [Goddess of Protection], it displayed the characters.

[Heaven of Music]

Floor: 71st

Constellation: The Maestro Singing of Heaven

Difficulty: B

Description (Lv.3): Heaven of Music. The heaven where souls tired of life, weary of language, and nauseated by conversation arrive.

Now, they no longer believe in the language between people. They do not attempt to approach each other, and if they do, it is only through music.

Everything that breathes life in this place possesses a soul. The dandelion ruling over the lowest heaven. The narcissus bowing its head. The stickleback enjoying a footbath in the shade of a rock by the stream. Every living being is merely a reincarnated soul.

They have forgotten the memories of their past lives. Sometimes, maybe always, as they dream, memories of their

past lives rise like dim fog, swimming through it.

In this Heaven of Music, where music echoes, the weary souls will be soothed.

Forever, if they wish.

+

Indeed.

"....."

I looked around.

It was eerily quiet.

Under the tranquil sky, birds did not form flocks but scattered individually, flying in whichever direction they wished. According to the information revealed by the [Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth], these were also souls.

My head throbbed.

‘...Even the afterlife is arranged in the tower.’

Reincarnation was everywhere.

Flowers lined both sides of the dirt road leading to the village. Stark white hydrangeas. Buddha's head flowers sat in meditation in a row, silently chanting mantras.

‘Not a single person has been overlooked by the Tower Master. Not a single one.’

There were many white flowers.

White didn't pick seasons.

The Buddha's head flowers clasped their petals together, and behind them, acacias bowed their heads. White daffodils nibbled at the sky with their fingertips. The cherry tree, like a grown fingernail, shaved off its petals and tossed them into the void.



Those wanting to shed their color were erasing their past lives.

‘...But I don't hear any music.’

I pressed down on my uneasy heart and thought differently.

‘Isn't it too quiet?’

Since arriving on the 71st floor, I hadn't heard any sound. Strangely, it was silent. Even when Hisimet Cretsu had roared earlier, only silent vibrations were transmitted to my wrist.

-Huh? Quiet?

The Guardian Spirit tilted its head in confusion.

-What are you talking about? It's almost too noisy for me.

‘What?’

I stepped on the dirt road. Though the world was silent, where I needed to head was clear. In the middle of the village, far down the road, a tree large enough to cover the sky was growing.

Perhaps it could be called the World Tree.

The villages clung tightly to the massive trunk of the tree, much like layers of bracket fungi.

When I enhanced my vision with Aura and looked closer, I saw people and animals like deer and giraffes mingling without issue, moving up and down a large staircase made of wood at the center of the tree. Not all souls were reincarnated as plants.

-Even the chirping of birds is one thing, but the flowers are singing too.

‘What?’

-If you look closely, even the insects are whispering songs. Of course, I admit it's a magnificent choir. If you listen quietly, it seems like it could bring peace to the mind. But personally, this stage isn't really to my taste... No, wait. Kim Zombie, you really can't hear anything? Nothing at all?

"....."

Could it be?

I opened my mouth.

I moved my tongue and tried to emit a high note, "Aaah."

"....."

No sound was heard.

I moved my Aura to supplement my hearing. I wrapped the organs responsible for human hearing in Aura once more, making sure there were no gaps, and perfectly supplemented my hearing. Then, I made a sound with my mouth again.

"....."

Still, no sound was heard.

It wasn't that my hearing was broken, but rather, as if the very sense of hearing had been deleted.

‘Damn it.’

I realized what the message [A certain penalty has been given] meant, which came to mind right after I fell into the 71st-floor stage. Why even Hisimet Cretsu's roar sounded like ■■ to me.

‘I... I can't hear anything here!’

To clear a world made of music without sound.

And to win over the heart of Patricia, a musician, and make her a believer.

This was the penalty given to me.

# Chapter 342:

## Absolute Music (3)

---

-It was truly a stroke of luck.

Guardian Spirit clicked his tongue in disapproval.

- Just imagine, Zombie. If you hadn't managed your relationships well. Think about it. If things weren't great between you and the Paladin, you would've been immediately out of this stage, completely out. How would you succeed in the world of music without being able to hear?

"Indeed..."

I trudged towards the World Tree Village. The village was incredibly picturesque. Having traveled through many worlds and seen all sorts of landscapes, the fairytale-like view of the village built around the World Tree was still a marvel to me.

"■? ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■?"

I encountered a villager along the way. The resident waved and smiled at me. Despite being a stranger, I felt no hostility from them, perhaps because in this paradise, the concept of hostility towards each other seemed non-existent.

"Uh... um."

The problem was that I couldn't hear a word they were saying.

I opened my mouth to speak.

"Ah, hello?"

".....?"

The villager tilted their head in confusion.

"■■ ■■■■ ■■■■■ ■■■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■? ■■■ ■■■  
■■■■■■■?"

What are they saying?

I tried my best to enhance my vision and observed the movements of the villager's lips, the twist of their tongue. It seemed like the villager was asking, "Is your voice always like this? Are you unwell?" Probably. I emphasize probably because their pronunciation seemed odd.

"I'm sorry. I have a bit of trouble hearing..."

"....."

The villager made a strange expression, continually tilting their head as if to say, "What a weirdo," before leaving without a word.

Why? What happened?

-Hehehe!

Guardian Spirit was the only one having a blast.

I grimaced.

"Ah, what's so funny? Do you find people who can't speak amusing? Huh? You, who knows nothing but swinging that sword around."

-You, you might not have heard because of your condition. But the villager who greeted you just now, they were singing like they were in a musical when they spoke to you.

So that's why even reading their lips seemed odd.

-And there you were, struggling to speak normally while they kept singing in soprano. Haha! This stage is going to be interesting to watch.

"Damn, you're still as despicable as ever! Forget it. I'm ignoring you."

In essence, this world itself was one giant musical stage.

Dandelions sang, white horses sang, and every villager I passed by sang.

Above all, the source of the grand chorus was the World Tree.



[The Goddess of Protection marvels at the song of the World Tree.]

[A Music Box Just for You acknowledges the spectacle.]

According to the Constellations, each leaf of the World Tree hums softly.

Low notes from the green leaves. High notes from the white blossoms.

Dozens of leaves and flowers come together to form a small harmony on each branch. Several branches unite to create a larger harmony, buzzing together. Thus, as if hundreds of thousands of choirs were murmuring, the entire World Tree sang quietly at times and magnificently at others.

"I can't hear any of it..."

Of course, I had no way to enjoy that overwhelming fairy tale.

"People would talk to me and I'd try lip-reading, but I can't hear anything. What a pity."

-That can't be helped. What will you do now? Your comrade said they'd acknowledge your clearance no matter what kind of spectacle you put on.

"Yes. So I just have to do something..."

At that moment, a slithering serpent wriggled on my wrist.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth informs you that the only meaningful actions in the evil world of music are related to music.]

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth suggests that engaging in musical activities, whatever they may be, might serve as a trigger for the judge to pass you.]

Music, whatever it may be, huh.

"Hmm."

I looked around. The village in the musical heaven was sloped, much like the shantytown I used to live in. Clinging close to the World Tree, it rose in altitude along vast stairs that also served as plazas.

"■■■■■."

"■■■■. ■■■■■ ■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■?"

"■■■ ■■■ ■■■ ■■■■■."

People bustled up and down the stair-plaza, their exchanges likely carrying the melody of songs.

But for residents who found the constant live musical odd or simply disliked conversing with others, instruments were set up at various points along the stairs.

"If any action is truly acceptable..."

I ascended the grand staircase, examining each instrument. Most were unfamiliar to me, belonging to worlds or civilizations unknown... played by humans before their deaths.

"Would a simple music piece suffice?"

Fortunately, I found a piano after a bit of searching.

The instruments had no owners. Anyone could sit and anyone could play. A child was playing the piano, surrounded by younger kids clapping their hands.

"■■■■■ ■■■ ■■■■ ■■ ■■■?"

The child noticed me and spoke.

'Would you like to sit?' They probably meant that.

"■■■ ■■ ■ ■■■ ■■■■."

The language felt like Spanish or French to me. Or it might have been a completely different foreign language, but it was clear it wasn't an alien language. This child died in the tower, thus must have lived in the same world as me.

Though they couldn't remember their past life.

This place, devoid of all but musical instruments from their

former lives, was where only those who wanted to discard everything else ended up.

"Yeah, thanks for letting me."

"■?"

The children murmured upon hearing my voice.

"■■■■■ ■■■■."

"■■■■ ■■■■."

"■■■■■? ■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■ ■■■■."

"■■■■....."

To these people, my voice must indeed sound strange...  
Raviel said she liked the sounds I made...

Hmm.

Indeed.

'It's been too long since I last saw Raviel.'

I sat down at the piano bench.

'I'll play a piece about longing.'

There was no tuning the piano. I couldn't hear anything.

'Well, this is literally the Heaven of Music, so I suppose tuning would sort itself out.'

Six children watched with eager eyes, seated on the stairs. Excluding the Blood Fire Drama, this was my first concert. These kids were my first audience.

I gently pressed the E note.

'Sword Emperor, can you hear the E properly?'

-Huh? How would I know?

'I was a fool to expect anything from you...'

The Sword Emperor seemed to have no intention of becoming my ears. Well, perhaps it was for me to conquer this stage on my own.

Slowly, I began to play.

"■? ■■■ ■■■."

"■■."

"■■■."

The children blinked in surprise. I couldn't read their lips while concentrating on the play, but the atmosphere somewhat conveyed their reactions. 'He can play a bit.' 'Wow.' 'Not bad?' Something like that.

It was a positive response, but...

'Hmm.'

It wasn't up to the standard I had hoped for.

'Without Aura to adjust the notes, it's challenging. Like a knight who's gone to battle without his armor, forgetting to wear it.'

'Until now, if a note seemed weak, I'd blaze it with Aura, and if I wanted a note to ring more desperately, I'd grab and shake it. But now, I can't hear anything... Well, it's my own doing.'

My performances so far were more akin to sound techniques than music.

[If you neglect basic swordsmanship and focus only on extracting Aura, you'll suffer greatly someday.] Guardian Spirit had said. My performance now was exactly that.

It was like a mercenary who had grown too reliant on tricks.



"■■■■!"

"■■■, ■■■ ■■!"

"■■■■ ■■■ ■■■■."

The light piece ended, and the children clapped.

Judging by the atmosphere... It was like having a satisfying lunch at an unexpectedly good value-for-money restaurant.

'A modest debut.'

I smiled wryly.

It was quite an achievement to even get a 'good value restaurant' acknowledgment from children who had grown accustomed to the grand choir of the World Tree all day.

[You have taken an action valid in this world.]

[Your judge has granted you a pass!]

Patricia seemed content not to expect more. Watching my day's work from the 70th floor lobby, she quickly stamped her approval.

[You have earned your judge's recognition!]

[You can declare stage clear at any time!]

It was a moment when a stage in the 70th floor area, known as a hurdle for top-tier hunters, was conquered all too easily.

[The Goddess of Protection says the path you've walked as a hero has led to today's easy victory.]

Hmm.

'Perhaps that's true.'

If I summed up what I'd heard so far, it was rare for top-ranked hunters to get along well.

It's just rare.

There might be some close relationships, but a case where ranks 1 to 10 entirely build a fortress of trust, like we had, might be the first.

'So it's a difficult quest in ordinary cases.'

Originally, it would be muddled with sticky grudges, sticky jealousy, contempt, and indescribable emotions, like it was with the Black Dragon Witch or the Sword Saint before I made an effort.

-Right. I actually get confused with ranks below 2. Why waste precious brain capacity on that? Who cares about being 3rd or 4th? I'm the top anyway.

You're a unique case, to be sure...

[Would you like to declare a clear?]

Just as I shrugged and was about to say yes,

"■ ■ ■ ■■! ■■■!"

"■■ ■■■■■ ■■■■■ ■■!"

"■■! ■■! ■■!"

The children clapped and chanted something. This time, it was easy to decipher. It was an 'encore'.

I smiled awkwardly.

"Hmm. Well, if it's just one song."

There was no need to rush through the stage and move on.

The stage, seemingly impregnable, was conquered in less than half a day. There was plenty of time.

Instead of hastening my steps here, I wanted to mingle a bit more with the souls who died in the same tower as me. Though they might not remember why they died, in their last moments, they thought, "I don't want to hear anything but

music now, I don't want to speak unless it's singing."

I played again.

"■■...."

"■ ■. ■■■■ ■■■■?"

"■■■, ■■■ ■■ ■■ ■■."

I couldn't hear the sound of the piano I was playing. I tried to recreate my hearing with Aura, but it seemed like the Tower had soundproofed it at the system level. Perhaps the Constellation of this world exerted some power.

"■■."

So, I had no way of knowing whether my performance was good or bad, or even if it was going well.

"■. ■■."

Not on my own.

"■■■...."

"■■■."

I watched the children's expressions as I played the piano. Their faces were the only clues I had.

If the children closed their eyes and gently nodded their heads left and right, that was a "good performance." If they blinked in confusion, ah, that was a missed note.

At some point, instead of chasing notes in my mind, I was pressing the keys while looking at the children's eyes, glances, and faces.

"■■■!"

The children laughed as if amused.

"■■, ■■! ■■ ■■!"

That meant I made a funny mistake, or a playful joke landed. Seeing the children laugh, I laughed too.

And to pull off another great performance, to know if I was doing well, the moment I looked into the children's eyes.

"....."

I realized something.

'Right.'

It was a simple realization.

'I've always been like this.'

Everything seemed to make sense in an instant. The performance I was giving now and all the things I had done before, though seemingly unrelated on the surface, somehow connected in a line.

'I wasn't fascinated by swords and started learning

swordsmanship. I began holding the sword heavier and heavier because when I swung it, people around me reacted. I felt recognized.'

Even now, playing without hearing anything, it was the same.

Not exactly enchanted by the piano. Not because I have a perfect score in my mind to reproduce. Maybe some do, but I didn't.

The children's giggling breaths, the slight movement of their eyebrows, the curl of their lips. With that alone, I gauged whether it was a [good performance] and [bad performance].

"....."

I was just a human who had taken [this method] to the extreme.

'It doesn't matter if I can't hear.'

I let Aura surge throughout my body.



'This is actually more familiar to me.'

I raised Aura, but not focusing it on myself like when I was on the Blood Fire Drama stage. Quite the opposite.

I enveloped the children with Aura.

"■.....?"

"■■, ■■■■."

The children felt ticklish. There was no harm to them. I just let Aura seep in so that their physical states would transmit to me.

'Hmm.'

Where their gazes were directed.

Whether they were watching my fingers dance on the keys or looking around to chat with the child sitting next to them.

Reactions to the sound.

Heartbeats of the children.

Blood flow.

The speed of the blood flow.

'Yes.'

All of that reacted differently depending on my play. It was subtle, but the Aura's touch was even more delicate.

It wasn't just the expressions on the children's faces that were my standard. Everything has an expression. The question is whether I have the means, the experience, the skill to read those expressions.

'I've always wanted to be like this.'

And I had the skill to do so.

'Let's give it a try.'

I noted when the children's gaze fixed on my fingers for certain notes. I observed which sequences of notes made the children's hearts respond most violently. The children couldn't hide their expressions.

And they didn't.

"■....."

"■■■....."

The time the children whispered among themselves gradually shortened.

At first, it was difficult because each child reacted strongly to different notes. But it was okay. There was an intersection. The children shared a massive commonality beyond any differences.

These children once gave up on the world and desired the same heaven.

Thus,

Although I still couldn't hear anything.

I pressed the keys for the sounds that made all the children respond the most brightly.

"....."

For a moment, all the children's hearts resonated simultaneously.

# Chapter 343:

## Absolute Music (4)

---

The children's heartbeats began to slow down.

'Why is this so fascinating?'

My fingers moved rapidly over the keys.

'Even though I can't hear anything, why am I so captivated by watching people's reactions?'

Breath was finite in this world. Performers and audiences shared a predetermined amount of breath. As my fingers quickened, the children's breaths slowed, and as my fingers leisurely swam, the children could finally catch their breath.

'How far can I go?'

I struck the keys.

"■■....."

"■■■■? ■■■■?"

Pedestrians on the grand staircase began to stop, one or two at a time.

I expanded my Aura. Not just the six children, but also the young man who just stopped, the woman with dark circles under her eyes—I sensed the rhythm of their heartbeats.

'How far can I go?'

Soon, my thoughts blurred.

'The scent.'

I caught the scent flowing beneath the World Tree. Despite not hearing anything, my Aura-enhanced sense of smell caught the most subtle and vulgar scents.

The deep recesses of my nostrils turned green.

'The scent of animals... The scent of beasts.'

It wasn't just humans who hesitated on the grand staircase and began to listen to my performance. Beasts did too.

Owls, robins, swifts, birds with long ears like goblins, birds with thick lips like hippos, birds with atrophied forelimbs like dinosaurs, birds whose names I couldn't call because I didn't know their identities, all craned their necks and dropped their beaks on the low branches of the World Tree. I was performing underneath them.

'...The scent of life.'

Not only were the beasts blinking their eyes and watching my piano under the World Tree, flowers were too.

Azaleas, hydrangeas, gladioli, mountain hydrangeas, hibiscus, cherry blossoms, pear blossoms, flowers with eyes full of snow, children with finely chopped nails blooming as petals, those clasping a handful of sky with curled fingers, beings that had colors before names, all looked down at me.

'The scent of Aura.'

This place was a kind of heaven.

Even the petals that didn't know how to listen had Aura lingering on them. Who had given it? In the world of musical heaven, from the moment of their birth, flowers knew how to drink rainwater as they knew how to listen with Aura.

[A skill has been activated.]

Unknowingly, I used a skill. [Salvation of the Torn Goddess]. Salvation Sword. A technique that temporarily amplified my Aura in exchange for losing my memories.

It was a skill I intended not to use recklessly, but it was activated unconsciously now. It couldn't be helped.

'More.'

Even now, as a Constellation, I lacked the Aura to sense everyone under the shadow of the World Tree— children, passersby, beasts and flowers.



I just wanted the hearts of everyone who lent their ears to my performance.

'More.'

I lost the memory of what I played three seconds ago and grasped the performance that would follow in the next three seconds.

Aura would become more boundless the more one would be willing to forsake themselves.

[A skill has been activated.]

Even if I had been born a musician who couldn't hear, a painter who couldn't see colors, a poet who didn't know what poetry was, I would have surely written songs I couldn't hear, painted pictures I couldn't see, and written poems I didn't know.

I would have lived that way.

'...Good.'

Maybe compared to someone who received the sound from the beginning, knew what harmony and music were, and just transcribed the music they knew, my life might have been inferior.

But I knew no other way to live.

'Yeah, I like it.'

And I liked being alive.

'Everyone... is beautiful.'

If there was something I realized after sacrificing my life over four thousand times, it was that I liked living.

If I were a stone allowed only a life of breaking apart, I would have loved even the act of breaking. If I were a flower that had to shed the white it nurtured from spring when winter arrived, I would have loved the sensation of dropping petals.

[The Maestro Singing of Heaven opens his eyes.]

Blink.

[The Maestro Singing of Heaven looks down at you.]

The wind stirred.

It wasn't a wind I created. The branches subtly wriggled, and countless leaves moved like feathers on wings. It was the World Tree. When this tree, covering the sky here, nodded slightly, a kind wind blew.

[The Maestro Singing of Heaven listens to your sound.]

And I knew that the wind flowing through the crevices of the tree was the heartbeat of the tree, and the sound of leaves bustling against each other was the tree's temperature.

The blooming flowers were the tree's gaze.

[The Maestro Singing of Heaven begins to sing along to your sound.]

Thump.

A flower whiter than the piano keys fell onto it.

Thump, the petals fell from afar. From somewhere high above. From the sky. The World Tree shook its branches and dropped its flowers. Thump. With the speed of the sky and the gravity of green, the white flower fell, pressing the keys as it descended.

Another flower dropped.

Everytime they fell, the flowers struck the keys. It was a performance. As I leaned to the left and played on the left side of the piano, the flowers fell to the right. The World Tree played an accompaniment by dropping its flowers onto the piano keys.

"....."

Like rainwater, petals scattered over the keys.

I moved my fingers. White mirrors bloomed with white flowers. Pressing a key, I unwittingly crushed a flower

someone had dropped there.

As I played the piano, fingerprints remained on the petals. Crushed between my fingers and the keys, the flower was slightly bruised. Mashed. Crushed. A juice-like moisture flowed from the petals. Just a little. A bit of fragrance, just a bit of scent, scent... scent.

The crushed fragrance must have been the tree's tears.

White keys, white petals, and a whiteness flowed, and if one noticed, the surroundings were filled with blooming flowers.

Petals that didn't know how to shed moisture until pressed, when they did shed, it wasn't a foul smell but a fragrance that flowed in white.

There was such a tree in heaven.

'Beautiful.'

What did the one who first planted this tree think?

"■■■....."

"■■....."

Children, pedestrians, and beasts opened their mouths. They probably sang along with the flowers. Unfortunately, I couldn't hear the world's chorus.

It didn't matter.

Really, it didn't matter.

[The Maestro Singing of Heaven blesses you.]

[Hidden Stage Clear.]

In the midst of falling flowers.

[The Maestro Singing of Heaven says you shouldn't stay here too long.]

[You will be transferred to the 70th floor.]

[The Maestro Singing of Heaven bids you farewell.]

[May fortune be with you.]

I opened my eyes.

The place where I opened my eyes was the 70th-floor lobby.

"....."

Patricia was silently watching me. She opened and closed her lips repeatedly, seemingly contemplating what to say first.

Finally, after some deliberation, Patricia spoke, "Kim Gong-Ja."

"Yes."

"Aura is a cheap trick, so I don't acknowledge it."

"Why did you even bother thinking about what to say first? Huh?"

"I find it somewhat embarrassing to praise you. Should I endure the embarrassment just to praise you? That would be your selfishness, your arrogance, and your vanity."

"I didn't say anything!?"

"Ha."

Patricia sighed.

"There was no need to try so hard. Didn't I tell you? Even if you did nothing, I would gladly acknowledge your stage clear. In fact, when you completely messed up your first performance, I immediately stamped the clear."

"You really say some harsh things so nonchalantly, don't you...?"



"Your last performance was... um, how should I put it?"

Patricia seemed lost in thought, then slowly nodded.

"I thought it was nice to live with a human like you. But now, after hearing your last performance, I thought it wouldn't be so bad to die together with you."

".....Oh."

Isn't that an even more embarrassing thing to say?  
Overwhelmingly?

I can't grasp your subtle emotions, my friend.

"Yes. It was an excellent start."

While I was hesitating on how to respond, the Staff of Time Immemorial intervened, "It was remarkable considering it wasn't your area of expertise. Congratulations on gaining a believer for the first time since becoming a Constellation."

[You are gaining believers!]

[The Paladin becomes your believer.]

[Currently, there are no blessings you can bestow upon your believer.]

[Currently, there are no divine powers you can grant to your believer.]

Although messages followed one after another, it still didn't feel real to me. Blessings or divine powers. Maybe after conquering up to the 79th floor, when my status as a Constellation is solidified, something might become possible.

Even if it becomes possible, I have no intention of acting as a deity to Patricia, nor do I wish to be treated as one.

"Well, take care. Kim Gong-Ja... Hang in there."

Patricia's ankles were wrapped in white light.

Her role as a judge was ending, and she was returning to the 1st floor.

Looking closely, Patricia wore a bittersweet smile.

"I was told by this one that I won't remember anything about this incident."

"....."

"Memories are islands that each person possesses. It feels troubling to leave you on a deserted island, but I trust you'll swim through any sea as you please and go wherever you want."

"Patricia."

"Hm."

"I think 17 plans would be insufficient if you were to attempt assassination."

"....."

Patricia looked taken aback.

What followed in the next second went like this: In less than a second, Patricia realized she had momentarily lost control over her expression. Then, in another fraction of a moment, she pondered what to do. It was brief, but her contemplation was evident in her gaze.

And she made her choice.

".....Indeed."

Patricia opted to [leave her taken-aback expression as is].

"Disappointed...?"

"No. I knew you were that kind of person. I've just come to understand you a bit more."

"I'm sorry. But I have seen people change. Witnessed it.

Experienced it. The Sword Saint, the Black Dragon Witch, many hunters from the past who are now gone... I simply cannot believe in people who never change their hearts. So, just in case."

"Yes."

I smiled.

"I understand what you mean by [I wouldn't mind dying with you]."

"....."

"It's an honor."

"Really,"

Patricia let out a forced laugh.

"You're quite the unadorable fellow."

Splash!

The ground beneath Patricia softened and swallowed her up. She was teleported by the mage.

In the space where Rubik's cube-like cubes continuously rotated, only the mage and I were left.

"Will you move on to the next stage immediately? Or would you like some time to rest?"

"I'm fine with either."

"Then, let's proceed."

The slender staff struck the white floor.

"The world of music was somewhat favorable to you as a battlefield. Even though music wasn't your specialty, you weren't entirely devoid of talent in it. But what about this time?"

Where Patricia disappeared, a burst of light soared.

"Your next destination is [the world of money]."

Beyond the dazzling pillar, a shadow of a person flickered.

"And the top expert related to money in your tower seems to be this child."

Like Patricia, it was a familiar face to me.

The newly summoned judge on the 70th floor blinked.

".....Um? What's this all about?"

A hunter deeply connected to Patricia who had just vanished.

"How peculiar. Can you tell me where this is, King of Death?"

The head of the Merchants Union, Sang-Ryun.

It was the Countess.



# Chapter 344: The Voyage of the Full Moon (1)

---

"Indeed."

After hearing the reason for her summoning, the Countess nodded.

"So, all I have to do is declare a pass and that's it? Simple. Easier than adding a slice of cheese to a hamburger."

"Of all things, why is the analogy a hamburger?"

"I'm on a diet at the moment..."

The Countess revealed a slightly despairing expression, reminiscent of a hamster who had just been told it's illegal to nibble on sunflower seeds. As someone who had never been on a diet, I found it difficult to relate, but it seemed she was

enduring a particularly challenging period.

"Why not just burn off the fat with Aura?"

"That sort of thing is only possible for a crazy Aura fanatic like you, King of Death. Keep in mind that not every hunter in the world can use Aura as effectively as you. What if I burn my insides while trying to burn fat?"

"It's not that difficult..."

"Keep your deceit to yourself. Well, anyway, I see no reason to oppose. It's a pass, a pass. Now send me back to the 1st floor."

The Countess gestured as though the matter was settled.

However, the Staff of Time Immemorial shook its head.

"Sorry, but it doesn't work like that. You have a duty to observe the King of Death as a judge."

"If I had to pick the worst word I've ever heard, it would be 'duty'. It's just a sneaky way of shifting the blame not to the one who exercises power but to the one who is coerced. The worst scammers aren't merchants like me, it's language."

"You make a valid point. Then let me rephrase. Observe. You have no choice but to follow my power."

"Damn it."

The Countess flicked her fan into the air, and a miraculous event occurred. Out of thin air, poof! A luxurious sofa materialized and settled down.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth informs you that this is a divine power of the God of Commerce.]

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth says that if you have enough money, you can buy almost anything from the God of Commerce.]

The God of Commerce, then.

Just as Patricia's skills stemmed from Hisimet Cretsu, most

of the Countess's skills seemed to have been granted by some unknown God of Commerce.

"Nice. Very nice. Being coerced by someone else feels so exhilarating, it makes even my life feel complete. At the very least, I want to fulfill my duties in comfort, but that's not too much to ask, right?"

"That's your prerogative."

The Countess leaned back on the sofa and propped up her chin. With a swish of her fan, the sofa was joined by a fluffy pillow, a cat plushie, potato chips, wet wipes, and cola. Even the potato chips were opened, and the cola came with a straw already inserted.

Munching on the chips, the Countess looked at me.

"What's the plan? Hurry up and get started with your quest. Consider it like watching a movie."

Incredible...

"Why can't you use that skill for dieting?"

"If the money spent on a diet item could buy a hair growth product, would you believe it?"

"Uh, there seems to be a serious error in price assessment..."

"That's how my skill is. Sometimes the prices of products go haywire. I once bought an item called [World Peace] for only 100 gold, and a message popped up saying, ['The world was peaceful to begin with! By realizing this fact, you have become a better person than yesterday!']"

"Wow."

"If I weren't a sufficiently rational person, I would have torn that skill card to shreds at that moment."

The character of the God of Commerce is clearly questionable.

"Quick question before I send you off."

"Yes?"

"I heard you're taking on the 72nd floor. That means someone else must have taken the role of judge for the 71st floor. Who was my predecessor?"

"Ah."

I didn't hesitate to answer.

"It was Patricia."

"Ho..."

The Countess crunched on the potato chips with a mustached gentleman's logo, famous for chips.

"I see."

There was no significant change in the Countess's expression.

"Just out of curiosity, hypothetically speaking. What happens if the judge refuses to stamp the pass?"

"What would happen, mage?"

"You'd wander in that stage forever. Simple."

The Staff of Time Immemorial explained.

"That's why many hunters give up on challenging the higher floors and settle for the previous ones. Honestly, you're the strange one for challenging the upper floors without any worries."

"Hmm..."

The Countess wiped her fingers, now dusty with chip crumbs, on a wet wipe.

"And the judge? I get that the challenger gets stuck in the stage, but what about the judge who has to watch over it?"

"Likewise, the judge has to stay here as long as the challenger is trapped in the stage."

"For decades?"

"Yes. For decades. However, they experience time differently. If a challenger has to fully endure 30 years as 30 years, a judge can use 'acceleration' as much as they want. If the challenger is a movie director, then the judge is a critic. A critic doesn't need to spend the same amount of time watching a movie as it took to produce it."

"So they can only watch. I see, I see... Got it."

Crunch.

"I've got the rules down. As long as there are rules, there's a way. The world I'm about to enter is related to [money], right?"

"Yes."

"Then that's settled. Go ahead with a light heart. Whether you find a part-time job and earn a... no, a weekly wage, the result will soon become clear."

The Countess's words were probably not a lie.



Naturally, I felt reassured.

[The Staff of Time Immemorial transfers you.]

The soft white ground swallowed my feet.

Until the moment my line of sight aligned with the ground level, the Countess watched me intently.

A gentle curve formed on the Countess's lips.

"You make a fine friend, King of Death."

Those were the last words the Countess offered me.

[You have entered the 72nd stage.]

[You are stepping into a place where you should not be.]

[A certain penalty has been given.]

I opened my eyes.

I was in what could typically be described as a "Mediterranean seaside village," the kind that corporations would likely prefer as a computer boot screen.

Blue and white.

The two colors that make up the sky were extracted with a dropper and then directly planted on the ground, creating a blue-and-white harbor.

It was truly peaceful...

"Orange apples for sale! Fresh and zesty orange apples!"

"Try the sweet potato grape wine imported from the distant Bastar Island!"

"Have you heard of the Dodeok pig barbecue? It's insanely delicious."

Okay.

There, among the street vendors' stalls, was the sale of utterly evil-looking, questionably sourced, and horrifyingly prepared monster barbecues, which at a glance could strip one of their sanity and incite an urge to immediately slaughter and gut them.

This world is not okay. Let's escape.

[You have not cleared the stage.]

[You cannot voluntarily exit this stage.]

Damn it!

"Hey, thin snake, quickly explain what kind of situation this is."

"Kkeeeek...."

The thin snake swayed its tail gently.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth manifests his authority.]

[General information about this stage is revealed to you.]

Amid the bustling noise of street vendors in the port city, words began to dance in front of my eyes.

I read the information eagerly, hoping for an explanation of the unidentified foods laid out on the stalls.

+

[Heaven of Gold]

Floor: 72nd Floor

Constellation: The Cat That Bites Gold Coins

Difficulty: B+~A+

Description (Lv.1): A world where everything revolves around bargaining. There's no such thing as a free lunch here. Nor is there a fixed price. If you wish to purchase something, you must bargain with the seller, and the 'satisfaction' felt from this bargaining is what sustains you.

The nourishment for the inhabitants of this world is satisfaction from transactions. The feeling of successfully bargaining, sucking the marrow out of the other party's back, giving a sucker an experience of a lifetime fills them with fulfillment. Conversely, feelings of being duped, cheated and backstabbed will leave you starved.

There's no such thing as a set price. It's the sucker's fault for being duped. Think of everything as being subject to bargaining!

+

What is this?

Hell?

Why is this a hell instead of heaven?

"Try the orange apples! Orange apples here. Just one bite and the juice will cling to your palate forever, never to leave..."

"True grape wine must have a sweetness that lingers at the tip of your tongue. For those who believe so, our sweet potato grape wine will offer a perfect experience! Hey, sir. Try it comfortably. No, just drink it..."

"Deodeok pig. Absolutely, the Deodeok pig!"

Upon closer inspection, the street vendors' eyes were bloodshot.

It was the murderous intent of remnants who had fled from battle and starved for days, seeing nothing but survival.

This is scary.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth manifest his authority.]

[Exposure.]

A new message arrived, slightly different this time.

[You have not met the conditions to acquire hidden information.]

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth forcibly satisfies the conditions!]

[Hidden information has been revealed!]

But fear stems from ignorance. The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth quickly updated the information, revealing secrets that an ordinary hunter could never have accessed from the very beginning.

+

[Heaven of Gold]

Floor: 72nd Floor

Constellation: 'The Cat That Bites Gold Coins'

Difficulty: B+~A

Description (Lv.2): This is one of the afterworlds prepared by the Tower.

Description (Lv.3): Heaven of Gold. For those who don't want to believe there's anything beyond money, for those who fear their entire life would be invalidated if it were, wishing even the afterlife could be purchased with money so that their life wouldn't be invalidated.

Even for such individuals, the heavens extend.

Here, they need not ponder the world. Everything is clear. You don't have to become a cold human to deny morality. There's no reason to be criticized for refusing to understand others. As they wished, as they desired, only transactions exist here. Like all heavens, the Heaven of Gold welcomes you.

Do not agonize. Do not ponder.

Die as you have lived.

You have the right to do so.



You will trade to fill your belly. The only concern is your daily bread. You may tire of the daily grind, but if there's nothing beyond the wheel, there's no reason to tire in the first place.

May eternal labor console your soul.

+

"....."

For a moment, a chill ran down my spine.

'Someone's heaven is another's hell. But this place is the opposite.'

It wasn't surprising that there were people who considered this place heaven. Not at all.

The reason for my chill was the fact that a whole afterlife was truly constructed for those who [consider such a place heaven].

'The Tower Master.'

She was determined not to let even a single soul escape.

That almost curse-like determination was what I felt.

What kind of heavens were built on the other seven floors?

'...No, focus.'

I shook my head to clear the distracting thoughts.

'Right now, the priority is to receive the Countess's passing stamp. Yes, that's the immediate task.'

I refreshed my mood.

The condition set by the Countess was to earn money through any job, even part-time.

The job didn't matter.

"Hey, you..."

Just as I was about to look for a job.

Among the street vendors, someone who had merely spread out a stall called out to me. It was a voice imbued with Aura, precise enough to leave no doubt about who it was addressed to, drilling directly into my ears.

"Yes?"

"Judging by your appearance, you're a [Challenger], aren't you? Am I right? Your eyes are too bright, unlike a soul that has forgotten its past life..."

The person was hooded, concealing their face. Before I could even respond, the hooded figure spoke with a somewhat breathless voice.

"How about it? I'm also a challenger like you. A senior who fell into this damned world 300 years before you. Wouldn't you like to buy a piece of advice from such a senior, for a mere

pittance...?"

# Chapter 345: The Voyage of the Full Moon (2)

---

I blinked.

"Did you say you came here 300 years ago?"

"Indeed, junior..."

The hooded figure nodded repeatedly, their face concealed. Suddenly, I was the junior, and they were the senior, but I wasn't particularly concerned about that.

What caught my attention was what the hooded figure had said.

'Whether it's the Hell of Gold or the Heaven of Gold, everyone who comes here forgets their previous lives. The fact that they guessed I'm a challenger means there's a high chance

they really are a hunter.'

Hadn't [The Staff of Time Immemorial] mentioned it? Unless recognized by the judge, one would linger in the stage like a ghost forever.

Perhaps the hooded figure in front of me was a challenger who hadn't completed the quest for 300 years.

"I am a failure..."

The hooded figure stuttered.

"Trapped here, unable to go anywhere, just wasting my time. My life might have ended like this, but junior, I wish to prevent other challengers from ending up like me..."

"How about it?" the hooded figure's voice rose.

"Wouldn't you like to hear my advice? Even if it's just the ramblings of a worthless life... a failure's murmurs, if it could help a junior..."

"No, no, what are you saying? You're willing to share your story, and I'm all ears."

"Huff, huff. Such a kind-hearted junior. Then, if you could just buy me an apple orange, I'll gladly assist in your future endeavors."

The hooded figure crooked his finger.

[A trade request has been made by the other party.]

Then, a message arrived.

[Do you wish to purchase the offered item with one apple orange?]

This seems pretty straightforward.

I went to a stall vendor and bought a fruit that was half apple, half orange. Literally, 50:50. The left side was an apple, and the right side was an orange. What's this?

"Come on over! Wow, young man, you're looking fine!"

The stall vendor, seeing me as an easy mark, gleefully asked for 3 gold. It was an obvious rip-off.

But my pockets were full of gold coins. Considering it an investment for advice from a person 300 years my senior, it wasn't too bad.

[The bargaining is over.]

[The other party is satisfied with the trade.]

[You are satisfied with the trade.]

That was easy.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth discreetly reveals that the fruit vendor considered you a top-tier sucker....]

I know that, but I just wanted to finish it quickly!



"Here you go, sir."

"Oh, such a kind junior..."

I quickly handed over the apple orange to the hooded man. He shakily took the fruit from my hand.

[The trade is completed.]

[The bargaining is over.]

That's when it happened.

"Yahoo!"

The hooded man sprang up and, with a surprisingly cheerful motion, threw off his hood. The sudden change was so startling that I instinctively stepped back.

"What, what is it?"

"What do you mean, what? I'm the fisherman of Ravent Port who hooked you! Seeing your face screaming 'sucker', I cast my line hoping for a catch, and voila, you're a big one! Hahaha! This ripe, seasonal fruit is all mine now, young one!"

The hooded man, now unveiled, greedily devoured the apple orange.

"Ah! Delicious! Feasting on the tender and naive is the ultimate delicacy!"

"....."

I was dumbfounded.

"Wait. You said you were a challenger. How could you be a resident here and pull off all that challenger talk?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about. I merely recited the repertoire of a sucker who was fleeced by me long ago. Was it 300 years ago? Occasionally, some kids fall for such nonsense, standing right where you are."

"This crazy...?"

"That's the expression I wanted to see!"

A dramatic sound effect seemed to echo in my head.

[The other party is very satisfied with this trade.]

[You are very dissatisfied with this trade.]

[You have suffered a loss!]

Right after the message, it happened.

"Uh? Uh-oh?"

An immense hunger struck me. A hunger I had never experienced before ambushed me. Despite having endured extreme hunger while practicing Demonic Heavenly God Art, I had never felt such immense starvation.

"What, what's this all about?"

"Umm, delicious...."

Contrary to me, the hooded man's face shone brightly.

"Well eaten. Junior, don't be too disappointed. Thanks to me, you've learned a valuable lesson, haven't you? To teach such a life lesson with just one apple orange, oh, I'm too kind... How did I end up being so kind in this harsh world..."

"Hey."

The hooded man's expression had a devastating impact. Even I, who had grown accustomed to not getting angry, felt a surge of irritation at that face.

[You are more dissatisfied with this trade.]

[The other party gains even more satisfaction from this trade!]

[You have suffered another loss!]

I soon realized that even this anger was calculated by the other party.

"Ah, excellent. Excellent! It's like having a prime Deodeok pig steak in my mouth, oozing with juice! What a gourmet spot, young one. You were a gourmet spot..."

The other party savored the moment slowly, as if enjoying a delicacy.

"Now, considering the hordes of alley cats that will recognize you as a gourmet spot and flock to you, it's almost a pity. I'd like to enjoy this taste all to myself..."

"Hey."

The hooded man's turn was so dramatic it could have been from a western movie.

"....."

And something in my head just snapped. I swear, if you could watch that and not get furious, you were not a human but a rock.

[You are even more dissatisfied with this trade.]

[The other party gains even more satisfaction from this trade!]

[You have suffered yet another loss!]

Fuck.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth says the other party considers you the biggest sucker in the universe...]

Shut up, you snake.

[The Goddess of Protection looks at you with a very pitiful gaze.]

Where even are your eyes, huh? You're a sword.

[A Music Box Just for You doesn't say anything and just looks at you with a compassionate heart.]

You too, fox?

-Puhahahahahahaha! Puhah, hah, heh, ho! I'm dying! I'm dead! Kim Gong-Ja, this bastard is killing the Sword Emperor! Oh my, people of the neighborhood! The Sword Emperor, who conquered up to the 99th floor, is about to be killed by this bastard!

You... just don't speak. No. Please don't speak. Can you not speak, please? Please.

"Look, that young man is a sucker."

Whispers.

"Is he really a gourmet spot?"

Murmurs.

Not only the Constellations were looking at me. The stall vendors were blatantly staring, gossiping among themselves. Their gazes could be described as those of a panda cub, that after starving for three days, sees a bamboo leaf falling right in front of it. How do I know what a panda cub's gaze looks like?

Well... can you leave me alone for a bit?

"Young man! Mister! Do you remember me? I sold you the apple orange earlier. Young man, trade with me just one more time! We've already proven a solid trust between a seller and a buyer, haven't we?"

"Try the sweet potato grape wine! Just one sip, no more, no less! Young man, I'll take responsibility for pouring sweet potato grape wine down your throat until you vomit from its novelty! A whole new world!"

"Deodeok pig barbecue."

The vendors rushed in. Their eyes were all twitching. Like waves crashing against the shore, they kept coming in waves, leaving the rock (me) with no choice but to be eroded away in this utterly shitty situation.

"Just one bite..."

"Gourmet spot..."

"Deodeok pig. Try it."



What more could I do here?

"Okay."

Run away.

"Ah, the gourmet spot is escaping!"

I launched myself into the air with Aura-infused footwork, clutching my stomach with my left hand. The extreme hunger gnawed at my stomach.

"Chase him!"

"Catch him!"

"How often do we get a sucker like this! We can't let him go!"

As a result, I had no choice but to run around, twisting my body and bending over.

If Master saw me now, she'd probably cry, saying, 'I've never seen such a disgraceful movement technique...'

"Hungry, ugh. So hungry..."

Of course, I managed to escape.

No matter how hungry I was, I wasn't going to fail at fleeing from angry pandas.

In a dark alley.

"I'm hungry... What kind of insane hunger is this...?"

I staggered along, enacting the opening scene of a classic movie. I was a poor little kid wandering the alleyways. The problem was, even that kid had trash cans to rummage through for food scraps, but there was nothing like that here.

What if I hadn't mastered the Demonic Heavenly God Art's Sword of Starving Death?

Would I have gone mad by now?

The hunger tormenting me was something no ordinary hunter could withstand. Seriously, if it was someone else instead of me, they would have flipped their eyes and collapsed by now, writhing on the ground.

-Gong-Ja.

That's when the Guardian Spirit spoke to me.

"Yes...?"

-I have something I really want to say to you.

I looked at Guardian Spirit with difficulty. Guardian Spirit was looking down at me with a serious expression, as if about to impart a crucial message.

And then the Guardian Spirit said.

-Adieu.

"....."

-Hahahahaha!

Right.

Okay.

That's how it's going to be.

"I understand..."

I slowly straightened my bent back. I stood firmly on the ground, despite the monochrome scenes flickering before my eyes due to severe hunger. Somehow, my mind was eerily clear.

"The world treats me this way, so I have no choice..."

-Huh? What? What's the gourmet artisan mumbling about?

"You all are dead."

It seemed like my mind had cleared because the fuse had blown.

When a blackout occurs, silence naturally follows.

-...

Guardian Spirit's expression changed upon seeing my face.

-Zombie? Hey, Kim Gong-Ja? Hello? Can you hear me?

"Yes. I can hear you perfectly, as if it's a 1080p high-definition video. Do you have something else to say to me, Sword Emperor?"

-.....

The Guardian Spirit quietly retreated.

-I just said adieu. I did nothing wrong.

[The Goddess of Protection insists she is completely innocent!]

[A Music Box Just for You reminds you that it has always been an innocent entity.]

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth argues that it merely spoke the truth...]

I drew the Holy Sword and gripped it tightly in my right hand.

"Why are you all like this? I'm not angry."

-.....

"I just think... shouldn't people not play with hunger? Because that's rude. It's about manners... This city lacks manners."

I smiled brightly.

"Let's teach them some manners."

It's time to set things straight in Heaven of Gold, or whatever it is, starting with this port city.

# Chapter 346: The Voyage of the Full Moon (3)

---

The operation was carried out.

"Hello, brother. Do you perhaps know the way?"

It might sound like nonsense, but any nonsense becomes reasonable when one believes it themselves. And since I was the one who had just made this remark, it was endowed with reason, a hundred reasons or a thousand reasons.

"Huh? ...What the hell are you talking about on our first meeting?"

Of course, the merchant who was suddenly asked if he knew the way furrowed his brows.

In the port city, inside of a fairly large general store. Even



now, in broad daylight, there were quite a few customers. There was even a regular customer playing chess with the store owner.

In the store displayed with various antiques, the street vendor put down his chess piece and slightly pushed up his monocle.

"I don't take nonsense. A young man with a decent build is up to no good here. There's nothing for you to scavenge here, so beat it. Shoo, shoo."

"In my opinion, elder brother, it seems you need to know the way. Have you ever heard of a god called 'The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth'?"

"It's like a dog meowing and a cat barking....."

I was curious what that was supposed to mean, but the curiosity I wanted to address immediately was elsewhere.

'Hey.'

I tapped the thin snake wrapped around my wrist.

The thread snake cried out sadly, "Kiiik."

'Reveal a secret between the merchant and the regular customer in front of me. Anything will do. Just make sure it's a critical secret.'

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth laments not knowing when it had fallen so low after being revered as one of the Twelve Zodiac Gods....]

'Should we add more sorrow to an already sorrowful life?'

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth manifests its power....]

While the snake was fulfilling its role, the street vendor clicked his tongue and turned his gaze back to the chessboard. However, the regular customer opposite him reacted differently. After examining my face, he tilted his head in confusion.

"Hmm? This friend, upon closer inspection, seems like the popular spot that caused a commotion at the docks."

"Popular spot? What are you talking about?"

"You wouldn't know since you're cooped up in the store, but it was quite noisy. A new young man, not only a complete sucker but also said to have a delicious soul, you see? Everyone is eager to strip him bare."

"That frail kid? Really?"

"They say it's incredibly sweet."

The eyes of the street vendor and the regular customer gleamed with greed as they looked at me, scanning me from head to toe as if they were tigers in front of a pig.

[Exposure.]

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth reveals a secret to you.]

Who the real tiger was remained to be seen.

+

Name: Serbados Xeniamilia

Previous World: Nameless Tower

Afterlife: Port City Levanta, Heaven of Gold

Secret: General store owner. The regular customer currently playing chess with this person actually has a boil on his buttocks, which developed because of the tea Serbados keeps recommending. Anyone who drinks this tea develops a boil on their left buttock. The regular customer always buys ointment for it, and Serbados sells that ointment.

Mental State: 'Even if I lose in chess, winning in trade means I have won the war despite losing the battle! I shiver with excitement at my own ingenuity....'

+

I smiled broadly.

And then I said to the regular customer.

"The reason you have a boil on your left buttock is because of the tea you're currently drinking. This fellow here deliberately plays chess with you and recommends the tea to keep fleecing

you."

"Serbadosssss!"

The regular jumped up and grabbed the street vendor by the collar.

"I knew something was off! Why would an antique store owner always come up with an ointment for the buttocks! It was your scheme all along!"

"Just wait a minute!? Misunderstanding! It's a misunderstanding! Do I look like a person who would do that to you?! Are you saying that some newcomer, whose origins we don't know, is more reliable than a friend I've known for decades!"

"Of course! Everyone who owns a store in Levanta is a scammer!"

"Even if everyone in the world is a scammer, I alone would be a true friend....!"

A commotion broke out in the store. Customers browsing

the displays looked over, wondering what was happening.

But this was just the beginning.

'Snake.'

I pointed to another customer.

'Next.'

[Exposure.]

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth reveals a secret to you....]

Words wriggled before my eyes.

+

Name: Sackspeener Williamtell

Previous World: Ring World

Afterlife: Port City Levanta, Heaven of Gold

Secret: Regular customer of the general store. This person has long known that the store owner was poisoning the tea. Sackspeener turned drinking the poisoned tea into a kind of trade, making arrangements for an acquaintance to steal items from the store whenever he drank the tea. Even now, if you look behind, a red-haired man on the left is secretly stealing antiques.

Mental State: 'Sorry, friend. There's always someone above the one who's running, and I'm just holding back my tears to let you realize that truth one day....'

+

"In fact, this person knew you were up to no good and went one step further. Turn around now and look to the left, where a red-haired man is stealing antiques every time."

"Sackspeenerrrrr!"

The store owner jumped up and grabbed the regular by the collar.

"I knew it! Every time you came by, something would always go missing! You thief bastard!"

"And you're the one who put poison in the tea, yet you dare point fingers!?"

And so, a real mess began in the store, but I'm sorry to say that it was far from over. I pointed at each customer in the store one by one.

"This person pretends to collaborate with you, but in fact, they've written down all the transactions where you've been cheated and are just waiting for the right moment to report you."

"Dante Legggggggg!"

"The reason you got food poisoning from the double pork steak the day before yesterday is actually because of the pepper this person gifted you. This person soaks the pepper in their saliva, then dries it before gifting it to people. If they receive it for free and are happy about it, they think, 'Hehe, these idiots are happy with my saliva pepper!' and make a profit in the



trade."

"Mandeok Cheeeeeeeon!"

"The toilet paper in this store's bathroom actually has a hemorrhoid-inducing agent applied to it. Every time you use the bathroom, this person gains a secret satisfaction."

"Serbadosssss!"

And so, a store in the port city exploded, but of course, my revenge was far from over.

[Exposure.]

[Exposure.]

[Exposure.]

I kindly revealed secrets in stores down the street in order. Soon, screams erupted, clothes were torn, and shouts and cries beautifully decorated the harbor town.

"Kill that scammer!"

"And you cheated me too!"

"Ah, ever tried doing business? The one who gets deceived is the one to blame!"

"Let's see how you like getting beaten up by a real scoundrel!"

"Save me! Somebody save me!"

I hummed a tune while setting one district of the city after another ablaze.

Not with physical fire, but with the flames of the heart.

The residents of the Heaven of Gold were inherently scammers and thieves. There was an endless flow of secrets to expose, sweet as honey.

[Exposure.]

[Exposure.]

[Exposure...]

It didn't take even half a day for those who had chased me calling me a popular spot to kneel and beg for mercy.

"Please, I beg of you...."

Before long, those who had their secrets exposed began to prostrate themselves before me.

Hundreds of them lay face down around the central fountain in the square, with the Mayor of the port city at the very front, pressing his forehead firmly to the ground.

By the way, it had been revealed that he had been tampering with taxes and had been thoroughly beaten by the residents. The Mayor's face had transitioned from flesh-colored to bruised a while ago.

The Mayor was quite the fashion icon. His sense of color was extraordinary, truly a trailblazer in fashion.

"I humbly and fully acknowledge that we were fools compared to you...."

However, the Mayor didn't seem interested in changing his current occupation to a fashionista. He pleaded sorrowfully, his tears soaking the stone pavement.

"In the future, for a hundred years, you will not feel hunger and instead, will feel satiated. On this occasion, we bow our heads and humbly admit defeat...."

"Hmm."

"Thus, we kindly request, oh plague of our lives, that you simply depart from our city....?"

I nodded gravely, like a benevolent conquering monarch.

"I grant it."

At that, the people of the harbor prostrated deeply in gratitude.

"Your grace is boundless...."

[The trade is completed.]

[The trade is completed.]

[The trade is completed.]

[The trade is completed...]

Hundreds of messages popped up in succession.

I had graciously decided to leave the city, and they had managed to send me away. Wasn't this also a splendid deal?

[The other parties are very dissatisfied with this trade.]

[You are very satisfied with this trade.]

[You alone have gained a tremendous advantage!]

Amidst the unending wave of messages, I raised my right hand. Hundreds of shoulders twitched simultaneously.

"Don't worry. I will keep my promise and leave. However, I am curious about one thing."

"What, what might that be?"

"I understand there are more cities than just this one here. As I will be visiting the next city, bring me a map."

The Mayor convulsed.

Thanks to the information revealed by the snake, I could clearly see what the Mayor was thinking. He had realized that I intended to visit every city in this world, setting fires everywhere, and trembled at the catastrophe.

"Of course. Please wait a moment, oh plague of our lives! I will present it to you immediately!"

Of course, it was a thrill of joy.

How could he be the only one to face ruin?

He was eager to personally ensure that other cities in this world were also doomed. The Mayor mobilized all the servants of the mansion to gather all the maps they could find.

"I have brought the newest and most accurate maps available in this city, hoping they will meet the approval of the plague of our lives!"

"Not bad."

"May glory accompany you on your journey! Long live the plague! Long live the ruler who will set this world ablaze, please travel the world and raise the average temperature of the entire world!"

The citizens followed with cries of "Long live! Long live!", their faces streaming with tears, their eyes filled with the glory of meeting a messiah, their voices bidding farewell to a savior, or more precisely, relieved that they were not the only ones left in the gutter.

"Huh."

I tucked the maps under my arm and turned around.

My long coat fluttered, kicking up a cloud of dust, like a gunman exiting a western film. And to ensure hundreds of citizens could hear, I snapped my fingers as if tipping an unseen hat.

"—Adieu."

At that moment, messages exploded.

[The other parties are even more dissatisfied with this trade!]

[The other parties are even more dissatisfied with this trade!]

[The other parties are even more dissatisfied with this trade!]

[The other parties are even more dissatisfied with this trade!]

[The other parties are even more dissatisfied with this trade!]



A radiant sense of fulfillment drenched my being. It was a magnificent sight, a breathtaking scene. The pleasure of a high-quality steak melting on the tongue filled me to the brim. The sky turned red, as if reflecting the juice flowing in my mouth.

-Poor things....

The Guardian Spirit looked at the citizens with pity.

-Why did they have to mess with such an absolute lunatic....

I walked out of the city and strolled leisurely into the wilderness.

Unfolding the map, I saw that the world was vast and the sea even vaster. It was a world mostly comprised of water. But what difficulty would that pose? Having mastered the art of [Stepping Across Water], the sea waters could hardly stand in my way.

Wait for me.

This world ends by my hand.

[The Cat that Bites Gold Coins urgently requests a conversation.]

At that moment, a Constellation sent a message. The Cat that Bites Gold Coins. The very constellation that ruled over this world, the Golden Heaven.

[The Cat that Bites Gold Coins asks desperately:]

[What exactly is wrong with you??]

No.

What I truly wish to burn is this rotten world, nothing more.

# Chapter 347: The Voyage of the Full Moon (4)

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[The Cat that Bites Gold Coins makes you an offer.]

While speaking to me, the Constellation had also shared details about what had been happening behind the scenes.

What was it? It was about the Countess specifically— the judge who would be watching from the 70th-floor lobby at this very moment.

The situation the Constellation described was quite surprising.

[The Cat that Bites Gold Coins earnestly requests that you and your judge somewhat agree to a deal.]

As it turned out, the Countess, this gentlewoman, was

bargaining with a Constellation!

Just as the Paladin had received a skill from the God of Snakes, the Countess had obtained a skill from the God of Commerce.

And that God of Commerce was the Constellation that governed the 72nd floor, the Heaven of Gold, known as 'The Cat that Bites Gold Coins.'

'Well, that figures.'

I found it easy to accept.

There were quite a few similarities between the skills held by the Countess and the laws of the Heaven of Gold which were too coincidental to be mere happenstance.

'The Countess can nearly summon any item through bargaining with her skill. The price is up to the trader. Moreover, when the [World Peace] item was purchased, the message [The world was originally peaceful!] appeared...'

In short, a skill that irritates the Countess.

The more the Countess is dissatisfied, the more The Cat that Bites Gold Coins is satisfied. Haven't we seen this scenario quite often? Teasing and provoking like this is actually the essence of the skill.

Meaning...

"...It seems the Countess is quite angry with you."

[The Cat that Bites Gold Coins begs you to do something about it!]

For a long time, a very long and enduring period, the Countess had been using the skills of the God of Commerce.

Each time, she must have been mocked and thoroughly provoked.

Just like when I arrived in the port city of Levanta and faced humiliation right away. No, she must have been subjected to similar antics for years on end.

In short, the current mental state of the Countess wasn't 'Oh, how thankful I am to you, whoever and wherever you

may be, for bestowing such a skill upon me.' Rather, it was quite far from it.

Instead, it was closer to 'I didn't know where you lived all this time, but now that I do, it's really good!'

In other words, she had finally encountered her sworn enemy!

[The Cat that Bites Gold Coins weeps since the judge seems ready to extract every last bit of marrow from its bones.]

Of course, the Countess had no intention of letting such an opportunity slip by.

First, the Countess sought a means to contact the God of Commerce. Thanks to the skill, she could purchase anything she desired. And upon searching, she found an item in the product list called [A Phone Call with the God of Commerce].

Bingo.

With an almost infinite array of items, she would never have found it without using the search function.

Oh, and by the way, [Product Search] is also a paid item. It's an essential item that you have to subscribe to on a monthly basis. You can imagine what kind of rip-off the Countess had been under all these years.

『Hello.』

The Countess spent a fortune to make the call.

『Hello. This is the Cat with a Grin General Store. May I ask who's calling?』

『I am a merchant known as the Countess from the World of the Lone Child. I received a skill in my youth and prospered, but now it seems you are the one who created it.』

The Countess had roughly guessed the situation the moment she was summoned as a judge. And right when I was being fooled, she grasped the entire truth. Her skill, the laws of the Heaven of Gold, the similarities between the two, and so on.

And so, she realized that her skill must have originated from the master of the Heaven of Gold.

『Is that so? What's the name of the skill?』

『Cat's General Store.』

『Ah, yes. That's a skill we developed and distributed.』

Her realization was correct.

『Currently, the customer who has called... Oh my, look at the points accumulated! Such a valuable customer. You've always used the services of the Cat with a Grin General Store. Are you calling to express your gratitude for our services?』

『Oh. Certainly. I feel a tremendous gratitude towards you.』

『No need to mention it! By the way, the phone call item you're currently using is charged by the minute. The first minute is free. After that, a separate call charge applies per minute. Please understand.』

The Countess warned leisurely.



『The King of Death has gone to the world you rule.』

『What?』

『I am the judge who will decide whether the King of Death passes or fails. In other words, whether the King of Death will be stuck in your world forever is entirely up to me.』

『Excuse me, but I'm not quite sure what you mean....』

『Oh, don't worry. You'll find out soon enough.』

Click.

The Countess hung up without a moment's hesitation.

At this point, I was wandering through alleys. Damply. Writhing in terrible hunger. Soon, I entered an antique shop and did what I could.

The Countess was lying on a sofa, munching on potato chips. It was around that time that a phone appeared out of thin air

and rang.

『Countess speaking.』

『Hello, customer. We've verified the information you provided. We truly appreciate you informing us in advance before we could contact you.』

『It's what I paid for.』

『Ah, customer. We've decided to refund the cost incurred for purchasing the phone call item. We'll also cover any additional charges. We sincerely apologize for not being able to anticipate your needs in advance.』

In a short time, the God of Commerce's tone became quite polite.

『So, I assume you're calling because you want to negotiate about the stage clearance of this King of Death, correct?』

『You're getting to the point. That's good.』

『What would you like in return?』

『You're getting to the point, but it's not quite the tempo I want yet.』

『Excuse me?』

『Let's talk again a bit later.』

The Countess ended the call.

At this point, I was sweeping through the streets after devouring the antique shop. My elegant demeanor was akin to the Pied Piper leading a horde of tiny mice, the difference being that these mice were fighting among themselves instead of jumping into a river, and they were eagerly signing up for a thumping. This thumping quickly became a city-wide trend, jumping from street to street in no time.

Ring-ring!

『Countess speaking.』

『If we've ever upset you or been inadvertently rude while you were using our services, we sincerely apologize, customer.』

The representative's voice was urgent.

『We're currently looking for the manager as quickly as possible. The employee responsible for serving you will be immediately transferred, and we'll comply with any other requests you might have.』

『That's quite prompt of you. I appreciate it.』

In the brief interlude, the God of Commerce's manners improved significantly.

『However, the tempo isn't quite there yet.』

Click.

The trend of thumping that started in the city reached its peak at the Mayor's mansion. The guards, who were exposed for stealing from each other, caused chaos, and the Mayor, who rushed out in surprise, was struck by a betrayal from a

loved one. Out of respect for the Mayor and his spouse, I won't divulge the secrets I exposed.

Ring-ring-ring!

The phone rang like mad.

『Countess speaking.』

『We were wrong. We're sorry. Please forgive us!』

『Now we're getting somewhere.』

『Currently, the entire staff of our store is prostrating! I'm calling you while bowing, customer! If you doubt it, we can immediately connect a video call!』

Unprompted, the phone call upgraded to a video call. In the hologram that unfolded before the Countess, indeed, dozens... no, scores of cats were bowing.

For a brief 0.5 seconds, even the Countess was at a loss for

words at the adorable yet grotesque scene.

That's right. The God of Commerce was a cat. Not just one cat, but dozens! Dozens of cats working together at the 'Cat with a Grin General Store', that was The Cat that Bites Gold Coins.

However, the Countess wasn't generous enough to forget what these creatures had done even after being charmed by their cute appearances. Her life, tormented by this skill, had been too bitter, like 99.9% cocoa chocolate.

『What a sight. Truly a spectacle.』

『Meow! Meow! Meow!』

『By now, you must have realized that friend of ours is a lunatic. If a lunatic could achieve perfection, and be complete, then it would be very appropriate to call him a complete lunatic. Now, you all understand that whether this complete lunatic will be eternally trapped in the Heaven of Gold or not depends on my mood. If you don't want to rot there, cooperate.』

This cat...

『If you're going to cooperate anyway, do it with gusto. That's your specialty, isn't it? I've seen the lunacy you unleashed in the port city. But I'm confident your lunacy will cross rivers and seas to shake the world. I hope you continue doing what you've been doing until I achieve a 'satisfactory negotiation'.』

Holograms beyond holograms showed cats bowing. Colorful cats trembled.

『Didn't I say? You're a good friend.』

The Countess smiled nonchalantly.

『Let's make sure our friendship becomes a model example in history for half a millennium.』

The cats meowed out loudly.

# Chapter 348: The Voyage of the Full Moon (5)

---

What I ended up doing was... Well, my friend told me to keep doing what I've been doing, right? For the sake of our friendship, I couldn't see why I shouldn't heed such a request.

To be more specific about what I was doing.

"We acknowledge our complete defeat..."

I was going around the world, making the mayors of cities kneel.

"Here, we offer these tribute items as a sign of our submission. Please, look upon our city with mercy..."

A hundred citizens offered me a deal at the same time. The deal? It was nothing much. I would not visit their city again



for the next six months, and in return, the citizens would bow deeply to me.

[The port city of Batarran acknowledges its defeat to you.]

[With this, you have become a merchant who has made 6 cities kneel.]

[The citizens of the city are very dissatisfied with this trade!]

[You are very satisfied with this trade.]

[Once again, you alone have reaped tremendous benefits.]

Due to the irregular known as me, the Heaven of Gold was in ruins.

It was akin to a kind of famine.

The cities I visited would inevitably have their citizens' secrets exposed. Unable to endure it, the citizens would surrender unconditionally, experiencing a desperate hunger.

In essence, a year of famine had hit the city.

[The Cat that Bites Gold Coins screams for you to stop!]

With me suddenly becoming a moving famine, The Cat that Bites Gold Coins was driven further into a corner.

6 port cities had already fallen. Regrettably, there was no one who could stop me.

There were times when those capable of fighting swarmed in droves, attracted by the bounty on me. A group of seven mercenaries, each flaunting a tiger fur cloak, made an offer.

[A medium-sized trading company 'Those Who Can Fight' requests a trade.]

[1. For 30 minutes starting now, both parties agree to exchange physical blows.]

[2. After 30 minutes, a total settlement will be conducted.]

[3. At the time of settlement, the amount of physical damage received from the opponent will be deemed as a loss.]

[4. The amount of physical damage dealt to the opponent will be considered as a gain...]

This is the Heaven of Gold. Even for a brawl, mutual consent is required, and a contract must outline that agreement.

The outcome?

Is there even a need to spell it out? I mean, on the other side of the hologram, the God of Commerce was still shedding tears, while the Countess continued to munch on potato chips. Could there be a clearer picture of who won and who lost?

『The sixth city has been smoothly conquered. What a joyous occasion.』

『Meow... Meow...』

『How many cities are left in that world now? Seven? Six? Even if six hundred remained, it's just a matter of time.』

For reference, this conversation wasn't a recorded one but a live video. With each city I swept through, the Countess would make a deal with the God of Commerce and 'pluck something' from it. This live conversation was also a product of looting.

Our tower's economic manager is quite thrifty, isn't she...

『It's about time to admit a complete defeat. Any further resistance will only ruin your paradise. Right now, the King of Death may generously accept a deep bow and leave, but who knows what will happen in the future? I don't even know."

『What have we ever done to you?!』

The cats exploded in outrage.

『We were merely continuing our small business! Meow! This is the tyranny and violence against a great Constellation! We won't stay silent! Meow! We will formally protest!』

『What did you do wrong, you ask? First off, you imposed a penalty where cat ears sprout on my head if I use the skill more than a set number of times a day.』

『What's the problem with that! Cat ears! Aren't they cute!』

『Also, there was a penalty where a cat tail would grow if I used the General Store too many times.』

『Cat tails are the epitome of perfect curves, both anatomically and evolutionarily! The fact that we've given even worthless humans a chance to taste such a divine creation should be grounds for gratitude!』

『Purchasing a product named World Peace only to be mocked by you.』

『Hey, any grown-up seriously buying a product named World Peace is already laughable. We added that phrase as a little joke, not to be taken too seriously. Meow. Isn't that also an experience and a lesson?』

The cats vigorously waved their arms in agreement.

『Exactly!』

『That's right, meow!』

『Countess or Count, what kind of customer is that? It's not even funny! We're more like their mentors!』

『Be thankful! Hurry up and thank us for our existence! Bow your head and thank us for bestowing the skill and for imposing penalties! It's a bow! Sincerely offer a deep bow!』

『Cats have their pride too!』

『Meow! Meow! Meow!』

The Countess nodded deeply.

『I believe you now fully understand why I want to punish these double cats, Kim Gong-Ja.』

Friend, you seem to have a lot built up...

"Hmm."

It was already night.

After subduing the seventh city, I unfolded the map.

Following the plan mentioned by the Countess, it would be easy to subjugate dozens, even hundreds of cities. It would be time-consuming, but not difficult to accomplish.

However,

"This is strange."

The Countess tilted her head curiously on the other side of the hologram.

『What do you mean?』

"The Cat that Bites Gold Coins... In other words, the God of Commerce, is nowhere to be seen. Even though it seems like I'm just wandering around, I've been heading to major cities. The seventh city I just conquered, the sixth port, was the most prosperous city in this world."

In the Heaven of Gold, there are only port cities.

To facilitate trade, the world was intentionally designed this way, or perhaps it's because most of the world is water. Small archipelagos were clustered together, and towns and cities were established along the coastlines.

There's no such thing as inland. There are mountains, but no villages are set upon them. Without exception, [all places where people live are adjacent to the sea].

"I thought I would see the God of Commerce in the largest city."

『See? What do you mean by see?』

"Exactly what it sounds like. The owner of the last stage was a tree. A World Tree large enough to cover an entire city and more. If it's heaven, wouldn't it make sense to always see the god?"

『Hmm...』

The Countess furrowed her brows as if it was a novel idea she had never considered and probably never would have in the future.



『That's an interesting perspective.』

"Yes, well. So, I thought the God of Commerce's headquarters would be in the largest city. But no matter how thoroughly I searched, there was nothing. Strange, isn't it?"

『Perhaps the last stage was special? Gods vary. These ones probably built a hideout far away and are snickering, watching humans ruin each other.』

"Is that so?"

『Absolutely, no doubt about it.』

I glanced at the hologram.

『What are you looking at?!』

The cats flinched.

『Looking at us won't scare us! We're not afraid of the likes of you!』

『 Really! We're not scared at all! 』

『 We're your meowsters! 』

『 Be grateful! Bow down and thank us for giving you the skill, for imposing penalties, thank us deeply, it's a bow! Bow sincerely! 』

『 Cats have their dignity! 』

『 Meow! Meow! Meow! 』

What would their rallying cry be like...

For now, although they look like cats, they are Constellations. Constellations powerful enough to govern the 70th floor area. I wondered if they might betray their composure, but of course, they made no such basic mistake.

" ....."

I carefully surveyed my surroundings. The waves lapped at

the dock.

Come to think of it, when I first arrived at this stage, I was also at the dock. Although, back then, I turned my gaze towards the street instead of the sea. [Every village is a port]. Could there be a clue hidden in that statement?

'The Cat that Bites Gold Coins. The Cat that Bites Gold Coins. Gold coins...'

Lost in thought, I wandered along the shoreline when suddenly, I saw the moon rising in the night sky.

It was a full moon.

"....."

A thought flashed through my mind.

I carefully managed my expression, ensuring no emotions showed through, and casually said to the Countess.

"Nisha."

『Hm? It's the first time you're calling me by my real name. Well, you've been using Patricia's real name for a while now. It's about time, I suppose. With this, you are the only person who calls both Patricia and me by our real names. Usually, those close to me utterly despise Patricia, and those close to Patricia despise me, but you're quite unique.』

"It's a great honor. Anyway, Nisha. You're watching me like watching a movie over there, right? Can you do a [rewind] by any chance?"

『Hmm? Perhaps. Why not?』

The Countess turned her head and spoke.

Chatter. Although it didn't show on my hologram, she was obviously consulting with the [Staff of Time Immemorial] in some blind spot.

Soon, the Countess looked back at me.

『It's possible.』

"Then, although it might be a bit of a hassle, could you check the night skies of last night, the night before, three nights ago, and four nights ago for me? There's something I want to verify."

『That sounds more productive than munching on potato chips. Alright.』

The Countess waved her fan and scanned the air. Her eyes skimmed through the void.

Although invisible to me, the Countess was currently viewing several days' worth of footage.

"Are you watching?"

『I've got them all up.』

"Please check the moon."

The cats turned to me in unison.

But it was too late. Without any need to hide my emotions any longer, I immediately asked.

"Is there any change in the shape of the moon?"

『.....』

"By any chance, is it continuously a full moon without any change?"

The Countess slowly nodded.

『That's correct. Not a single movement. A pristine full moon.』

Then it's as I thought.

『Meow! Now that I think about it, negotiating might not be so bad after all...!』

『Perhaps there's really a condition to an unconditional surrender, right?』

『We will now seriously engage in surrender negotiations!』

The cats began to panic. The Countess tilted her head in confusion, not understanding the situation.

However, I paid no mind and enhanced my eyesight, infusing it with aura. With a vision that surpassed human limits, I gazed up at the full moon.

'Nothing.'

Regrettably, nothing could be found on the surface of the moon.

No, in fact, it wasn't even a real moon. Unlike Earth's moon, this one had a pristine surface. It wasn't even a sphere but a flat surface. It was merely something that took on the shape of the moon.

'That place isn't a hideout. There are no cats there. So, where...'

I quickly scanned the surroundings.

Based on my reasoning,

1. Each heaven has a sovereign constellation that rules over it.
2. Souls can always feel and see that constellation, wherever they are.
3. The souls here are invariably adjacent to the sea.
4. Therefore, the constellation might be residing in the sea.

If the sea itself were the constellation, all problems would be solved. However, the constellation of the 72nd floor is [Cats], not [the Sea]. Nor is it any creature related to the sea.

Could it be living in the deep sea? Maybe it built a deep-sea base in the depths of the ocean, or perhaps it's roaming around in a submarine. That could be possible. But in that case, souls wouldn't be able to feel or see the constellation at all times.

'A god that can be easily seen by just looking from the seaside.'



The sea waves crashed.

'Not in the deep sea, nor in some distant ocean.'

The dark night sea.

In the middle of the pitch-black surface, brightly.

'Just something that anyone living in a seaside village can easily see.'

The full moon.

The moon in the night sky was reflecting off the water, white and bright.

As if it were a round gold coin.

"Indeed."

I smiled.

"Found it."

And without hesitation, I stepped towards the sea. Splash! Ripples formed around me. The ripples didn't intensify beyond a gentle level. Splash! Splash! I trode across the surface towards the spot illuminated by the full moon.

『Customer! Madam Countess! VIP client! We'll offer a 50% discount on all items from now on! Isn't that enough? Would you please accept our surrender!?』

『60%! 70%! 80%!』

『Up to a 90% discount! Just please stop your friend...!』

『Meowwww?!!』

The cats chorused in alarm.

『No, no! Wait, a deal! Let's make a deal!』

As I dove towards the moonlit surface, surprisingly, it wasn't the cold seawater that greeted my face and body.

Only for a moment did I feel the touch of water on the surface.

Soon after, a gravity distinctly different from that of the water's embrace caught me.

『Meow, meow, meow, he's here?!』

I landed, thud, on solid ground.

There was no dragon palace under the sea. The moon reflected on the surface was a kind of portal, a gate. Passing through the moon on the water surface led directly to the abode where the God of Commerce reigned. The [Gold Coin] was the [Full Moon], and 'The Cat that Bites Gold Coins' was, in fact, 'The Cat that Lives on the Full Moon.'

『Emergency! Emergency!』

『What should we do...?』

『Don't panic, meow! A cat doesn't die only once!』

『It's all over now!』

In a pristine white space, cats gathered. The cats huddled close together, trembling and shivering. The colorful cats huddling and shivering together had a touch of poignancy, albeit not entirely so.

"Hmm."

I smiled. After all, I was visiting as our tower's premier lunatic.

"Good evening, brethren."

And a lunatic must maintain the decorum only a lunatic can.

"Do you perhaps know the way?"

# Chapter 349: The Voyage of the Full Moon (6)

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When I asked if they knew the way, the cats' reaction was simple. The cats who called themselves the God of Commerce, were trembling yet prostrated themselves without a moment's hesitation.

"We shall surrender!"

Indeed, they knew their place.

"However, if we were to fall completely, it wouldn't be just one or two beings left destitute on the streets! It's not just for our own survival that we struggle, but for all the faithful people across the worlds and the divine citizens of this world... Please, have mercy on us..."

"Please have mercy on us!"

The twenty-four cats simultaneously begged for forgiveness.

There was something deeply moving about the sight of the differently colored cats bowing their heads in unison.

But my heart had become far too sullied to live by sentiment alone.

"Is that the truth, you serpent?"

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth reveals their innermost thoughts in a single sentence.]

As the serpent hissed, text floated before my eyes.

+

Mental State: 'Followers and divine citizens be damned, we're about to die here, what do we care!'

+

I knew it would be like this.

I clicked my tongue in disapproval.

"You all are consistently petty...."

"Meow! Why should a serpent submit to a mere human?! Because of it, we can't deceive or negotiate! This is an outrageous abuse of power... it shouldn't be allowed!"

The cats were outraged. Being a Constellation that primarily dealt in deceit, they seemed to have a natural aversion to Hisimet Cretsu. Caught off guard by the insult, Hisimet Cretsu, now infuriated, raised its head and hissed loudly.

The cats jumped in shock.

"Meow!?"

"S-So scary!"

"It's terrifying...!"

"Ah, look at that dreadful green! Such a color and curve should not be tolerated in this universe! Its mere existence is an insult to all creation...!!"

"Hisss!"

"Meowww?! Spare us, spare us!"

"The green alien is trying to eat us! Help! Help-!"

What a mess this has become.

Or more accurately, a cat mess....

Since 'cat mess' is a bit weird, let's just call it a 'meow mess.' Isn't that cute?

"My friend seems to have fallen into some strange thoughts again. Proceed with the negotiation."

The Countess intervened just in time. Of course, she was watching the spectacle live through the hologram.



"While you do desire unconditional surrender, we have no intention of extorting more than what's reasonable from you. Anyway, that place is a kind of heaven, and you all are its administrators, right? It's only right to preserve that status."

"Meow. So, what do you desire...? A fair monetary compensation or periodic tribute?"

"No, what I desire is only one thing, and that is your utter humiliation."

The Countess showcased the character that made her the wealthiest in the tower without any reservation.

Let's just call it a 'character flaw.'

"Cu-Customer...?"

"I have no intention of ruining the economic structure of the Heaven of Gold. Nor do I plan on ruining other worlds. It wouldn't be fair for the administrators of heaven to favor our tower alone, wouldn't it? I'm saying, once again, I just wish you'd eat shit."

"Eek...!"

Shivering at the Countess's character flaw, I couldn't bring myself to sympathize with the cats, considering they were the ones who nurtured such a personality.

What goes around comes around. Karma. A meow punch. All these are among my top three favorite phrases.

"Come when I call you. Perform tricks if I ask you to, and if I command you to open a snack bag, then do it. Of course, you cannot lie to me and must always speak the truth. And that's not all. If I tell you to meow, you meow, and if I get sick of it and tell you to bark, then bark willingly."

The cats trembled.

"What outrageous demands!"

"To be born with a spine like a top and then to utter a dog's bark is the ultimate disgrace!"

"Indeed! Dogs are inferior beings that can't even stretch their backs! There are the Three Bonds and the Five Constant

Virtues, we can't possibly use the language of dogs!"

So, these beings are a Constellation of deception, deriving pleasure from tricking others and looking down on dogs as an act of speciesism. At this point, calling them cats might be an insult to the cats of our world.

The Countess quietly listened to the cats' protests and then ended all arguments with just two sentences.

"If you don't like it, just let the King of Death expose all your secrets."

"From now on, we are your eternal dogs."

The twenty-four cats bowed deeply to the hologram.

"In fact, we have long admired the ways of dogs and have always wanted to say 'woof' instead of 'meow.'"

"Woof woof! This feels much more affectionate and fitting!"

"Having been bestowed with the ways of 'woof' and the teachings of 'bark' by your graciousness, we finally feel liberated from barbaric customs and embraced by the Great Way. Mrow!"

Indeed....

I'm not exactly sure what 'indeed' refers to, but it seems like the most appropriate word to describe the current situation....

[The 'Gold-Biting Cats' surrender to you.]

The negotiation between the Countess and the God of Commerce continued with various minor skirmishes. I didn't pay much attention to it.

It was just the process of refining the minutiae in the surrender document leaving no room for misunderstanding, and well, the Countess would handle it.

What was important to me was what came next. After over three hours of discussion, a perfect surrender document was finally drafted, and the Countess, beaming with a smile, looked my way.

"Good work, King of Death."

"It was nothing."

Unlike the joyous Countess, the cats were completely exhausted and lay sprawled on the floor.

"There was a demon among us...."

"We might need to reconsider our service levels to our customers...."

How much had they been fleeced to end up like this?

I was relieved that the Countess was on my side. If she were an enemy, the Paladin would be too, and not just the economic structure of the tower, but the security forces would be against me as well.

Game over. The detailed assassination plans and the capital to execute them would just be the icing on the cake. Truly sinister.

"Thanks to you, I've fulfilled a wish I never thought possible in my lifetime. They say 'what's the use of having friends,' but clearly, I'm enjoying luxury because of a friend."

"I enjoyed it too."

"And now, we must end these enjoyable times."

The Countess closed her fan and smiled.

"It's time to return, King of Death."

A message resounded in my head.

[The judge you've chosen has given you a passing mark!]

[You have gained the recognition of your judge!]

[You may declare Stage Clear at any time.]

There was no reason to hesitate.

I quietly declared Stage Clear in my mind, and in response, a yellow light enveloped me.

[You have subdued the 'Gold-Biting Cats.']

[Hidden Stage Cleared!]

[You will be transferred to the 70th floor.]

And then, I opened my eyes.

"Welcome back."

Upon opening my eyes, the first thing to greet me was still the Countess, languidly reclining on the sofa. She slowly waved her fan and said to me,

"I really wanted to say this face-to-face. Congratulations on your clear, Kim Gong-Ja."

We had broken through the 72nd floor.

The completion of the stage didn't mean the Countess immediately left.

Perhaps knowing that leaving here would erase her memories? The tower's laws dictate that all memories related to the Pillar, namely the [Staff of Time Immemorial], must be distorted. Perhaps that's why the Countess leisurely lounged around.

"I'm always in work mode because of the Merchants Union, 24/7. No rest for me."

The Countess said.

"Honestly, being here is like a free vacation. The flow of time is even different from Babylon, making it the ultimate vacation spot."

"What's the point of resting here if your memories are going to be erased anyway?"

"If it's going to be erased, I better enjoy myself more before



that happens."

The Countess seemed serious. Well, I wasn't in a hurry either. I thought it might be a good opportunity to chat and get closer to the Countess.

".....?"

And during our conversation, we stumbled upon a quite astonishing fact.

"You knew about Patricia's assassination plans?!"

"Of course."

The Countess said it as if it was the most natural thing.

"Patricia and I have no secrets from each other. We don't needlessly blab about everything, but we never blur the line between what's necessary and unnecessary. We both have the intellect for that, and we've made that promise. The most important thing is the will to keep that promise. I trust Patricia's will."

The certainty in the Countess's expression was undeniable.

Honestly, I was taken aback.

"Uh... I don't know if I should say this, but Patricia probably also has, well, of course, it's just a plan, but a plan to assassinate Nisha too?"

"Of course. To take control of the entire tower on behalf of the Five Major Guilds, Patricia would first need to conquer the Sang-Ryun. And to do that, she'd need to start with me."

"Good heavens."

As I stammered, the Countess chuckled as if amused by my reaction.

"It's an old story. I was the one who told Patricia first. If she ever decided to become a dictator, she should start by taking my head before killing others."

"....."

"When would she have the courage to carry out a bloody purge without that kind of resolve? It was a kind of constraint. Honestly, without the chains I had placed, Patricia would have exploded long ago. Patricia is a deep thinker and may seem indecisive at first, but once she's determined, she goes straight ahead regardless of what happens."

I was momentarily lost for words.

My silence wasn't for no reason.

Neither the Paladin nor the Countess knew. Not a past event, but a secret buried in the cycle of time.

Only I remembered it.

'...The Countess was the first to die.'

The tragedy that unfolded on the 12th floor.

'When I first reached the 12th floor, the Paladin accepted the choice offered by the [Demon King of Autumn Rain]. She colluded with the Demon King. And we, the leaders of the Five Major Guilds, were hunted down by the Demon King one by

one...'

When the Demon King swung his sword, red rays burned everything in their path. The first thing destroyed by that sword was the imperial audience hall of the Aegim Empire, and the person in that hall was the Countess.

The Paladin, Patricia, was the first to kill the Countess.

As promised.

"Hm? Your expression is odd. Is something bothering you?"

"...No, it's nothing."

It's okay.

In this timeline, it's nothing more than an event that hasn't happened.

The [Demon King of Autumn Rain] has become a Preta. I call the Paladin Patricia. The Countess can be called Nisha. And

both of them call me Kim Gong-Ja.

Everything has changed.

'But...'

But what I once thought were mere coincidences, many events, now looking back, are understood in directions I never thought of before. They've become comprehensible.

It's... How should I say?

'A strange feeling.'

I realized anew. Eventually, coincidence is just a name I temporarily attach to the inevitabilities I don't know.

What I do, what I want to do, might just be the process of changing those many coincidences, one by one, bit by bit, sip by sip, into inevitabilities.

It must be so. I felt that this process was not at all different

from turning each and every one into myself.

"Uh. Sorry to interrupt your enjoyable conversation."

A voice intruded beside us.

"This isn't a holiday resort."

The Pillar, hiding silver blades in its eyes.

The [Staff of Time Immemorial], holding a long staff, watched us.

"King of Death. It's time to ascend to the 73rd floor."

That's right.

Another heaven was waiting for me.

# **Volume 15 – Chapters 350-375**

# Chapter 350: The White Ending (1)

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Although I grandly stated that it was time to ascend to another heaven, in reality, the 73rd and 74th floors were rather uneventful.

Literally, as soon as I set foot on the stage, I was deemed 'passed.'

"Ah, come on. I was just thoroughly defeated by you not long ago, and now I'm supposed to judge you? Just go on up already."

The examiner of the 73rd floor was Liǎofàn, the Celestial Martial Clan Master, Viper.

Viper was summoned by the [Staff of Time Immemorial] and tasked with the role of being my judge. With a grimace, he waved his hand dismissively.

"A loser must know his place. Having fought a life-or-death



battle and still having my head intact, the least I can do is boost the winner's morale and make him happy! You don't even need my approval to pass."

Thus, the 73rd floor was cleared in about 2 seconds.

Ah, for reference, the 73rd floor was a place called the Heaven of Martial Arts. If everything in the Heaven of Gold revolved around trade, all matters here were settled through duels.

A kind of Valhalla. A resting place for souls who wished to wield their swords even in death. Perhaps it was the heaven for peculiar martial fanatics like the Sword Emperor when they died in the tower?

[The judge you've chosen has given you a passing mark!]

[You have gained the recognition of your judge!]

Thank you for the swift clearance.

"Doesn't it bother you that you'll lose the memory of being here?"

"Huh? How many memories do people forget in a lifetime? It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter."

Viper coolly departed, as if he truly had no regrets. Unlike the Countess, who hesitated to the very end, valuing her memories dearly, Viper's personality was starkly different.

Well, if I ever feel like fighting a strong opponent, I can always come back to the 73rd floor. Duels have been plentiful so far, so there's no immediate regret.

As for the next stage, the 74th floor...

"Ahaha! A heaven, you say! What an intriguing concept for a place!"

You could guess who it was just by the laughter; it was Bambolina, the Heretic Inquisitor. Upon hearing the whole story from the [Staff of Time Immemorial], Bambolina laughed heartily.

"However, if the stage clear condition solely depends on my approval, there's no need to waste time. Master, please proceed without delay!"

Even after meeting me and undergoing various changes, the Heretic Inquisitor still prioritized efficiency. He had no interest in [The hidden secrets of the stage] or [Quests that genuinely impress her]. Smiling brightly, he'd ask, 'That's great! And what benefits does it bring?'

The Heretic Inquisitor was more interested in practical aspects.

"It's remarkable how you've subdued several Constellations in such a short time! Perhaps it's time to change your alias from King of Death to the Salty Constellation Master?"

His eyes sparkled like shooting stars.

"Participating in the auction as [Goddess of Protection] is also commendable. What do you think, Master? Why not bestow one of the stages Hwiya owns to Hamusutra? Then the Constellations we can utilize in our tower would include [Goddess of Protection], [The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth], [The Ruin-Harvesting Cow], [The Muscle Pig Dreaming of Parricide], [The Holed-Up Head Librarian], and so on. It would be a formidable force!"

"Uh... no, that's a bit difficult."

I thought to myself how Uburka's Constellation name was dreadful and replied.

"I want Hamusutra to experience human life. At least for several decades. It would be a great help if Hamusutra returned as [The Holed-Up Head Librarian], but that wouldn't benefit Hamusutra's growth. Unless he wants it himself."

"Hmm... Indeed. If that's Master's wish, then there's no helping it..."

Sensing my firm stance, the Heretic Inquisitor didn't press further and merely sighed.

Fundamentally, the Heretic Inquisitor respected my wishes absolutely. To put it extremely, if I ordered him to become a Constellation, he'd likely respond with, 'Understood! Just give me 30 years!'

The 74th floor, where the Heretic Inquisitor served as the judge, was the Heaven of Laws.

Unlike the Heaven of Martial Arts, where disputes were resolved through duels, this place was a bit more complex.

According to the information leaked by Hisimet Cretsu, the laws of the Heaven of Laws were as follows:

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[Heaven of Laws]

Floor: 74th

Constellation: 'The Heretic Judge'

Difficulty: C~A+

Description (Lv.1): A world where everything is governed by laws. Every resident of this world can create a world law comparable to physical laws, but only once in their lifetime.

Here, everyone has the power to legislate once in their lifetime.

Someone might establish a law that 'fighting among each other is forever prohibited.' And then, it would indeed be

prohibited! However, if someone else declares, 'I nullify the law that prohibits fighting among each other,' that law would be immediately invalidated.

Once invalidated, it's over! You can't legislate twice in a lifetime, so you must carefully consider how to use your one-time power.

Not just any law can be established. There are a few exceptions that are not allowed.

To give three examples of impossible laws:

-No tyrants allowed! Laws that negate others' legislative rights are not recognized. (e.g., 'Only I can create laws in this world.')

-No clever Aladdins allowed! Laws that indefinitely increase your one-time legislative power are also forbidden. (e.g., 'I can legislate 100 times.')

-No greedy ones allowed! It's allowed to invalidate another's law, but you cannot nullify more than two laws at once. (e.g., 'I remove all laws established so far.')

Excluding these exceptions, you can wish for anything!

Of course, that's only if others recognize your law. There's always someone who might use their once-in-a-lifetime authority just because they dislike you.

Choose wisely!

+

...Just reading the information made me realize what a tricky heaven this was.

'How on earth do I clear this when I can't even see a clear path?'

What kind of absurd laws might be lurking?

For example, there's bound to be a law like [The use of Aura is prohibited]. There are far more people who can't use Aura than those who can. It's a matter of simple majority. That means I'd lose my biggest weapon right from the start.

And that's not all. There's a high probability that a law like [The use of skills is prohibited] has been established.

It might not seem like it since I'm surrounded by monstrous hunters, but acquiring even a single skill is a rare event. Most people don't have skills.

Would people really tolerate the use of skills? Of course not. Even if they did, there'd at least be a law like [Skills cannot be used to harm others].

'It's best not to stay in such dangerous places for too long!'

As the saying goes, the wise man does not expose himself needlessly to danger.

Being a Confucian scholar, I should be especially cautious. What nonsense am I spouting? Anyway, I obediently accepted the Heretic Inquisitor's stamp of approval.

[The judge you've chosen has given you a passing mark!]

[You have gained the recognition of your judge!]



The Heretic Inquisitor vanished with a "Good luck! Ahaha!" leaving his laughter to echo in his absence. Following Viper, another lightning-fast clearance was achieved.

At this point, you might grasp the strategy I employed in the 70th-floor region.

Stay if interested. Deepen the exploration if necessary. But if there's no need, gladly skip.

Unless something particularly extraordinary happened, I intended to skip the 75th floor as well. So, it's easy to guess that something out of the ordinary did happen on the 75th floor.

Let me introduce the Hunter summoned as the judge of the 75th floor.

"Wh-where is this? Why was I suddenly summoned? Eek... Who are you!? Kidnapping me now won't affect the operation of the Alchemy Castle! I'm only in charge of developing potions; I don't deal with sales or distribution! I'm content just having my shop on the 20th floor... Why won't the world even consider my small wish!?"

The Hunter, upon being summoned, covered her head as if

this wasn't her first time experiencing such a thing.

It might seem like an overreaction, but it was justified.

Not only I, but also the Countess and other Guild Masters acknowledged this Hunter's talent. Though she didn't wield a sword on the front lines, she contributed to the tower's conquest as much as anyone else. She was still contributing in real-time, and most importantly, played a crucial role in breaking through the [The Veritable Records of the Heavenly Demon].

"...Huh? Kim Gong-Ja?"

The Apothecary belatedly realized my presence and stared blankly.

"Where have I been brought to...?"

I greeted her with a broad smile.

"Welcome. This is the entrance to the afterlife."

The Apothecary's face turned pale.

Why? It's not exactly a lie, is it?

---

My little joke came back to me as a fierce backlash.

The Apothecary, not even considering the possibility that I was lying about this being the gateway to the afterlife, nearly fainted upon hearing it. Naturally, once she regained her senses and understood the situation, she was coldly furious with me.

Why say 'coldly' furious and not 'blazingly' furious? Well, because the Apothecary's anger went something like this:

"From now on, I will cease the supply of special potions to you."

"I apologize!"

The Apothecary looked down at me through her frosted glasses.

"I will remove the strawberry flavor from the potions provided specifically to you. How about mugwort flavor? Interested in spinach? Frog eye? Mosquito wing? Or shall I replicate the taste of nasal mucus on the fourth day of a flu?"

"Th-That fantasy flavor from the world's most famous fantasy novel!"

E/D note: Harry potter

"Sigh..."

The Apothecary shook his head in disapproval.

It felt like she was dealing with a mischievous kid next door. Considering I was actually curious about the nasal mucus potion, it wasn't entirely the wrong treatment.

Anything can be an experience. To put it fancily, it's an experience. Ex-perience. Doesn't it sound a bit like a magic spell?

"Anyway, I understand what I need to do. It's quite surprising that there are heavens, multiple ones at that, in the tower..."

Originally, the tower was a place of wonders. The Apothecary murmured softly.

Then, she brought up something no one summoned as a judge had mentioned before, but something that everyone must have thought about at some point.

"Kim Gong-Ja, will we be sent to one of these places when we die?"

"....."

"Will we be sent here, our memories cleared, forgetting our pasts like previous lives, scattered among the nine heavens based on our personalities and desires?"

I was momentarily at a loss for words.

The Apothecary's tone carried not so much a fear of death but a deeper sorrow at the thought of being scattered from the current world. Forgetfulness and farewells. After all, death is merely a combination of those two words.

"Ugh."

The Apothecary, lost in thought, shook her head.

"It's useless to think about such things. Alright, Kim Gong-Ja. Go ahead and ascend the stage without worry. If it seems dangerous, I'll immediately grant you a pass to return."

".....Okay. I'll be off then."

"Yes, take care. I won't say be careful because if you're still breathing, even if you're on the brink of death, I can save you... Just make sure your neck remains intact."

A small smile crept up on me. This person really knows my character well now.

After all, I've known the Apothecary for quite some time. She was the first person I tried to get close to immediately after my return. Without me, the Apothecary would have struggled for a while before finding success, and without the sensory amplification potion she provided, I would have had a hard time awakening my Aura. We were comrades who shared success together.

"Yep. I'll do my best."

I waved at the Apothecary and headed straight for the next floor.

The ground beneath me wobbled and swallowed me whole.

[You have entered the 75th stage.]

[You are stepping into a place where you should not be.]

I opened my eyes.

".....?"

And immediately upon opening my eyes, I noticed something odd.

In fact, it was something I couldn't help but notice.

"Huh?"

The entire world was black and white.

There was no color in the landscape before me. Only shades of gray, and even those were starkly divided into black and white.

If it were just the lack of colors, I wouldn't have been surprised. Haven't I encountered all sorts of bizarre landscapes before?

The problem was that the world was flat.

"Uh? .....Huh?"

And it was quite flat.

To put it bluntly, a [2D plane] was spread out before me.

I blinked. For some reason, the objects didn't appear in 3D. As I continued to blink, my brain slowly began to adapt to this new dimension, perceiving the world as if it were a side-scrolling RPG game screen.



In short, my field of view was confined to a third-person perspective.

"What... what is this?"

I instinctively moved my foot.

Squirm.

Then, something in the middle of the screen squirmed.

As 'that thing' in the middle moved, the screen also shifted along with it.

The view of this world was boxed in, but as 'that thing' moved, the view shifted, illuminating new scenery. Though it was still depicted as if a child had drawn on a canvas, with mountains represented by  $\triangle\triangle\triangle$  and clouds by  $OOO$ .

And 'that thing' placed in the middle of the screen, if described from top to bottom, had...

At the top, there was a ('-').

Below that, a horizontal line — was drawn. At both ends of the line were tridents, making it look like  $\ni - \in$  when drawn.

Then, for a while, there was a vertical line. The line split into two at the bottom, firmly standing on the ground of this side-scrolling world.

Astonishingly, when I moved my foot, the lower part of 'that thing' moved. When I moved my arm, the tridents moved.

Could it be?

Testing a hunch, I moved my mouth slightly.

('π')

Immediately, 'that thing's' expression changed.

"....."

We often come to unavoidable conclusions in life. In my case, at this moment, the harsh truth was all there was to it.

"...Is... is this me?"

Then, the stick figure in the middle of the 2D screen assumed what it probably thought was a sophisticated and dynamic expression.

$\Sigma(^{\circ}v^{\circ})!?!?$

No.

Why are you so unnecessarily cute...

---

# Chapter 351: The White Ending (2)

---

The sudden transformation into a 2D stick figure left me bewildered, yet my confusion did nothing to alter the circumstances.

The world remained as flat as it could possibly be, and I was as much of a stick figure as one could imagine.

Idiot 「Oh, fascinating.」

Fortunately, or unfortunately, I wasn't the only one who was reduced to a stick figure. The Guardian Spirit had also become a dotted-line ghost.

If I was represented by solid lines, then perhaps the only difference was that the Guardian Spirit was depicted with dotted lines?

For reference, the Guardian Spirit was making expressions like this:

^(-▽-^)

Just looking at it was infuriating, a truly Guardian Spirit-like emoticon.

A speech bubble wafted above the Guardian Spirit's head.

Idiot 「To my eyes, this damn world looks like it's drawn on a piece of paper. Zombie, do you see it the same way?」

"Ah, yes..."

While I nodded, I was somewhat skeptical.

"Why are you speaking through speech bubbles? Can't you just talk?"

Idiot 「Huh? To me, it looks like you're the one talking through speech bubbles.」

Oh.

The Guardian Spirit genuinely seemed perplexed.

It didn't look like he was lying.

"Really?"

Idiot 「Yeah. Every time you talk, a speech bubble appears above your head. I can't hear any voice.」

"Ah... I see. Maybe in this world, only one's own voice can be heard."

I had grasped the situation.

So, this stage was devoid of sound. Everything said by people was represented in text instead of being heard. Just like in comics.

While one could hear their own voice, hearing others was impossible. Though I wasn't sure why this was the case, it was the rule of this world.

Fox God 「Peep.」

Snake 「Keeek.」

The Constellations were the same. Their cries were turned into speech bubbles, and next to the bubbles, names were written.

Instead of [A Music Box Just for You], it was Fox God, and instead of [The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth], it was Snake, suggesting it wasn't the 'objective names' that were used but rather the names I found convenient.

'Wait a minute. Does that mean the Guardian Spirit is labeled as an idiot in the bubbles...?'

I looked back at the Guardian Spirit.

The Guardian Spirit tilted his head in confusion.

Idiot 「Hmm? What are you staring at?」

"...No, it's nothing. I just thought you matched well with the speech bubbles."

I bluntly changed the subject. After all, there are truths in the world that don't necessarily need to be shared. It's like scratching an itch.

Idiot 「Is that so? Well, I am a rather cool guy no matter what I do.」

"So, what should we do here?"

Ignoring the Guardian Spirit, I surveyed the surroundings. Instead of looking in all directions, I could only look left and right. Unlike the real world, I could only move in those two directions here.

The scene that met my eyes could be simply depicted as:

.,,... C;^;^;;,D

...'.....



!!  
,,.....,,

" " "  
.... ..

,,..... ,,,

-----

To the left, there were mountains. Floating vaguely in the distance were clouds. Below the mountains and clouds, the baseline stretching horizontally represented the horizon. In essence, the ground.

How should I put it? Quite a simple world.

Idiot 「Either left or right. We have no choice but to move forward, right? 」

The fool who knew nothing but martial arts spoke.

Idiot 「This is the afterlife, after all. So the souls must be present and living their lives somewhere, right? Though, what

kind of life one must have led to consider this place heaven is beyond me.」

"Okay. Let's move."

I walked forward. No, to the right.

Of course, there was no sound of footsteps. When I stepped forward with my right foot, the word 「Step」 appeared as if it were a sound effect in a comic.

"Wow. Even the sound of footsteps appears like this..."

I tried stomping my foot heavily, and 「Step!!」 appeared in bold letters, with a grand and fierce font.

Conversely, when I tiptoed, 「Tip-toe... Tip-toe...」 appeared in small letters, with a gentle font.

"Impressive."

Literally, everything in this heaven was represented on a flat

surface.

Villager A 「 Oh. I haven't seen your face around here before. Are you a traveler? 」

After walking for a while, I encountered someone.

It was the first time I had met a local of this world.

The villager was depicted just like me, as a stick figure, and was hammering something into the ground.

What the villager was holding was... a sword? A trident? No, considering he was digging the ground, it was likely a hoe. He was hoeing the field.

"Ah, yes. Hello."

I bowed my head in greeting.

"But can you distinguish my face?"

Villager A 「 Hmm? Face? 」

"Yes. You said we hadn't met before as soon as you saw me. I was wondering how you could easily tell me apart from others."

Villager A 「 Huh? Of course, I can tell. You're quite distinct from others. You're asking strange questions. 」

The farmer replied as if it was obvious.

(—□—)?

And looked at me strangely.

However, the one truly enveloped in an odd sensation was me. No matter how closely I examined the farmer's face, I couldn't distinguish it from my stick-figure face. My goodness, can the people here recognize everything just by looking at sticks?

Villager A 「 Anyway, if you wish to enter our village, there are a few procedures you must follow. 」

"Procedures?"

Villager A 「Nothing difficult. You just need to answer a few questions I have. Are you here to harm anyone in our village?」

I immediately shook my head. The sound effect "Shake, shake" appeared.

"No, that's not the case."

Villager A 「Good.」

The farmer cheerfully responded as if my answer had cleared all suspicions, as if there was no need for further interrogation.

Villager A 「I have more questions. Do you plan to cause trouble in our village? Will you create discord among the villagers?」

"Eek. No, I have no such intentions. Unless someone attacks me first..."

Villager A 「 Good. If an unwanted incident occurs, can you swear to faithfully participate in the investigation and trial according to our village customs and laws? 」

"Of course."

Villager A 「 Oh, what an admirable traveler! 」

The farmer smiled widely, seeming very satisfied. He patted my shoulder with a thump, thump.

Villager A 「 Even if you're an outsider, I can trust someone like you. Come on in! Our village welcomes you! 」

"Uh..."

I was a bit taken aback.

It was nice to be welcomed, but I didn't understand.

How could they trust me so easily?

We had only exchanged a few questions and answers. There was no further interrogation.

Such a simple Q&A couldn't possibly reveal what kind of person I am. They couldn't even tell if my answers were sincere. Why then?

Snake 「 Keeek. 」

At that moment, the snake reacted, seemingly understanding my puzzled mind and knowing the answer.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth manifests its authority.]

[Exposure.]

[Information about this stage has been disclosed to you.]

[Hidden information has been unveiled!]

A window popped up on one side of the screen. It was a Description window. Neatly squared, the letters began to

inscribe themselves into it.

+

[Heaven of Truth]

Floor: 75th

Constellation: 'The Faceless Conductor'

Difficulty: B~A

Description (Lv.1): A flat world made up of pictures and characters.

Description (Lv.2): This is one of the afterlives prepared in the Tower.

Description (Lv.3): Heaven of Truth. This name refers to the afterlife where souls tired of falsehood and hypocrisy end up. Those who are weary of seeking truth in others' words, those drained by the constant need to discern truth from lies in



every human encounter, and those who have grown to despise the complex human world, settle here after death.

In Heaven of Truth, you can never 'lie'!

+

Ah.

So that was it.

My questions were instantly resolved, the description window wasn't finished yet. I continued to read the information revealed by the Snake.

+

Once you step into this heaven, you need not worry about what others might be hiding or doubt their intentions.

Just ask.

You will be met with an honest answer.

Others cannot distort their intentions with subtle expressions or refined words here. In this place, any expression or tone of voice is 'blatantly' displayed.

Here, even your appearance and that of others are indistinguishable.

Rest assured. You don't need to exert yourself by acting out expressions. There's no place for smooth talk in this land.

This heaven was created for those who are tired of being human, tired of the acts of humanity, yet still wish to be among humans.

May you find peace here.

+

Villager A 「If you encounter any trouble, feel free to seek me out!」

The farmer slung his hoe over his shoulder and walked away. Step, step. Soon, the farmer exited the screen and was no longer in my view.

"...I see."

I understood all of the farmer's strange behaviors. After sharing the information I gained with the Guardian Spirit, I said.

"Just exchanging words with me is enough in this world. After all, everything I say is the truth. There's no reason to be wary of me just because I'm an outsider, as long as I assure them I have no intention of causing trouble."

Idiot 「Indeed. A world where lies are impossible...」

The martial arts fool crossed his arms and nodded gravely.

Idiot 「Most hunters are cunning by nature. For many, the condition of being unable to lie would be excruciating. Of course, for someone like me, who has a heart as clear as a stream and always speaks sincerely, no matter where or when, this stage is not difficult at all...」

"Excuse me?"

Idiot 「 Huh? 」

As we conversed, we walked into the village.

Idiot 「 Zombie, try saying what I tell you to. 」

"What are you going to make me say this time?"

Idiot 「 Say, "I secretly admire the Sword Emperor so much that I can't help it." Go on, say it. 」

This guy must be crazy.

Idiot 「 Oh, come on! Just do it! Hurry up. Right now. Right now! 」

The Guardian Spirit urged me insistently. His urging was sincere. I sighed.

"Sword Empe..."

As soon as I opened my mouth, a massive shock ran through my body.

[Prohibited!]

[You cannot violate the rules of this world.]

[You cannot utter a lie!]

"....."

My mouth immediately closed. Not by my own will, but because I was forced to. I tried again, but my mouth merely moved silently. The sentence the Guardian Spirit begged me to say just wouldn't come out.

Idiot 「Hey, Kim Zombie.」

The Guardian Spirit looked at me with eyes that had cooled off considerably.

Idiot 「 You... Don't tell me. It's not that you stumbled on "so much," nor on "I can't help it," but you couldn't even get past "Sword Emperor"? 」

Damn it.

Idiot 「 You can't even add "Emperor" to me?! Just calling the Sword Emperor a "Emperor" is already a false sentiment to you!? Huh!? 」

"Of course. How could I possibly call you an Emperor? Huh? Did your conscience swim across the Pacific to Hawaii?"

Idiot 「 My god. Are you even human? After all I've taught and given you, how little do you think of me in your heart to not even be able to call me "Emperor"!? 」

"Wait... Hold on. Look at you. You just called me 'Kim Zombie'! You're sincerely treating me as a zombie in your heart! How could you do that to me!?"

Idiot 「 I can do that, but you can't! 」

"Get lost!"

By the way, we were passing through the village. What I mean is, the villagers got a free show of our bickering. They looked at us with various expressions, each making its own statement.

( ' □ ' ? ) ' ^ ' ) / " ); , ( @ ~ ) , ( ° ∫ ° )

I don't know about the others, but the last villager really pissed me off...

Even their speech bubble was marked with a 「 ㅎ ㅎ 」 . What's this? Are they picking a fight with me?

Villager F 「 Hey, you there! 」

We were just about to leave the village when one of the villagers who had been standing at a distance shouted— or rather, enlarged their speech bubbles dramatically— and rushed over in a fluster.

"Yes?"

Villager F 「 Don't go any further! 」

The villager, sweating profusely (;;;), stopped me. Then, pointing towards the right side of the screen, he warned:

Villager F 「A madman lives over there!」



# Chapter 352: The White Ending (3)

---

I tilted my head in confusion.

"A madman?"

Villager F 「Yes, that's right. If you keep going that way, you'll encounter a very dangerous madman. You must not approach him! ...Of course, you mumbling to yourself in the middle of the road as if talking to thin air makes you seem quite mad yourself...」

This stick figure?!

Villager F 「Even if you're a strange madman, the one living over there is extremely dangerous. He slashes at anyone who approaches!」

"Heh."

Villager F 「Among us, he's called the [Mad Warrior]. Since he settled there, not a single person has been able to cross to the other side... All communication was completely cut off. 」

I grasped the situation.

Here, the world only extends left and right. When a madman appears and blocks the path, transportation is severed from that day forward.

"Is there no way to bypass him?"

Villager F 「There used to be... But it's been a long time since the madman appeared. Over a hundred years, perhaps. That madman destroyed all the detours around the place he blocked. Even if we forcefully create a detour, he smashes it as soon as he sees it. There's no way to cope with it. 」

Truly a madman.

Normally, even if a path was blocked, one could dig tunnels or build sky bridges to bypass it. "Tunnels" are literally paths dug underground. "Sky bridges" are created by erecting pillars and laying bridges. However, the [Mad Warrior] smashed all such detours.

"Is he that powerful? This Mad Warrior."

Villager F 「Haven't I said it? It's been such a long time, and still, the situation remains the same. Countless warriors who challenged the madman lost their heads. Now, nobody dares to confront him. As a result, the trade between the east and west was completely ruined!」

The villager made a sullen expression (・ω・). The faces of other villagers listening to our conversation weren't much different. Or rather, they were exactly the same. Thus, several villagers simultaneously made (・ω・) (・ω・) (・ω・) (・ω・) expressions.

All looking at me.

That's kind of scary...

Villager F 「I don't know how far you plan to travel, but it might be best to make a U-turn at this village.」

The villager advised me with a resigned look (; -Д-) on his face.

Villager F 「Beyond here is practically off-limits. Rest up for a day and then head back. 」

I gratefully accepted the hospitality and stayed at a villager's house for the night.

Though a few more questions were exchanged to ascertain whether I was a dangerous traveler, it seemed the villagers ultimately deemed me completely harmless. They treated me with great courtesy as their guest.

"I just need to take care of that Mad Warrior and then I can leave."

I said to the Guardian Spirit while lying in the bed provided by the villagers.

"Clearing the stage can be done anytime. But that madman is, in a sense, a monster. A monster of this world. Who knows when another hunter will come up to the 75th floor again? If I just ignore him and move on, it might be decades before anything changes."

Idiot 「Doesn't really matter, does it? It's up to you. 」

The Guardian Spirit spoke indifferently.

However, the Guardian Spirit was inherently an honest person. He was nothing but a corpse without his honesty. Especially in this world where expressions are blatantly revealed. When the Guardian Spirit made a bothered expression (;¬\_¬), it was impossible not to notice, even if I didn't want to.

"Why so? You look like a complete idiot."

Idiot 「No... Hmm. I suppose it's because that Mad Warrior or whatever is said to be the strongest in this world. And although I don't remember, I definitely cleared the 75th floor.」

"Yes, I guess so."

Idiot 「So, it's been bothering me. I would have undoubtedly taken down anyone who held the title of the world's strongest, right? How could such a person still be alive and well?」

"Hoh."

It was a valid point, but since it wasn't impossible, I easily provided an answer.

"He must have appeared after you cleared this place. What's so strange about that?"

Idiot 「Is that so...?」

The Guardian Spirit looked uneasy but couldn't argue against my point. It was the most plausible explanation. We decided not to dwell on it any further and had a good night's rest.

The next day, we headed towards the location where the madman was said to be lurking.

Villager F 「I told you not to go there, young man!」

Even though I was an outsider, spending the night without any issues seemed to make a significant difference. The villagers were noticeably friendlier than yesterday, and yet, they were more frantic in trying to stop me.

Villager F 「I knew it when I saw that young man mumbling

to himself. He's gone mad!」

This villager's face was like this: (o□㐔□o);;

Villager D 「Right. There's madness that harms others, and then there's madness that harms oneself. This fellow is the latter. Tsk tsk.」

This villager was (・̀・).

Villager C 「Maybe he came here looking for a place to die... His beloved must have left him. But he didn't have the courage to end it himself, so he came to this village looking for someone to do it for him... Ah, it must be so...!」

And there was someone like this ♪(。>~<。)/'.

A variety of expressions saw me off.

As I left the village, a sign that read [Danger! No Trespassing] blocked the path. I lightly jumped over it. Unlike the well-maintained village, the further I stepped out, the more desolate the path became.

On the other side of the path, the [Mad Warrior], who had instilled fear in the residents of this world, sat quietly.

Madman 「 ..... 」

The warrior was expressionless (=\_=). It was hard to tell if his eyes were open or closed. However, as soon as my right foot crunched a weed, making a rustling sound, a speech bubble appeared above the warrior's head.

Madman 「 It's been a while since we've had a visitor. 」

In this world, the ground was fundamentally represented by \_\_\_\_\_. Although there were bushes and underbrush, the base was —.

However, for some reason, the area around where the warrior sat was depicted as ⊥⊥⊥⊥. At first, I thought they were large weeds, then reeds taller than weeds.

Unfortunately, they were neither.

Madman 「 Are you a challenger? 」



Those were all 'swords' stuck in the ground.

Madman 「If you've wandered off the path and ended up here by mistake, I'll grant you one last act of mercy. Turn back. But if you've come to challenge me, I'll gladly entertain you.」

"....."

Madman 「No. Perhaps I was foolish to even utter such words, considering I focused on the sound of your footsteps as you approached. The consistency of your footsteps was astonishing. The stride of your tens of steps was frightfully the same. It's impossible to think that someone with such a realm and experience would stupidly stray off the path and end up here.」

The warrior slowly stood up.

Madman 「Let me ask. Are you a hunter?」

I blinked.

"Are you a hunter too? Did you climb the Tower and end up

trapped in this stage forever?"

Madman 「No. I am not one of your kind. I am a pure and innocent native, born and raised in this world. But that too is a foolish statement. According to your claim, I wasn't born in this world but died in the other world, and thus I'm merely living in the afterlife.」

Swish.

The warrior pulled one of the countless swords stuck in the ground around him. It seemed all the swords scattered around were his blades.

Madman 「But I do have some connections with the humans you call 'hunters'.」

Throughout the drawing of the sword, the warrior maintained an expressionless (=\_=) face. Perhaps not expressionless, but indifferent. It was difficult to seriously gauge his realm in a world barely represented by stick figures.

"Connections?"

Madman 「Sword Emperor.」

Then, the warrior inscribed an unexpected name in his speech bubble.

Madman 「I am waiting for the day the Sword Emperor returns, having been defeated by him.」

From that moment, the story the warrior shared was straightforward.

Madman 「According to the Sword Emperor, I was someone who died in the same world as he was born and brought up in. In other words, I was once a hunter.」

"....."

Madman 「It's a story I can't remember, but here, in this world, the Sword Emperor certainly said so. Therefore, it cannot be a lie. At least, he believed without a doubt that I was 'an old warrior who lived and died in the same world as him'. In other words, the Sword Emperor and I were acquaintances.」

"...Did the Sword Emperor tell you what name you had in life?"

Madman 「 He did. 」

The warrior recited the alias he couldn't remember.

I turned to look at the Guardian Spirit.

"Is that correct?"

Idiot 「 Yeah. Right. And every time his speech bubble appears, the name displayed is also the one I know. What he's saying is probably true. 」

The Guardian Spirit confirmed the facts.

Madman 「 To think the world I lived in was actually the afterlife. It was surprising, but there's no need to subjectively be surprised by something objectively surprising. I dueled with the Sword Emperor and lost. However, the Sword Emperor said, 'I have no hobby of killing an old fellow countryman who's already dead,' and did not take my life. 」

"....."

Madman 「It was indeed a humiliating act. Even if it was a past life, it's a life I can't remember. To tell me to live, no, to die forever defeated? Then, I'd rather he accept another duel later.」

The Guardian Spirit casually accepted the request for a rematch.

Promising to return and fight after breaking through the 100th floor.

Madman 「Time passed.」

And he forgot.

It was inevitable. Events related to the pillars were all meant to be forgotten. That was the law of the tower.

Unlike me, the Guardian Spirit did not secure immunity to memory loss. And the [Staff of Time Immemorial] was not as kind as to teach everything to the Guardian Spirit as it did for me.

Upon reaching the 80th floor, the Guardian Spirit's memories from the 70th to the 79th floor would have been completely distorted.

Madman 「 Well, I think the Sword Emperor is dead. 」

"....."

Madman 「 No. Maybe he just can't find where I am. The world is quite vast. I settled here and threatened anyone who came, fearing he might not find me. Thanks to that, my notoriety spread. Enough to reach the entire world. In other words, there's no way he can't find me now. 」

I sighed.

In the end, the Guardian Spirit's reckless promises were the cause of all misdeeds.

"You're really causing trouble..."

Idiot 「 No, no. Wait. I might not know about other things, but this time, I'm unfairly accused. I really don't remember, you know? 」

"That's the problem, that very fact that you don't remember. Really."

Idiot 「Grr...」

Just like on the 50th floor, there are many issues left unresolved because this guy failed to conquer the 100th floor.

I'm unintentionally cleaning up the messes the Guardian Spirit made while climbing the tower.

Madman 「It seems you know quite a bit about the Sword Emperor.」

"Yes. It's too complicated to explain in detail, but... You can roughly consider me a disciple of the Sword Emperor. And I doubt the Sword Emperor will ever return to duel with you."

Madman 「Is that so.」

The warrior's indifferent expression (= \_ =) remained unchanged.

Madman 「Then I must capture you instead of the Sword Emperor.」

"Ah... So it comes to this, huh?"

Madman 「Of course. If I retreat now, it means I've wasted a long time for nothing. If the Sword Emperor is dead, that's all there is to it, and it's my own anxiety. But if the disciple of the Sword Emperor has appeared, it's a different story. You might see it as an irrelevant venting, but I want to alleviate my frustration by defeating you. No. It's definitely venting. I'll take out my frustration on you.」

"Straightforward, aren't you?"

Madman 「Is that so? I wouldn't know. I'm unfamiliar with the concept opposite to honesty.」

Well, fine.

I came here intending to defeat him anyway, so it doesn't matter.

It's not just about hunting a madman, but also about



cleaning up the Guardian Spirit's mess, which has its own significance.

Madman 「Then, let's have a fair fight.」

Thump!

Stepping on the ground and marking it with large fonts, the warrior charged at me. I, too, drew my holy sword. As i waited for an opportunity, watching the warrior swing his sword wide—

'Wait?'

I realized a fatal flaw at that moment.

'Huh? What?'

I extended my perception of time with aura. In the elongated timeline, the warrior was raising his sword high. If it had been a normal situation, I would have also raised my sword to block. That was the standard.

The problem was.

'...Where exactly is he swinging his sword?'

From my perspective, accustomed to three-dimensional fights, the warrior's two-dimensional sword swings were completely unfamiliar!

'Upper right? Lower left? Or just straightforward? So should I also raise my sword straight to block? Wait, how do I deflect the sword to the side? Is deflecting even possible here? This is just a flat plane!'

In a hurry, I tried various stances. A stance to block the upper right. A stance to block the upper left.

But the stick figure representation in [this world] was pathetic. I couldn't be certain what stance I was taking, how to completely block the opponent's attack, or even which [path] the opponent was attacking from!

As a result, I could only make a dumbfounded expression!

(;;●Д●) !!?

Madman 「Prepare yourself.」

While I fumbled around, the stick figure warrior didn't seem to care and continued his charge.

"Wait! Just, just a moment! Hold on! Something's strange..."

Swoosh!

The stick figure warrior swung his sword at me. Thus, I was faced with two choices— block the upper part or the lower part.

# Chapter 353: The White Ending (4)

---

“Eeek!? Save me, sir!”

In a situation where I didn't know which side to defend, the conclusion I reached was just a single one.

I rolled over.

This technique of rolling on the ground to exquisitely dodge the enemy's fierce attacks is known as the Lazy Donkey Roll, but in more simple terms...

It was just rolling on the ground 〵 (:3/ 〵) /.

Why? What? I have to survive first!

Madman 「To soil your back with dirt. How unsightly.」

The warrior raised one eyebrow.

In other words, his facial expression was, um, should we stop this now?

There are always old-timers in every field. Compared to other fields, martial arts had a particularly high proportion of such old-timers. According to old-timer studies, the Lazy Donkey Roll was considered a disgrace for a martial artist. They would say something like "that guy is a master yet he used the Lazy Donkey Roll!" and would ridicule the person for 12 years straight. It was typical of martial artists who uphold form over substance.

"Anyway, there's no one looking, so what does it matter! Plus, I'm from the Demonic Cult!"

Madman 「I don't know what the Demonic Cult is, but my excitement has cooled down. No, on the contrary, it might be more accurate to say that my excitement has risen. After seeing your evasion just now, the last bit of obsession in my heart has cooled down. Like a fisherman trying to catch a fish with a harpoon, I'll just cut you down with the sole intention of slaughtering you.」

"This fight is unfair!"

Whooosh! Swaaash!

Every time the warrior swung his sword, sound effects were drawn in sleek fonts. Left? Right? I couldn't tell where the blade was aiming.

Let's say I can distinguish between left and right to some extent. But even if it's [left], including up and down, it's a whopping 180 degrees! Whether the sword was coming down from the 11 o'clock direction or slicing from the 11:30 direction, it was almost impossible to detect such a minute difference!

"Damn it! It's do or die!"

I prefer using delicate and precise swordsmanship. But now, I couldn't precisely identify the enemy's attack path, nor could I strike accurately myself. What to do?! I had no choice but to push through with force!

+

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The Eighth Form.

Sword of Scorching Death.

+

I leaped from the ground and immediately unfolded the Demonic Heavenly God Art. Sword of Scorching Death. As the technique is a 'Sword Combo', it's a martial art that involves swinging the sword consecutively. And I just slammed Aura into the sword groove instead of a blade.

Brutally!

Madman 「.....!」

The warrior hurriedly wielded his sword to block my attack.

Clang! Claaang!

Sword grooves attacked simultaneously, constricting the warrior. It was a mass attack! If I couldn't precisely hit the target, I might as well bombard it savagely!

Out of the seven attacks that plunged in, four completely missed, two were perfectly blocked by the warrior's sword, but the last one pressed down right in the center of the warrior's sword, just as I aimed.

Chaaaaeeng!

The sword held by the warrior shattered into pieces. No matter how great the sword he was wielding, once pushed back by the pressure of Aura, it was no more than a piece of iron.

The warrior raised both his eyebrows, showing a surprised expression, albeit it was hard to recognize and wasn't particularly desirable to recognize.

Madman 「.....To have a connection with the Sword Emperor. It seems it wasn't just a vague connection. Such a ferocious sword energy is truly something I haven't seen in a long time. No, it would be correct to say it's the first since the Sword Emperor.」

The warrior seemed to have reevaluated me internally.

Madman 「At least, you can't be treated as a mere rabble who resorts to the Lazy Donkey Roll.」



"Well, now that you acknowledge me, that's enough...."

From my perspective, it was nerve-wracking.

The recent exchange was purely violence of Aura. It's like swinging your arms wildly, blinded, trying to block an attack whose path you don't know. It was truly reckless.

Sure, if we fight, I will win. But the very act of fighting like this is stressful! The act of exchanging swords on a 2D plane is too unfamiliar!

"Well, you've seen it. I am the one who is expected to conquer the top after the Sword Emperor. In other words, I'm the King of Death. It's not at all shameful for you to surrender. Now, just raise the white flag quietly...."

Madman 「 However, I still have 712 swords left. 」

"What?"

As I mentioned before, the horizon of this world was marked with —. But the base of the 'Mad Warrior' mentioned by the terrified villagers here, just around this area, had lines



Ssshhhing.

One of the swords, waiting in the ground just to fulfill its purpose, was drawn.

The scabbard was still half-buried in the ground, but the blade was now freed in the warrior's hand.

Madman 「It's 712 bouts from now on.」

"....."

Madman 「You have to defeat me within 712 bouts, Hunter.」

Before the word 'Hunter' even finished, I had already sprung into action.

Taat!

I stomped on the ground. The warrior raised his eyes again. Had he not expected me to counterattack without saying anything? Perhaps he was somewhat reassured by my frivolous

actions and words.

But whether it was the Lazy Donkey Roll or a surprise attack, in the end, it's all about the determination to win. Frivolity and pettiness, there's no difference to me. Now that I've confirmed the opponent has no intention of surrendering, all that's left is to fight.

+

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The First Form.

Sword of Starving Death.

+

Sword of Starving Death is a flowing sword.

The attack flows like water, and the entire blade, from tip to hilt, is controlled, making it the Sword of Starving Death. I

concentrate all sensations of the blade in my palm. I control the flow. To put it plainly, I ensure the sword doesn't go off course.

I swung the aura-charged blade broadly from side to side.

Madman 「 Hmm! 」

My sword strike, filled with aura, flew horizontally to the right, continuously to the right, and in the process, it cut through any obstructing swords.

Like an invisible hand, swiftly cutting through rice stalks during harvest.

Thud-thud-thud-thud-

Like rice heads falling, the swords cut by my aura soared into the air.

Madman 「 Indeed, 」

The warrior too, threw his sword. Chaang! A sharp metallic sound echoed in the air. My sword aura and the warrior's blade collided in mid-air, nullifying each other.

It seemed like an equal match. A draw. But out of the 711 swords planted in the ground, 11 had been cut already.

It was a painful loss for the warrior.

Madman 「 So you're coming at me like that! 」

"Yes. Well, I'm coming at you like this."

I can always back off, recharge my aura, and come back.

But what about the warrior? In this land, where east-west trade has been cut off and all residents are afraid to approach, who would come with swords?

The 11 swords the warrior just lost cannot be replenished anytime soon.

Madman 「 Despicable! Petty! 」

"In other words, you're saying the player plays the game shittily, but that's a compliment. Anyway, now you're left with 700 swords. If we consume 10 swords per bout, it doesn't seem like it will be a long battle."

Madman 「 As you wish! 」

The warrior drew another sword.

Madman 「 I'll end it quickly! 」

And he charged at me. Whoosh! Wind sound effects were inscribed in the white world. The pressure was tremendous. Is this what it feels like to be rushed at full speed?

"No."

Towards the opponent charging at me as if he was burning his entire body, I neither showed respect nor screamed in harmony. I just swiftly leaped back.

Madman 「What!」

"I won't fall for such shallow tricks."

The warrior pursued me. During the chase, he launched swords at me. Chaang! Kaang! Chaang, six metallic sounds rang out in an instant.

There was no seventh sword flying towards me.

Madman 「.....!」

The warrior hesitated and stopped his pursuit.

"You didn't just set up shop here and defeat everyone passing by merely because you were considerate of the Sword Emperor possibly getting lost."

The place where the warrior stopped.

It was a swordless zone, where the swords' graveyard ended, and the flat horizon continued; it was a safe area.



"By taking away the swords of everyone passing through here and laying them in the ground, you turned this area into your territory. In other words, a trap. To lure the Sword Emperor, who might revisit this place someday, into the sword hell."

I spoke leisurely.

"But conversely, it also means you can't leave the sword graveyard. The moment you step out, you lose the card to counter my aura. Hmm. The term 'self-inflicted trap' is used here."

Madman 「You...」

"You deliberately used harsh words to provoke me, right? Like saying, [I'll end it quickly as you wish]. You schemed to stir up my fighting spirit. Sorry, but although I'm often called a fool, I'm also known for annoyingly distinguishing between fighting spirit and foolishness."

I infused my sword with aura.

"And now, I'm going to do something even more regrettable to you."

Madman 「What...」

"Like this."

Unsheathing the sword...

Madman 「.....! Kuh!」

I used the Sword of Starving Death again.

The warrior blocked the aura I fired with the sword he was holding.

It couldn't be helped. If left alone, dozens of swords would fly away. If I shoot aura horizontally, the warrior has no choice but to use one sword to defend each time.

"Are there 693 swords left now?"

He couldn't rush at me with a sword either. As mentioned earlier, this is a safe area. A safe place for me is a dead end for the warrior.

"Let's end this quickly."

In the end, the warrior had to keep blocking my aura attacks at the edge of the sword graveyard.

Retreat? My aura would harvest the swords like autumn rice.

Charge forward? After one exchange, the sword would break, and he would lose. There are no swords in the safe area for the warrior to replenish.

He was caught between a rock and a hard place.

I'm sorry to repeat, but the warrior has no other option but to wither away while blocking my aura's continuous attacks.

Literally, a slow death. Slowly. From 600 swords to 300, from 300 to 100, and finally, from 100 to 0.

Madman 「Isn't it shameful! With your level, your swordsmanship must be outstanding. No, swordsmanship should be your true skill. Then, shouldn't we be exchanging sword strikes here to determine the winner!」

"Ah, yes. But that's only good when I win, right? Or when there's a 90% chance I'll win. I'm already uncomfortable in this world, so losing not because of skill but because of stage gimmicks is... How should I put it? Not really... Oh, now there are 690 swords."

Madman 「Kuh!」

"689 swords."

I continued to unleash the Sword of Starving Death. Maybe my aura will run out halfway. So what? If it runs out, I'll go back to the village, rest well, and then come back with a new mindset to crush the warrior's swords.

A perfect plan.

"685 swords."

Madman 「Damn...!」

"680 swords."

Madman 「 This is absurd...! 」

With each sword that broke, the warrior took a step back.

⊥ ⊥ ⊥ turned into — ⊥ ⊥, and then into —— ⊥.

Perhaps the entire sword graveyard will flatten into —— someday.

It's just a matter of time.

Madman 「 This cannot be. My efforts, my sweat and blood, they cannot end in such a petty manner! 」

"Isn't setting up camp here and making a fortress a petty act?"

Madman 「 That was a legitimate preparation! 」

"Then this is a legitimate response!"

The sword graveyard quickly shrank. The original 700 swords were reduced to 500, and the warrior, breathing heavily, glared at me.

Madman 「Huff... Huff, huff...」

It wasn't because he was physically exhausted.

There's no way out. No clever strategy. Being pushed towards the end according to my scheme brings a sense of resignation, causing the warrior to feel fatigued.

And eventually, an explosion occurred.

Madman 「Uoooooh!!」

The Madman stomped his foot. That stomp made the swords surrounding the Madman fly towards me. Like arrows tearing through the air alone.

No, they were actually countless arrows flying horizontally.

"Haah!"

I raised my sword vertically and then brought it down again. Repeating this, I layered aura over aura to create a massive wall.

■

■

■

Towards the wall I created, the stick figure, that is, the warrior, charged in.

The barrage created by throwing swords, followed by the warrior's sword, exploded.

Boom...!

A flurry of attacks ensued.

Boom...! Boom, booom...!

The warrior didn't just use his sword. He used punches, kicks, elbow strikes, knee strikes, headbutts, and hand-chops, literally every type of violence a stick figure could demonstrate, he threw everything at the wall that I created. He spewed it out.

He poured it all out.

And then, he was depleted.

Madman 「 Kuh... 」

Finally, the Madman knelt down.

The wall I created did not break.

■

■



■ OTL

"The match is over."

I said. Probably the speed at which my speech bubble appeared was significantly slower compared to before. As if the message speed was set to the lowest.

Maintaining the wall had also taken a toll on my stamina. But anyway, I was standing, and the warrior was kneeling. The winner and loser were clear.

Madman 「Damn it! Damn...」

The warrior did not object. He just cursed.

Then, it was time for the victor's rights.

I said,

"From now on, you'll have to answer my questions."



# Chapter 354: The White Ending (5)

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The "Madman" who was defeated by the Sword Emperor a long time ago, faced humiliation again after being defeated by me. However, at least the Madman knew to accept humiliation and defeat as they were.

I demanded the rights of the victor. After hearing my demands, the Madman raised an eyebrow.

Madman 「You want me to assume whatever position you desire?」

"Yes, that's correct."

By the way, the 'Madman's' real name was Mad Warrior. He was literally a mad warrior.

He used to have a different name. However, when he met the Sword Emperor in the past and heard, "Hey, your original nickname was Mad Warrior before you died," he reclaimed the

title he had during his lifetime. It was a peculiar fate in many ways.

"I'm still unfamiliar with the principles of this world. Honestly, the martial arts I've practiced until now are almost useless here because this world is too different from the one I lived in."

Mad Warrior 「So you defeated me with martial arts that have almost become useless.」

"Yes, that's right."

Mad Warrior 「...Don't people usually deny it or at least pretend to deny it in such situations?」

The Madman made a face of disbelief. Hmm, I've become accustomed to this Heaven, so I can quickly interpret the expressions of others.

But more than reading expressions, I sought a much more challenging realm.

"My world is different from here. Not only does it have front

and back, but it also has right and left. Even if you swing a sword from top to bottom, the upper right is different from the upper left."

Mad Warrior 「I've heard such talk from the Sword Emperor as well. From my perspective, it's utter nonsense... No, if that's how it is for you, then so be it.」

"Well. I intend to comply with a fair duel, as you wish."

The Madman blinked.

Mad Warrior 「Really?」

"Yes. But that's after I become familiar with the laws of this world."

This was exactly what I demanded from the Madman as the victor's right.

"I need to know how the upper left of my world is expressed here, and how a waist cut from my world appears here. Please demonstrate every movement I can make, as a resident of this world."

Mad Warrior 「I don't understand what you're saying. I'm a born warrior. Speak plainly.」

"Please step forward."

The Madman moved as I instructed.

I observed closely and with all my concentration how 'martial arts movements' were represented on a 2-dimensional plane.

"Good. Now, please take the upper position."

Mad Warrior 「...I'll comply with your request since I lost, but is there any point to this?」

"The decision of its meaning is also the right of the victor, isn't it? Please do it."

Mad Warrior 「Hmph...」

Although the Madman was skeptical, he assumed every

posture I asked for.

The postures were neat. Despite his defeats to the Sword Emperor and me, the Madman was at the very least, a contender for the strongest in this world. My Aura was overwhelmingly less than his, which meant that he was a martial artist who didn't rely much on Aura.

To firmly understand [2D martial arts movements], there couldn't be a better specimen than this. I kept making demands.

"Next, please take the lower position."

"What does my current posture look like to you? What movements should you make to counter my posture?"

"I'm not asking you to show me secret techniques, just the basic movements. If you're a swordsman, any basic cutting movements will suffice."

Initially, the Madman complied with my requests with a disgruntled face, but as time passed, he began to understand the intent behind my demands.

Mad Warrior 「...I see.」

The Madman smirked. It was the first smile he had shown in front of me.

Mad Warrior 「You're translating my postures into your own terms, I see.」

"That's right."

Mad Warrior 「By now, you must be busy dissecting and transforming my postures into something of your own in your mind.」

Although a beat late, the Madman had read my intentions.

Ultimately, the reason I couldn't display precise swordsmanship in this 2D world was that I wasn't familiar with how my postures were represented here and what movements of the Madman corresponded to in my terms.

Thus, I requested the Madman to perform basic movements, while I rearranged every gesture, foot movement, and action according to the martial arts of my world.



Mad Warrior 「How long do you think it will take for you to become accustomed to 'our world'? 」

"I'm not sure."

At the moment, I was reproducing various movements in my mind.

Imagination is like a muscle. It can be trained, and with training, it becomes clearer. Aura is the muscle of the mind. As I became proficient with Aura, my mental images became more precise, and now I could run various simulations in my mind.

"About half a day? I should be fairly accustomed by then."

Mad Warrior 「After you've become accustomed, do you intend to challenge me to a duel again? 」

"Yes, since you desire a fair and square duel."

Mad Warrior 「...So, I'm currently making my enemy stronger in real-time, am I not? 」

The Madman sighed heavily.

Mad Warrior 「 But that is precisely the battle I desired, so I cannot refuse. Perhaps, I will lose to you in the second duel as well. Knowing I will lose, yet unable to stop myself. Caught between a rock and a hard place, over and over again. 」

With those words, the Madman ceased his lament. Silently moving his feet and swinging his sword, he simply repeated postures to help me become accustomed to fighting in 2D.

Half a day passed.

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I sat cross-legged, immersing myself in my thoughts for hours.

As the saying goes, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do," I had to become familiar with this world first if I wanted to defeat the strongest of the Heavenly World purely with the fighting methods of this place.

'The stick is not a stick, but a sword.'

Swoosh, swoosh. In my mind, the I-shaped stick swung by the opponent was perceived as a sharply honed sword. I struggled to perceive it as such.

'Not just swords, but everything must be seen this way.'

— is not a line but the ground.

▲ is not a triangle but a mountain.

⊂;^;^;, ⊃ is not a jest of dots and curves but a cloud.

This was the true appearance of this world, the form I had to genuinely accept.

"....."

I blinked.

As the sun set and the white sky gradually turned black, when I no longer considered the black sunset any less red than the red sunset, I unknowingly murmured softly.

"However, if that's the case, shouldn't my voice also not be heard like everyone else's?"

It was at that moment.

[You have shown respect for the laws of the Heaven of Truth!]

[The Constellation The Faceless Conductor permits you to

stay in the Heaven of Truth.]

[A minor penalty has been applied.]

I blinked again.

Me 「What's changed?」

As soon as I spoke, I realized what had changed.

Me 「My voice isn't audible.」

What I thought appeared as a dotted speech bubble, and what I spoke out loud appeared as a solid speech bubble. Neither was a monologue.

Is this the [Penalty]?

But at least for me now, it didn't feel like a penalty.

Me 「 Hmm. 」

I slowly unraveled my cross-legged posture and stood up.

Me 「 You've waited long. 」

Mad Warrior 「 ..... 」

The Madman, who was repeating basic movements, paused. His pupils were pitch black. His eyes, resembling black wells, looked at me.

Mad Warrior 「 Have you really become accustomed to it? ...Already? 」

Me 「 If it were the Sword Emperor, he would've adapted in an instant. It took me half a day to barely get used to it, so it's not something to be praised for. 」

It was a strange sensation. Or should I say, a normal sensation?

In the Heaven of Music, I couldn't hear sounds either. But here, sound itself was absent. The senses needed to live in this world were much fewer and much fainter than in the original world.

Me 「It's comfortable.」

Mad Warrior 「...Ha.」

The Madman adjusted his posture. It wasn't a posture to show me as an example. It was a posture of aiming his sword tip at me, wanting to fight me once again.

Mad Warrior 「Indeed. That's why you lot lived, and I diad.」

After muttering something which wasn't directed to anyone in particular, the Madman spoke.

Mad Warrior 「I've already lost once. However, my spirit hasn't fully acknowledged the defeat. Shamelessly, I want to request a rematch. Will you accept?」

Me 「I'm embarrassed for making you wait so long.」

Unlike the first fight, both the Madman and I observed formalities this time.

Me 「I am the Vice-lord of the Demonic Cult, the King of Death.」

Mad Warrior 「King of Death, why do you indulge in my whims?」

Me 「I consider the Sword Emperor my master.」

The Guardian Spirit, who had been silently listening to our conversation, widened its eyes in shock. This is the Heaven of Truth. Lies and false flattery don't work here. Surprised by my unhesitant reference to 'master,' he reacted.

But it was too early to be surprised. I spoke freely.

Me 「My master is shameless and foolish, lacking the foresight to consider consequences, hastily making promises and oaths, leading many into despair. How is this any different from an animal that relies only on its strength? As a disciple, it's embarrassingly unbearable for me.」



Idiot 「 Hey!? 」

Me 「 But no matter how stupid and petty he is, he taught me the sword. Even if the shit he's stirred spreads over three thousand li[1], as an undutiful disciple, I have no choice but to shovel and spread the stench bit by bit. You are also a victim of the shit spread by my master. 」

Idiot 「 Hey! ...Hey!? Why does everything you're saying sound shockingly true from my perspective!? 」

Quiet, please.

Me 「 Therefore, I have a duty to restore the honor of my sect and settle the dishonor of my master. Even though you are a criminal who blocked the trade routes between the east and west, causing inconvenience and harm to many, if we think about it, my master is the one who committed a great crime. I will convert you and set things right. 」

Mad Warrior 「 Ha, ha! 」

The Madman burst into laughter.

Mad Warrior 「It's astonishing that all those words came from sincerity. But can you really convert me? No, it's impossible. Come!」

And so, I went.

Mad Warrior 「...!」

In one strike, the sword held by Mad Warrior shattered. It wasn't the result of launching Aura from a distance. My Holy Sword had struck down his sword from above.

It happened in an instant.

Mad Warrior 「Ha,」

Although hundreds of swords had been destroyed in the sword graveyard, hundreds more remained. Mad Warrior quickly picked up another sword stuck in the ground.

Mad Warrior 「In the end,」

I extended my front foot, no, my front leg, to strike the Madman's hand. Thwack! The Madman, who hadn't even managed to lift his sword yet, staggered.

Mad Warrior 「Is it my fate to lose no matter how I fight!」

Using the momentum from striking with my front leg, I kicked the Madman's body with my back leg. The Madman tried his best to block my attack with his arms. I put my whole body into the kick, losing my balance, and the Madman's stance was already broken, but I had a sword in my hand.

Me 「Yes.」

Thrust.

During the time the Madman had to grab and pull out the sword handle, all I had to do was lift and aim my Holy Sword. The Holy Sword was pointed right under the Madman's chin.

Mad Warrior 「.....」

Me 「If you're not satisfied, I'm willing to fight again as many times as you like.」

Mad Warrior 「 ...No. I've lost. 」

The Madman smiled weakly.

Mad Warrior 「 I lost to the Sword Emperor, and now to his disciple. It's a dismal outcome after such a long wait, but still, it's a result. ...Thank you. 」

Me 「 Not at all. 」

Now, the 'madman' blocking the passage between the east and west in this world will disappear.

I don't know where he'll go to train again or whether he'll travel around the villages he's troubled to make amends, but I had no intention of cutting the throat of this witness who remembers the Sword Emperor.

Me 「 Among the locals from the 70th to the 80th floor, you're probably the only one who remembers my master. I have something to ask you. 」

Mad Warrior 「 Ask anything you wish. 」

Me 「Between the Sword Emperor and me, who is stronger? 」

The Madman closed his eyes. After a long while, he opened his mouth.

Mad Warrior 「The Sword Emperor is half a step stronger than you. 」

Half a step, huh.

In that half step, there must be the Sword Essence.

[The judge you've chosen has given you a passing mark!]

Perhaps, the Apothecary was waiting for me to conclude any matter. As soon as the Madman openly declared his surrender, messages were etched into the black sky as if waiting for this moment.

[You have received the recognition of the judge.]

[You can declare Stage Clear at any time.]

I turned my back on the Madman.

[1]: Li, also known as the Chinese mile, is a traditional Chinese unit of distance. The li has varied considerably over time but was usually about one third of an English mile and now has a standardized length of a half-kilometer. This is then divided into 1,500 chi or "Chinese feet".

# Chapter 355: The White Ending (6)

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After wrapping up matters with the Madman, I found myself with some spare time. I glanced towards a corner of the world.

[You can declare a Stage Clear at any time.]

The words were floating there.

As I waved my hand, the letters dispersed like grains of sand. Standing in the middle of the land (since the world moves with me, I was always in the center), I was deep in thought.

Idiot 「What are you doing? Aren't you going back to the lobby?」

Me 「No. Suddenly, I thought that I might fail at the 99th floor too.」

Idiot 「.....」

Me 「I believe I've become quite strong. Perhaps, with my current strength, I could even compete with my master before her enlightenment. Stronger than me, and even stronger than my master, you were half a step ahead, Sword Emperor. Yet, even someone as powerful as you died at the 99th floor.」

I couldn't even begin to imagine what awaited at the 99th floor that led to the Sword Emperor's death. It was beyond my comprehension. From that point, anxiety grew like a poisonous mushroom.

I looked straight at the Guardian Spirit.

Me 「What's on the 99th floor? Can't you tell me yet?」

Idiot 「.....」

Me 「If you tell me, I can prepare. I can devise a strategy, right?」

Idiot 「Hmm. Well, that's a valid point, but it's only a point.」



Me 「What do you mean?」

Idiot 「I just don't want to tell you about the 99th floor.」

Me 「Are you really a child?」

Idiot 「Enough. Let's take a walk.」

Me 「Walk? You're a spirit, you can't even walk....」

Then, for the first time since meeting the Guardian Spirit, I witnessed something. Depending on the perspective, it was a remarkable sight or merely an ordinary scene.

The Guardian Spirit, who almost always floated gently in the air, was now walking on the ground, step by step.

Idiot 「Aren't you coming?」

Me 「But... you don't have a body. How can you...」

To my eyes, the Guardian Spirit truly appeared to be walking.

Me 「Did you gain a body? As I climb the tower, do you gradually gain a physical form? Something like that...」

Idiot 「Idiot. I'm just pretending to walk.」

Me 「What?」

Idiot 「Tsk, no use explaining. Just follow me.」

The Guardian Spirit turned and walked away. I, as if possessed by a ghost, followed.

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Mountains stretched on and clouds drifted by. The world was as silent as the Guardian Spirit. I silently followed the silent man.

Idiot 「The Madman said the difference between you and me is only half a step.」

After a long walk, the Guardian Spirit finally spoke.

Idiot 「Zombie, what do you think that half step difference is?」

Me 「I think it's the Sword Essence.」

Idiot 「Right. The Sword Essence. I can use it, and your master figured it out right before closing her eyes. So, how can

one awaken and freely wield the Sword Essence? 」

Me 「 ..... 」

I instinctively felt that this conversation was extremely important. Yes, the Guardian Spirit was trying to teach me something, just like when I first awakened my Aura.

Me 「 The Sword Essence is the sword of the heart. If you imbue your heart into the sword, wouldn't that work? 」

Idiot 「 You've already reached the pinnacle of the Demonic Heavenly God Art. You've freely deciphered it and even devised formations. In the realm of imbuing the heart into the sword, there's hardly any meaningful difference between you and me. 」

Me 「 Then, is it a matter of the type of heart you imbue? 」

Idiot 「 That's bullshit. Dive deeper into it. 」

Step by step. I realized something as I followed the Guardian Spirit. It felt distant. More distant than before. The Guardian Spirit's back was slightly further away.

Me 「.....」

The stride hadn't changed. The way the Guardian Spirit walked remained the same. Yet, somehow, the pace, the speed at which the horizon was traversed, had changed.

I had to quicken my steps not to fall behind the Guardian Spirit.

Idiot 「Most martial artists will never even glimpse the Sword Essence in their lifetime. Not most, but 99.99% of them. But you, incredibly lucky, have witnessed the Sword Essence twice, haven't you? Then, you should grasp a hint of enlightenment from there.」

Me 「Twice...」

Idiot 「Yes. Let's set aside mine since it was just an illusion. But what about your master? Didn't she show you the Sword Essence for the last time before leaving the world?」

Step, step.

The Guardian Spirit's back grew even more distant.

However, the Guardian Spirit was just walking at a regular pace.

I, too, had to increase my speed.

Idiot 「Let me ask you. Did your master have any inner energy left then? 」

I recalled the last time I embraced my master's shoulders. The sensation of something that shouldn't die, dying in my arms. It was a painful memory, but remembering someone was always hard.

Me 「No. 」

Idiot 「Did she use up her true energy when she broke the seal? Was there any vital energy left? 」

Me 「...No. 」

Idiot 「Did she have any physical strength left? 」

Me 「 No. Master had absolutely no energy left. 」

Idiot 「 So, no inner energy, no true energy and no physical strength. Yet, how could your master use the Sword Essence? Why did the mountain split open? Did the mountain split open on its own out of respect for the Grand Master of the Demonic Sect? 」

Me 「 ..... 」

I clenched my teeth.

Not because I was deep in thought, but because the Guardian Spirit had become so fast that I had to run at full speed or he would disappear from sight in an instant, forcing me to bite down and use light-foot techniques.

Step! Step!

Idiot 「 There was nothing left in your master. So... 」

Me 「 She must have drawn from the outside. 」

The landscape flashed by at breakneck speed.

Me 「If there's no inner energy, then you must use external energy.」

Idiot 「Right. That's the logical conclusion.」

Clouds passed by, mountains and forests, countless villages.

Idiot 「What is external energy? Life... vitality, something like that?」

Me 「Oh, impressive. Using such abstract terms, you're quite adept at imitating Homo sapiens.」

Me 「This foolish spirit....」

Idiot 「Inner energy, or ki, is, in other words, Aura. It's the realization of your will. It's no different from writing down the images in your mind and engraving them on paper. If the paper is the world, then the characters are Aura. Then, what is external energy?」



Step.

Idiot 「What in this world could be called the will of the world?」

At that moment, my tongue moved instinctively.

Me 「Constellations.」

Idiot 「.....」

Me 「It's the Constellations. Constellations define the laws of the world. Or rather, there are Constellations that define the laws of the world. They are the masters of the stage, and if a stage is a world, then they are the masters of a world. If they will something, it's as if the world itself wills it.」

I realized as I spoke. Not because I understood and then spoke, but because I understood as I spoke. What would have remained vague if I had only thought about it became clear as I put it into words.

Me 「It can't just be nature. There must be Constellations in that place. Constellations that rule that place. Only in such a

world can you draw external energy, and that external energy is the inner energy of the Constellations. The Sword Essence is about drawing the inner energy of Constellations.」

Idiot 「Right! To freely use the Sword Essence, one must become one with the Constellation that rules that world. Without Constellations, there's no will, and without will, there's no Sword Essence.」

The Guardian Spirit's laughter floated lightly.

Idiot 「In the world your master lived in, the Constellation 'The Golden Dragon of the Great River' reigned supreme. That Constellation, cursed to never die even with the sword of Constellation Killer embedded in its heart, defined the rules of that world with its resentment of 'not being able to die'. Thus, the humans living in that world became 'bodies that couldn't die', zombies, or gangshi.」

We sped past the last village and finally only mountains, forests, and clouds stretched on endlessly.

Idiot 「So how could one draw the inner energy of such a world's Constellation?」

Me 「...You have to become more of a Constellation than the

Constellation itself.」

I felt like I knew the answer.

Me 「The Constellation suffered from the sword embedded in its heart, unable to die. But... my master suffered more. More than the agony of 'not being able to die', my master, without a doubt, suffered more than that Constellation.」

In other words.

Me 「If you want to freely use Mutia's power, you just have to be more obsessed with time than Mutia. If you desire return more fervently than Mutia, then you can freely wield the Sword Essence in Mutia's world.」

Becoming even more like your opponent.

Me 「To use the power of Hisimet Cretsu as if it were your own, not by commanding it but to freely use it, you have to be more obsessed with people's secrets than Hisimet Cretsu.」

That was the principle of the Sword Essence.

Me 「To kill winter, you have to become more like winter than winter itself.」

How far had we run?

C;^;^;;ヅ

-----

The mountains flattened to meet the horizon, and the forests dwindled to the ground. Only the sky managed to hold onto a few clouds. As the Guardian Spirit walked step by step, and I ran, the world gradually whitened.

Suddenly, I wondered if this world too had an end.

Me 「The Sword Essence isn't a panacea that can always be used. Only when you understand that world. Only when you feel that world more bitterly than the world itself, can you barely use it. But... if that's the case.」

I stopped.

The Guardian Spirit also stopped and turned to look at me.

Me 「How could you use the Sword Essence in my master's world?」

There, at the end of the world, even the clouds had vanished.

-----

Only the horizon could be seen.

No mountains or trees.

Only the bottom edge of the world stretched infinitely. A single line of black and a surrounding white. As Aura amplified my senses, as far as possible, my vision expanded. My view became ten, thirty, a hundred times broader than usual.

-----

Yet, the world remained white.

It was beautiful.

A pale vastness, silent and devoid of all sound, lay there. A boundary where even breathing seemed forbidden, a world of rest where everything... faded... away.

I thought someone might consider this place heaven. And this place deserved to be someone's heaven.

There, the Guardian Spirit's eyes were looking back at me.

Sword Emperor 「 Watch closely. 」

The Guardian Spirit raised his arm.

Sword Emperor 「 I'll show you for the third time. 」

His arm moved slowly.

Sword Emperor 「 The next time you see this, it will be when you and I fight. 」

And then...

-----

Something split silently.

-----

I blinked. In the blink of an eye, while my eyelids closed and opened, the silently split crevice quietly widened. It seemed as if the more the crevice widened, the more it consumed the time of this world, erasing it.

-----

The white crevice expanded uncontrollably. It wasn't that the world was collapsing, nor was it being destroyed. It simply vanished. Erased.

It was being cut by a sword.

[The Faceless Conductor notices an anomaly in the stage.]

The master of the cut world spoke.

[The Faceless Conductor urgently requests your departure.]

[The request for departure has been forwarded to The Staff of Time Immemorial.]

[Approved.]

Finally, my entire field of vision turned white.

[You are forcibly transported to the 70th floor.]

My vision swirled chaotically.

Black diluted, white intensified, and various colors swirled together. My mind began to feel nauseous. My senses, perfectly adapted to the 2D world, were forcibly dragged back to the original world.

"Such outrageous behavior...!!"



The voice of 'The Staff of Time Immemorial' thundered in my head like a clap of thunder.

"Are you aware of what almost happened!? If you cleared the stage, you should've quietly returned. Moreover, my goodness. How dare a non-challenger, an outsider, presume...!"

I struggled to open my eyes.

The face of the mage, stained with dismay and anger, was before me.

"You, the unparalleled troublemakers of this world!!"

"....."

Despite the nausea, I managed to speak.

Even in difficult times, there are moments when one must speak.

"That's not right. Since there are two of us, rather than

being an unparalleled nuisance, we should be called a nuisance with only the two of us..."

Kang!

The mage swung his staff and hit me on the head.

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# Chapter 356:

## Return to the Origin

### (1)

---

The mage, The Staff of Time Immemorial, sighed.

"...I can't remember the last time I felt such astonishment, Sword Emperor. Though I can't see you nor have you spoken to me directly, I must tell you, there is a reason you failed to conquer the Zenith of Heaven."

The mage massaged his forehead, clearly exasperated.

It was unusual for her to show such strong emotions, given her normally stoic nature. The impact of the Sword Essence demonstrated by the Guardian Spirit must have been quite profound.

"Hmm. What exactly happened...?"

I shook my head, trying to clear it. The aftereffects of transitioning back from the flat world to the original world had not yet dissipated. A wave of nausea clung to my throat.

"What happened? Oh, something monumental."

At my question, the Staff of Time Immemorial frowned.

"The stage almost collapsed."

"Collapsed, you say...?"

"Literally. Some stages are Constellations in themselves. If a stage is destroyed, the Constellation suffers as well. The ghost you've been carting around... it nearly sliced through the stage."

"Excuse me? Mr. Gong-Ja has a ghost following him around?"

The Apothecary blinked in surprise, hearing this for the first time. However, the Staff of Time Immemorial seemed too irritated to address her confusion.

"Had we left it as is, the wound inflicted by your ghost would have widened, expanding rapidly. The Heaven of Truth would have been cut like paper! While there are several worlds that could substitute for the 75th floor, what a shock it must have been for the souls resting in the Heaven of Truth, akin to a bolt from the blue!"

The mage glared into the void, as if she would slap the Guardian Spirit if it were in front of him.

"I can't fathom what was going through your mind to do such a thing."

-Not at all. I was merely placing my trust in you.

The Guardian Spirit crossed its arms, chuckling.

-Even if the world were to crumble, I believed you would do your utmost to prevent it. Yes, you might say I trusted in your goodness. In fact, you should be thanking me for acknowledging your virtue, coming from someone like me.

"What's your ghost saying?"

"Ah."

Kim Gong-Ja, a moment of contemplation in a split second.

"It says it swung the sword thoughtlessly and apologizes."

"At least it knows shame, that's a relief."

The mage clicked his tongue.

Watching him, a twinge of guilt pricked at my conscience for having relayed the Guardian Spirit's nonsensical words and offloading the stress onto him... But, wait. Upon reflection, wasn't conveying the Guardian Spirit's absurdities directly, thus transferring the stress onto someone else, the epitome of a guilt-free conscience?

"....."

While we conversed, the Apothecary seemed lost in thought. Hearing about the existence of a ghost accompanying me might have plunged her into contemplation, so I inquired.

"What's the matter?"

"Ah, it's nothing, really. Hmm. Just wondering why I was selected as the judge for the 75th floor. It's been bothering me."

Fortunately, her concerns weren't related to the Guardian Spirit.

"By the way, Mr. Gong-Ja. Could you tell me about the judges before me and what their stages were like?"

It wasn't a difficult request, so I explained it to her in detail. Listening to my story, the Apothecary's eyes, even behind thick glasses, darkened noticeably.

"...As I thought."

The Apothecary murmured.

"Mr. Gong-Ja, if I were to die, I'd end up in the Heaven of Truth."

"Excuse me?"

"That's the criterion for the judges, the heaven they would go in the afterlife."

My eyes widened in surprise, while the Apothecary narrowed hers.

"Think about it. The world judged by the Paladin was the Heaven of Music, right?"

"Yes, that's correct, but..."

"The Paladin is, of course, an expert in music. So, it makes sense she was in charge of the Heaven of Music. Yes, but if that's the case, shouldn't I have been summoned to the Heaven of Medicine? After all, my expertise lies in medicine."

The Apothecary spoke in a hushed tone.

"But instead, I was summoned to the Heaven of Truth. Completely unrelated to my field of expertise. I'm certainly not known for [not lying] or having specialized knowledge in [2D planes]."



"....."

"So, who becomes a judge isn't determined by whether they're an expert or not. Absolutely not."

Indeed.

I found myself mimicking the Apothecary's narrowed gaze.

"If the Paladin were to die, she would be reborn in the Heaven of Music. If the Countess were to die, she'd go to the Heaven of Gold. If Viper dies, he'd go to the Heaven of Martial Arts, and if the Heretic Inquisitor dies, he'd end up in the Heaven of Laws. And..."

"Yes, if I were to die, I'd be in the Heaven of Truth."

The Apothecary nodded.

"While you were challenging the stage, Mr. Gong-Ja, I pondered what afterlife I'd desire if I were to die and reach the other side. It was hard to imagine, but... Hmm. I concluded I'd want to be in a world where [I wouldn't have to worry about what others truly thought]."

"...I see."

"Yes, that's what I thought. Therefore, the Heaven of Truth is the afterlife I desire."

I shifted my gaze. The Apothecary also looked in the direction I turned.

There, the Staff of Time Immemorial was silently enduring our stares.

"Is that true?"

"...Yes. Correct. You've hit the mark."

The mage responded rather refreshingly.

[The Staff of Time Immemorial acknowledges the accuracy of your interrogation.]

[You have unveiled a secret that The Staff of Time Immemorial had concealed.]

The message popped up, confirming it for me. How considerate.

"Originally, I planned to reveal [all the heavens you've experienced so far are such and such] when you reached the 79th floor, to give off a final boss vibe."

The mage looked as though she had lost a cherished hidden toy.

"But you figured it out much sooner than I expected. Ah. There goes the element of surprise."

"...Is the heaven I'd go to after dying also predetermined?"

"Hmm."

The mage smiled enigmatically.

"That's a question I can't recklessly answer. It's not up to me to decide. Anyway, Apothecary, was it? You've done well. You may go now."

With a tap of his staff on the ground, the Apothecary's feet began to undulate like a swamp. A forced summoning had begun. The Apothecary flailed as she sank into the ground.

"Ah! Go, Mr. Gong-Ja! Fighting! Though I heard I'd forget about this incident, you'll remember..."

"That's right."

I smiled and saw the Apothecary off.

"I look forward to the special potions you'll develop next."

Plonk-

In an instant, the Apothecary's figure vanished below the surface. Only a ripple remained where she had disappeared, quickly settling down.

After a moment's delay, the 70th-floor lobby was enveloped in a chilling white hue.

'Only I will remember these stages.'

It wasn't a new realization.

I shrugged and turned to the mage.

"Alright then. Who's the next judge? Anastasia? Sir Marcus? Considering only the top hunters have been summoned so far, the ranking must play a part in the selection criteria."

"More precisely, it's chosen among those deeply connected to you."

"Then is it Uburka? Or perhaps, Raviel?"

"Both are deeply connected to you, indeed. But neither desires an afterlife. King of Death."

The mage tapped the ground again with his staff.

"This time, the judge evaluating you might be a bit more troublesome."

Whoosh!

A light blossomed around the tip of his staff. If you looked closely, the blooming pattern resembled a lotus. As the neatly arranged lotus petals parted, a figure flickered through the beams of light.

"Uh— What's this?"

Like the previous judges, this newly summoned figure was all too familiar. Among the few people I hoped never to forget even in death, he was one.

And not in a good way.

"A summoning? Is this the famed summoning I've only heard about? What kind of unprincipled bastard summons a working man? The nerve! At least have the decency to greet me."

"....."

"What? Is something wrong? Have my eyes deceived me? It seems the very paragon of virtue, a name synonymous with

the learned scholar, stands before me. Well, who else but you would summon me? I was naive to think otherwise. Why? What's your purpose this time? Shall I dance again?"

I muttered the name of the newly summoned judge, covering my forehead with my palm.

"Yoo Soo-Ha..."

"That is my name."

Of all people, why him?

My head throbbed.

He was indeed "deeply connected to me," making him a fitting choice.

"Why are you here...?"

"What? You're asking me? You summoned me."

Yoo Soo-Ha narrowed his eyes, his thin but pronounced brows furrowing elegantly.

"Wait a minute. Hey, I thought my days living in your shadow were over. Can I still be summoned by you? Is this even legal?"

Yoo Soo-Ha had long shed the status of a summoned ghoul from Ghoul Summoning. Through the skill Earth Bone Dragon's Skull I acquired from the Tower Master, he had obtained a new body.

He probably thought the days of being summoned at my whim, possibly to perform something as ludicrous as the Cossack dance, were over. The desperation in his voice as he explained his pitiable situation hinted at his fear of such an outcome.

"You bastard. Stop exploiting me. I'm trying to turn over a new leaf and live diligently! Don't you see what I'm wearing? This is my part-time uniform. I was working at the planetarium before you summoned me, part-timing!"

Yoo Soo-Ha seemed to think I had performed the summoning.



Perhaps he feared being ordered to perform another dance. He began to fervently explain his unfortunate circumstances.

"I have to rush to the Celestial Martial Guild after my shift! Because of you, I have to slog away as a disciple there, huh? Do you have any idea how much I'm suffering, you heartless..."

"Scared?"

"What?"

"Are you scared I'll make you do something weird?"

"That bastard..."

Yoo Soo-Ha's expression soured.

"Now that you're the 2nd ranked hunter, have a top hunter as a personal bodyguard, are friends with all the major guild leaders, and married the most beautiful person in the world, do you see me as just dogwater?"

"Yep."

"Damn it."

Yoo Soo-Ha seemed to reluctantly accept that he could indeed be seen as H<sub>2</sub>O.

"Anyway, I didn't summon you this time."

"Then who did?"

"It's a long story."

I delved into the lengthy explanation.

About how I'm currently trying to conquer floors 70 through 79. To advance, it's not enough for me to excel; approval from the chosen judge is necessary. And this time, unfortunately, it's him.

".....Hmm."

Yoo Soo-Ha crossed his arms.

Before hearing the story, a slight unease fluttered between his brows, but now it had vanished.

His dark eyes, inscrutable, scanned me from head to toe.

"So, to sum up. To move on to the next floor, I absolutely have to approve, right?"

"Correct."

"No matter if it takes ten years or a hundred, I can just sit here and watch you stumble through the stage."

"That's right."

"And the flow of time differs between the stage and here, so if I wish, I can speed through long periods swiftly?"

Yoo Soo-Ha's probing made me feel uneasy, but I couldn't lie when the Staff of Time Immemorial would just explain

everything anyway.

"...Yes."

"Figures. I've got my answer."

Yoo Soo-Ha smirked.

It was a devilish smile.

"Let's start with a dance, Gong-Ja."

What?

"Of course, by dance, I mean the one I performed. That dance. The Cognac Dance or whatever... You know it best since you were the one who ordered it. Let's assess your dancing skills first. We can talk about the stage afterward."

Hold on.

"Why? Won't dance? If you don't want to, fine. Let's just start with a hundred years. Even a monster like you would eventually feel like dancing after being stuck on the same stage for a hundred or two hundred years, right?"

Hold on.

"Of course, I don't plan to stop at just one dance. That would be too lenient. Ah, we have so many unresolved feelings between us, don't we, Mr. Gong-Ja?"

You damn bastard.

Editor Note: The gender of 'The Staff of Time Immemorial' has been revealed to be female in the later chapters. We'll be making changes to the previous chapters shortly as well.

# Chapter 357:

## Return to the Origin

### (2)

---

I shouted valiantly.

"How could you do this to me...!"

"There are hundreds of reasons why I can. You bastard."

Yoo Soo-Ha didn't even flutter an eyelash.

I shuddered. Could this guy truly lack blood, tears, and conscience?

In other words, was he indeed Yoo Soo-Ha?

"Yoo Soo-Ha. I secured you a job at the Café Planetarium..."

"Eh. I'm overwhelmed with gratitude, but it's not like I ever asked for it?"

"I gifted you a disciple position under the Celestial Martial Guild Master..."

"Thanks to you, every morning and night, all the muscles in my body joyously tear apart. Much appreciated."

"I gave you back your life...! Snap out of it! Open your eyes!"

"And if my memory hasn't deteriorated, you were the one who killed me in the first place. You fucking bastard. A person without blood, tears, or conscience. Right now, my mental state is crystal clear, and my eyes are bright and alert."

If we're counting, you were the one who tried to kill me first at the 2nd floor hunting ground! Before the regression, I was actually murdered! If we went to court, the judge, spectators, jurors, and even the news reporters would all stand to acknowledge my innocence and your ruthlessness!

"Change..."

I clasped my head with both hands and moaned towards the Staff of Time Immemorial.

"Please, change the judge...!"

"No."

Only a cold reply infiltrated my ears.

"That won't happen, King of Death. The fates of this tower favor you, but sometimes they wish to screw with you as well, even if I don't intend it. Think of it as the price for the chaos you caused on the 75th floor."

This can't be happening.

"There's no way Yoo Soo-Ha is the person most deeply connected to me! What about Uburka? Logically, it should be my son's turn first!"



"Didn't you know? [The Muscle Pig Dreaming of Parricide] doesn't want to go to an afterlife."

"Why not! Is it discrimination against the Earth Spirit Tribe!? Does the tower, which promises a second chance to everyone, even its founder, disregard and belittle our Earth Spirit children!"

"No... it's just that [Muscle Pig] thinks there's no need for an afterlife when you're dead..."

Damn it, Uburka!

Who raised you to become such a cool parricide! Uburka! Here I am, desperately calling out your name, and you can't even hear me!

"Then, Raviel. Yes, my love exists."

I pinned my last hope.

"It makes no sense for Raviel not to be the judge. This is invalid! Summon my Duchess right now!"

"[The Silver-Clad Heart]... Ah, was that title revoked? Anyway, [Duchess Ivansia] doesn't desire an afterlife unless it's with you. Memories with you are far more important than any afterlife."

Ah, Raviel! I feel the same!

Joy overwhelmed me!

But... thinking that the result of this joy is the psychopathic ponytail male brat flickering in and out of my sight within 2 meters, why does my heart ache so...!

"Are we done talking? So, when will you dance?"

Shut your damn mouth.

"...Fine. I'll concede to the judge selection as it is."

I lifted my head. My face was as hard as stone.

"But I will absolutely not dance. Never ever, Yoo Soo-Ha."

"Hah? Didn't you hear what I said? If you don't dance, I'll never stamp the approval. Never, as in forever."

"Don't stamp it."

"What?"

"Do as you like. You'll end up stamping it anyway."

Yoo Soo-Ha looked incredulous.

"Ha, this is a funny situation. Do you think you're so special that I'll stamp the approval just because of you?"

"Because initially, you'll watch me with the thought, 'Let's see how far he can go,' but soon you'll get bored and fast-forward through the boring parts. Still, seeing no change in me, your desire for revenge will be overshadowed by the boredom and tedium of the moment. Roughly 2 days later, you'll have an epiphany, 'What kind of idiotic thing am I doing, let's just go back,' and you'll cut ties, saying, 'Approved, approved, I don't care if you pass or mess up.'"

"Uh...."

Yoo Soo-Ha blinked.

"...That's totally me."

"Exactly. So, there's no chance I'll dance. Wake up from your dream."

"Wait. How do you know what's in my heart so well?"

"Who knows? Maybe because I've once thoroughly stirred up your insides. In a sense, I know your inner thoughts better than you do."

"No fucking way."

Having no more business with the ponytail man who can't speak without swearing, I turned to the Staff of Time Immemorial.

"Please send me to the next stage immediately. I'll just bide my time there. You said this judge might be a bit tricky, right? You were wrong. I'll simply go to the 76th floor and slow down my sense of time. A week will feel like a second, a year like a minute. Before I know it, the stage will be cleared. How about

that? Mage, my victory is now clear."

"Remarkable."

The mage truly marveled at me, as if astonished.

"You really are amazing..."

I'll take it as a compliment.

[The Staff of Time Immemorial sends you off.]

As the two lukewarm gazes saw me off, I was transported to the next floor.

[You have entered the 76th Stage.]

[You are stepping into a place where you should not be.]

What I said to the mage wasn't a lie, it was the truth.

As the white light faded and my feet touched the ground of the new stage, my first thought was to numb my sense of time. It was only natural, wasn't it? I knew what kind of person Yoo Soo-Ha was and how to safely navigate his temper.

"God of Snakes."

Before delving into time manipulation, I decided to see what kind of heaven this place was.

"Let's start with the information."

"Sss."

The faithful guide to my strategy manual, the God of Snakes, flicked its tongue.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth manifests his authority.]

[Information about the current stage has been revealed to you.]

Words twirled before my eyes.

+

[Heaven of Vision]

Floor: 76th

Constellation: 'The Lotus Reflected on Water'

Difficulty: C+

Description (Lv.1): Everyone in this world sees you exactly as you wish to be seen!

You control all gazes. Want to appear as a charming beauty? You will be seen as such. Desire to be seen as a wealthy person? It shall be reflected so.

All you need is to wish how you want to be perceived by others. Beyond that, no effort is needed. You gain infinite freedom regarding yourself.

However, you gain not a speck of right over others. You cannot decide how to view others. You can only see them in the way they wish....

+

The text continued downwards.

I chuckled as I read the information.

"This would be a paradise for Yoo Soo-Ha."

That was my first thought. If there were a heaven that suited Yoo Soo-Ha, this place wouldn't be a bad choice.

"Okay, snake. Hurry and unveil the rest of the hidden details....."

But just as I was about to command Hisimet Cretsu, a completely different idea from my first thought crossed my mind, akin to a suspicion.



'—Wait a minute.'

I hesitated.

'A heaven? A heaven suited for Yoo Soo-Ha?'

Something bothered me. It felt as uncomfortable as biting into an eggshell in a well-eaten egg rice.

"Keeek?"

Hisimet Cretsu tilted its head, puzzled by my sudden pause in speech.

"....."

However, my lips remained sealed. While my mouth stopped and my tongue stilled, my doubts spun faster and faster.

The Apothecary's words before leaving the 70th floor came to mind.

「That's the criterion for the judges.」

「The heaven they would go to in the afterlife.」

That's correct.

Meaning, if Yoo Soo-Ha were to die, he would consider this world a heaven and reincarnate here, hence the role of the judge for this stage was given to Yoo Soo-Ha.

There's nothing strange so far. What exactly is bothering me? Why is my instinct uneasy?

「What about Uburka?」

「The Muscle Pig Dreaming of Parricide doesn't want to go to an afterlife.」

The conversation I had with the magician in jest just a moment ago caught in my mind.

「Why not?」

「 No... it's just that Muscle Pig thinks there's no need for an afterlife when you're dead... 」

I felt my eyes narrow. By reducing the width of my sight, I reduced external stimuli. As unnecessary information was blocked out, my thoughts soared.

「 It doesn't make sense for Raviel not to be the judge. 」

Suddenly.

「 Duchess Ivansia doesn't desire an afterlife unless it's with you. 」

I muttered unknowingly.

".....This can't be Yoo Soo-Ha's heaven."

"Kee?"

The serpent raised its chin, looking up at me, mistaking that I was speaking to it.

Instead of correcting Hisimet Cretsu's misunderstanding, I voiced out the conclusions flowing in my mind.

"According to the [Staff of Time Immemorial], not everyone is guided to heaven upon death. Like Uburka, who has no regrets about the afterlife, or Raviel, who refuses to let go of her current memories no matter what, they would simply embrace death instead of reincarnating in heaven."

The more I voiced out my thoughts, the firmer they became.

Was it because the inside of the mouth is warm and the outside is cold? Thoughts that were mushy and melting on my tongue solidified as they passed my lips, cooling down.

"Then, Yoo Soo-Ha must accept the concept of [the world after death] to eventually reach the heaven floor. Otherwise, like Uburka or Raviel, he would just be categorized as someone who accepts death when it comes, and wouldn't meet the criteria to be selected as the judge for the 76th floor."

"....."

The serpent looked at me. The fox turned its head to glance at me. The gaze of the Guardian Spirit also fell upon me.

There must be more eyes looking down at me now, unseen by me.

"That's exactly the problem."

I stated.

"Yoo Soo-Ha would never consider this place heaven."

With certainty.

"Because even if he dies, he would wish to be reborn in [the same world]."

Not because he likes the world he was born in.

It's the opposite.

"He doesn't like other worlds either. He doesn't even think that changing himself and the world would make him a better person. He just cherishes his own body, life, and memories that he has possessed so far. As long as he can protect those, it

doesn't matter what the world turns into....."

I looked up at the sky.

The clear blue expanse.

"If he can't protect those, no world can satisfy him."

I spoke towards the [Staff of Time Immemorial], presumably observing my every move in the lobby.

"I hereby challenge your selection of the judge."

There was no response.

"If Uburka and Raviel were excluded from being judges, then by the same standard, Yoo Soo-Ha cannot be a judge either. Although the reasons differ, the result is the same: they absolutely do not accept the future of [losing their memories and reincarnating in heaven]. Don't you think?"

There was still no response.

"If I'm mistaken, please correct me. But you won't be able to refute it."

Silence persisted.

"After all, as Yoo Soo-Ha himself admitted, I know him better than he knows himself."

And then.

[The Staff of Time Immemorial closes her eyes.]

[The Staff of Time Immemorial fully accepts your objection.]

Whizz—

[The 76th floor stage has been forcibly terminated.]

The world of the blue sky split apart.

# Chapter 358:

## Return to the Origin

### (3)

---

Let's delve into a bit of a throwback.

Back when the director was a kid, the preferred pastime for children was staring blankly at the television instead of using smartphones.

On TV, you couldn't just pick whatever video you wanted to watch. You had to watch whatever the broadcasting station decided to air.

And since broadcasting stations were operated by people, nothing would be aired during the times when most were off to dreamland.

It was just like a restaurant; they didn't operate 24/7. There was a time for rest, a time for closure, and during those times, their function came to a halt—a pause.



Zzzzzt—

When the television rests, it shows a strange screen. Black and white dots mingle chaotically, buzzing away. Blink, blink. It's as if the machine AIs are playing their own version of Go at an incredible speed, with the black and white dots chaotically intermingling. Dizzily. Dizzily, and dizzily.

Zzzt, zzzt—

That was the scene before me now.

[The 76th floor stage has been forcibly terminated.]

The once blue sky had suddenly split open. From the crevices, like the proliferation of mold, black and white vomit spilled and overflowed. The sky was devoured first, then the humans wandering below, and finally, the horizon was consumed.

Zzzzzt!

[The Sixth Pillar, The Staff of Time Immemorial, intervenes.]

[The Staff of Time Immemorial seeks to maintain control of the stage.]

In the midst of a world where black and white committed chaos, there stood a mage, leaning on a solitary staff.

One of the pillars operating this tower. It was the Staff of Time Immemorial.

"...Quite an interesting story you're telling, King of Death."

The mage looked at me.

"So, you're saying that my choice was a mistake? Who is suitable to be the judge of this heaven? Who willingly has the right to pass or fail you? Considering all that, I chose Yoo Soo-Ha as the judge, and you're saying my judgment, my decision, was wrong?"

"Yes."

"....."

The mage's eyes shimmered like silver water stained with a blade. I did not shy away from the silver blade-like gaze directed at me.

"Even if Yoo Soo-Ha were to face death, he would never wish to be reborn here."

The mage didn't respond immediately. After a significant pause, she finally gripped his staff tightly.

"...Maybe there's some merit to your words. But then, what about this place?"

The mage raised her lengthy staff high and slammed it down with all her might.

[The Staff of Time Immemorial manifests its authority.]

Whoosh!

Centered around the place where the staff struck, ripples emanated. The ripples were white. The white waves surged like torrents, driving away the blackness that had been devouring this world.

At the same time.

[The Staff of Time Immemorial is transporting you.]

The noisy world of static shifted.

[You have entered the 76th stage.]

[You are stepping into a place where you should not be.]

"This is the Heaven of Machines"

Was it magic cast by the Staff of Time Immemorial? We were floating in mid-air.

Far below our feet lay a dazzling city of the future. Skyscrapers rose smoothly without a single pillar or seam, and buildings were connected like neurons in the brain. The pathways draped like spider webs between the towers glowed ceaselessly.

"In this world, countless mechanical dolls live. In your

terms, they are NPCs."

The futuristic city was bustling with numerous people.

If what the mage said was true, then the vast majority of these beings were NPCs. In other words, they were not hunters reborn with souls.

"The Constellation of this world, [God of Machinery], controls billions of these mechanical dolls. Of course, the humans reborn here are unaware of such facts. Even the NPCs believe they are just like any other human. Naturally. The dolls governed by [God of Machinery] are indistinguishable from real people. And..."

"And?"

"The dolls always lose to humans at [life's decisive moments]."

A boxing-like match was being broadcasted on the city's screens.

"Here, the reborn humans always win against the dolls. The

defeats are so subtly orchestrated that they never realize they're being let to win. Or rather, they never suspect that those who lose to them are merely dolls."

Thud!

The boxer with red gloves knocked his opponent to the ground. Roars of cheers echoed from beyond the screen. The boxer with blue gloves staggered and was cornered, while the red boxer triumphantly pressed on.

"Those reborn here lead lives of unbroken success. Even when faced with seemingly insurmountable crises, they ultimately emerge victorious. The sweetness of victory, the confidence of having overcome life's challenges—all the joys are gifts prepared by [God of Machinery] solely for humans."

The red boxer's uppercut landed squarely.

Boom! The blue boxer couldn't withstand it and fell onto the ring. The referee rushed to separate the two, but the victorious gleam had already stained the red boxer's face, the joy of triumph glowing brightly.

"It's a game. A kind of play. A game where they're always treated to victory. But the suspicion that [I'm being treated]

never arises. It's as if they believe they've earned every victory through their own merit."

"....."

"How about it, King of Death? Doesn't this place suit Yoo Soo-Ha as heaven?"

Woahhh!

The red boxer roared. The referee grabbed his wrist and raised it high. Drunk on his victory, the red boxer bellowed like a gorilla, and the crowd responded in kind. Their cheers lavished him with even greater acclaim.

"I acknowledge you know Yoo Soo-Ha well."

Amidst the cheers filling the sky, the mage spoke softly.

"Yes, perhaps I too made a mistake once. Sorry. It's the responsibility of an administrator. As an apology, I'll recognize that you've automatically cleared the 76th floor. So now, you should focus on conquering the 77th floor..."

"How long can you keep this up?"

"...What?"

I narrowed my eyes.

"Those who wish to abandon the outside world enter the tower. Those who wish to abandon the world of the tower head to one of the heavens arranged from the 71st to the 79th floor. Is that the end? What if the souls that arrive here wish to abandon the world once more?"

"....."

"Will you then create another heaven within heaven? Build a tower within the tower, and then another within that, stacking up to a hundred floors, a thousand, ten thousand, a hundred thousand, or a million floors, building a tower that ascends eternally?"

The mage bit her lip.

[The Staff of Time Immemorial is transporting you.]



The staff gripped by the mage trembled.

[You have entered the 78th stage.]

[[You are stepping into a place where you should not be.]

"...How about this place?"

The world changed again. A tranquil yet abundant seaside village unfolded. People were paired up, peacefully engaging in conversations or enjoying meals.

"This is the Heaven of Bonds. Here, everyone can find their destined soulmate. Even those who never encountered their fate in their previous life will surely meet here and be together forever..."

"There's no end to it."

I stated, deflecting the blade in the mage's eyes with the blade in my voice.

"Staff of Time Immemorial, I now understand your true nature. You are probably a judge of the underworld, similar to the King of the Underworld, deciding which heaven the souls that die in this tower should go to."

"....."

"The difference might be that you never sentence anyone to hell."

The tower's voice echoed in my head.

[You have discerned the true nature of The Staff of Time Immemorial!]

[The Staff of Time Immemorial's privileged rights as a pillar have been activated.]

[Your memories related to the pillar are being distorted.]

[Failure.]

[All actions attempting to distort your memories are unsuccessful!]

The goddess was wrapping around my neck like a scarf. I nodded and continued to glare at the mage before me, the judge who distributes all the souls that die within the tower.

"You've made two mistakes."

"...Mistakes, what do you mean?"

"The tower never forces people from the outside world to come here. That's a decision for individuals to make. Whether the world of the tower suits them... Whether they really want to abandon the outside world once and for all. The hunters living here made that decision on their own."

I emphasized my words.

"But you didn't ask for their consent. You didn't ask the Paladin if she would choose this heaven if she were to die. You just decided on your own that the best heaven for the Paladin would be the Heaven of Music. The same goes for the Countess, the Viper, the Heretic Inquisitor, the Apothecary, and Yoo Soo-Ha; you summoned them all without [asking anything]."

"....."

"But the worst mistake is something else."

That is,

"The people who go to the heavens you manage lose all memories of their previous lives."

"...So what? They are souls who abandoned the world and went to a heaven that would make them happy. They don't need to remember the unpleasant memories, the things related to the world they have left behind."

"We didn't choose to be born into the outside world."

However,

"But the tower is a world we chose."

"....."

"A world we decided to be born into. A world we resolved to come to. Unlike the outside world where we just happened to fall into without knowing anything, we chose this place. That's what gives the tower its meaning!"

I took a step forward.

Did the mage's magic wear off?

Suddenly, I lost my footing in the air and nearly fell. But I quickly mobilized my aura to create invisible stepping stones. I used the Aerial Movement Technique. The sky could no longer signify a fall for me.

"And you made them lose the memories of [the choices they made themselves]!"

".....ugh."

"You've obliterated the meaning the tower barely managed to establish. It's the same. You've just recreated a world identical to the outside world within the tower."

Standing in the sky, I declared,

"You are not fit to be the judge of heaven."

The Staff of Time Immemorial gnashed her teeth.

"Just because you have a mouth, doesn't mean you can spout nonsense...!"

"Yeah, and it's not over yet."

I looked up at the heavens.

"Yoo Soo-Ha!"

Zzzt—

"You must be listening! You decide! Whether among the 76th, 77th, and 78th floors, there exists a heaven that you willingly wish to enter, as judged by [The Staff of Time Immemorial]! And thus, whether [The Staff of Time Immemorial] is qualified to be a judge! Or..."

The sky zzzted and split open.

"Or tell it to disappear! Whether the world of the living, where I live, the World of the Lone Child, is your world! If you were to die, tell us if that's where you'd want to be reborn! And decide who is right between [The Staff of Time Immemorial] and me!"

『What's in it for me?』

Through the gap in the sky, the same noise as before peeked through. The white and black dots flickered noisily. From there, Yoo Soo-Ha's voice flowed out.

『It's a bit unreasonable to ask me to choose without offering anything. I'm not sure, but it seems you're competing with that pillar or whatever. You're asking me to side with you, right? Then this is a transaction. Tell me, what will you give me?』

"This realistic son of a bitch..."

『Ever since I got killed by this kid, I've started to look after reality too.』

I clenched my teeth, but instead of a grinding sound, laughter seeped through the spaces between my teeth.

"Crazy bastard."

I laughed.

"You've been like this even before you died to me, you bastard."

Yoo Soo-Ha, that's the kind of man you are.

A man who prefers the living world even if he rolls in a pile of shit, and even if the living world is shit, as long as his memories remain intact, he's the kind of man who'd flip the world off. A man who wouldn't go to heaven even if he could. A man who would tell the afterlife or whatever to fuck off if it doesn't bring him the pleasures that make his current life joyful.

"I'll dance the Cossack dance for you!"

I let out a cursed laugh and shouted.

"It doesn't matter if it's for a day, two days, or a week! I'll show you my dance moves until you tell me to stop! I'll dance 10, 20 times longer than the time you danced, you shitty



bastard! Tell heaven to fuck off and keep living in my world!"

『 Hmm... 』

The sky fell silent for a moment.

『 That doesn't sound like a bad world to be in, huh? 』

Before the Staff of Time Immemorial could contort its expression, the judge raised a hand in my favor.

『 Deal. 』

Warning tones embroidered my consciousness.

[The 76th stage floor is being forcibly terminated.]

[The 77th stage floor is being forcibly terminated.]

[The 78th stage floor is being forcibly terminated.]

"Seriously,"

As the Staff of Time Immemorial cursed while holding its forehead,

"These damn brats—"

The tower's proclamation fell.

[An objection has been raised against The Staff of Time Immemorial for being unfit as a pillar.]

[Requesting approval from Zuraqua.]

[Unable to confirm.]

[The question exceeds the authority of the tower.]

It had been a while since such a declaration was heard.

[The tower reconfirms the question.]

[Approved. The current issue raised is valid.]

[The tower officially recognizes the King of Death's issue as a formal agenda.]

And then,

[The tower requests a majority vote meeting from the Six Pillars of All Lives.]

White and black sands covered my view once again.

# Chapter 359: The Heaven that Gathers Wails (1)

---

This wasn't my first time.

I had met with the Pillars several times before and attended meetings where the Pillars were present. So when the tower whispered, [a majority vote meeting from the Six Pillars of All Lives], I wasn't particularly startled.

"Please rise, King of Death."

I thought I would wake up in the dark Netherworld again.

That's what I was thinking.

"Do you intend to lie down like this? I advise you to get up promptly. I wish for you to regain your consciousness and show proper etiquette first. Until then, I have no intention of

inviting the Duke here."

A familiar voice resonated in my ear.

"....."

I blinked my eyelids. Little by little, my vision cleared. Just like a car's windshield smeared with yellow dust being wiped clean by a wiper.

There stood a black-haired beauty with elegant eyebrows.

"Have you finally opened your eyes?"

She was undeniably a beautiful person.

She looked down at me with her head bowed. Distinctive eyes. Indifferent pupils. Lips that held no stubbornness, no obsession and no self-display. They were simply closed shut. As if rejecting all that was whitened and grayed in this world, she was clad in pure black.

Somewhere.

I had definitely seen that attire, those lips, and those pupils somewhere before.

I paused for a moment, trying to recall the name of this darkness.

".....Gu Won-Ha..... advisor?"

She nodded her head.

"Yes, that is my alias."

Her chin movement made no sound. Perhaps that's why it seemed as if, around her moving chin, gravity and even air were absent for a brief moment.

"It wouldn't be right to greet you as if it's our first meeting, would it? King of Death. I am aware that you had, albeit briefly, possessed my body, as informed by the Duke."

"Ah....."

Right.

I had been to a kingdom in the world of Tower Master Jaa Soo-Jeong. Although it was during a visit within a trauma.

At that time and place, I possessed someone. It was the woman standing before me, hands neatly folded in front, Baron Gu Won-Ha.

I had become her. That's why, upon seeing this woman of darkness, I felt déjà vu.

"The Duke owes you a debt of gratitude."

Baron Gu Won-Ha bowed.

The person Gu Won-Ha refers to as 'the Duke' must be 'Kaleidoscope Duke'. Another alias for the Tower Master.

"Ah, yes. No, not at all...."

I felt a strange sensation.

To be faced head-on with a face that was once [me].

"But why are you... um, I'll call you the Baron. Why is the Baron welcoming me? I was summoned for a meeting of the Pillars."

".....I have heard that you are an exceptionally quick-witted person."

Baron Gu Won-Ha straightened up and tilted her head slightly.

"Don't you recall anything upon hearing my voice?"

"Huh?"

Oh.

"I did think that I've heard this voice somewhere before. Somehow, it felt familiar."



"Is that so? Perhaps it would be clearer if I played it for you directly."

Baron Gu Won-Ha looked at me quietly.

That moment came.

[Test.]

[Playing the voice.]

[This message does not carry any particular meaning beyond playing the voice.]

I was taken aback. My mouth fell open.

"Wha? Wha-wha-wha-wha?!"

"Let me introduce myself properly once again."

Unaffected by my astonishment, Baron Gu Won-Ha bowed.

"I am the second advisor of the Kaleidoscope Ducal House, a subordinate and a noble who received the eleventh cup from the Sun King, Baron Gu Won-Ha. My true name is Miya. Please, call me Baron Gu Won-Ha."

The voice that flowed from underneath the bowed head was identical to the voice I had heard countless times while climbing the tower, the so-called [Voice of the Tower].

"Wait, just a moment....."

I stuttered, lost for words. I had heard a lengthy self-introduction from Baron Gu Won-Ha, but frankly, there was only one thought in my mind.

"The voices that come from the Tower..... aren't automatic responses by some system but you...?"

"Yes. It's all done manually."

"What?!"

I was astounded!

"Manually... All of it? But I'm not the only Hunter who hears the Tower's voice. There are countless others! Every time Hunters learn a skill or ascend a stage, they hear a voice, and that's..."

"All done manually."

"That's impossible!!"

"But, as a matter of fact, it is possible."

Baron Gu Won-Ha remained expressionless throughout.

"The flow of time in your world and here is different. From your perspective, time here is virtually at a standstill, King of Death. Even if events occur simultaneously for you, for me, it's merely a task that I can address one by one."

"But... you'd have to respond to Hunters thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of times a day...!?"

"That is correct."

The Baron tilted her head as if it was nothing out of the ordinary.

"Is there a problem?"

There were nothing but problems.

"The epitome of inefficiency....."

"Inefficiency arises only when time and space are limited. Here, time can be manipulated at will, and as many different worlds as desired can be observed. The concept of inefficiency does not exist."

"Don't you get tired...?"

"It's for the Duke. There's no reason to be weary."

It seemed sincere. My goodness.

"The important matter at hand is not my work, King of Death. First, please dress properly."

Only then did I take a proper look around.

Just as Baron Gu Won-Ha's face was familiar to me, the place where I had awakened was incredibly familiar. The grand council hall of the kingdom where all the nobles gathered for discussions. The very place I had visited when I was possessing Baron Gu Won-Ha.

"Why here....."

Weren't the Pillars supposed to meet in the dark Netherworld?

"An explanation will follow shortly. For now, please organize your attire. Even if you personally know the Duke, in my presence, etiquette must be observed. I cannot allow you to meet the Duke in your current state."

"M-My appearance? What's wrong with my clothes?"

"They are crude."

"....."

Baron Gu Won-Ha scrutinized me from head to toe. Naturally, my current outfit was Anastasia fashion. In other words, I was wearing a black leather outfit.

I couldn't bring myself to argue, so I averted my gaze.

".....But this outfit was quite expensive."

"How much?"

"Huh?"

"You said it was expensive. May I ask how much, if you don't mind?"

I mentioned the price Anastasia had told me.

Baron Gu Won-Ha heard the cost and lightly nodded. Then, she picked up one of the garments laid out on the desk and handed it to me.

I awkwardly accepted the clothes.

"What's this for?"

"It's at least 120 times more expensive than that."

"....."

"Please get dressed."

I obediently changed.

"This is the control room that oversees all the towers."

While I was changing, Baron Gu Won-Ha spoke softly, her back turned to me.

"It was modeled after the kingdom's grand council hall. Although it looks the same, it's an entirely different space. From your perspective... Let's see. This is the [Basement Floor 1] of the tower."

Basement Floor 1.

While slipping my left foot into my pants, I asked,

"Is there a Basement Floor 2?"

"There isn't. Rest assured, even if you clear the 100th floor, there won't be an event like [In fact, there are 100 basement floors from Basement Floor 1 to Basement Floor 100, and our true adventure starts now - The King of Death Saga Part 2 Begins (Celebration)]. Please, be at ease."

I had never even considered such a terrifying possibility, but somehow, it sounded plausible.... How terrifying would that be...? It would be a disaster for my soul and the whole world.

"Are you fully dressed?"

"Ah, yes. I've finished changing."

"My apologies."



Baron Gu Won-Ha turned around. She carefully examined me, now dressed in royal attire fitting the kingdom.

"Hunters, or even Constellations for that matter, can never set foot here in Basement Floor 1. Even if by a one in a million chance someone does gain access, without the proper qualifications, they would only see utter darkness."

"Interesting."

"Yes. Previously, King of Death, you too would have only seen darkness here. However, you have now temporarily obtained the qualifications. This is the first time such a thing has happened since the tower was established."

Baron Gu Won-Ha glanced at the serpent wrapped around my wrist.

"I apologize, but the qualification is exclusive to you. Activities of [The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth], [A Music Box Just for You], [Goddess of Protection], and [Sword Emperor] have been suspended. It's for security reasons, so your understanding would be appreciated."

"....."

So that's why everyone has been quiet since I arrived here.

"Fortunately, the clothes suit you well."

Was the dress check complete?

Baron Gu Won-Ha took a step back, looked me over once more, and nodded.

"This should be sufficient for meeting the Duke."

"I heard rumors that I can pull off any fashion, you know....."

"Then, let us commence the meeting."

Baron Gu Won-Ha didn't give me a chance to enter nonsense time and clapped her hands with a smack.

Creeeak—

The grand council hall's main door opened.

As if they had been waiting by the door, figures walked in.

"Confirming participants."

[Confirming participants.]

The same voice overlapped twice. Baron Gu Won-Ha, with her chin held high, directly faced the newcomers entering through the main door and called them out one by one.

"The 5th Pillar, 'The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages,' has joined."

[The 5th Pillar, 'The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages,' has joined.]

The first to enter was the Princess.

The Pillar most amicable towards me.

Her hair, a mix of golden and white as if gold conceded half of itself to white, fluttered as the Princess smiled broadly and waved excitedly at me.

If I were to liken her to an animal, it would perhaps be a chick.

"Hello, King of Death! Long time no see! How have you been —"

"I'm sorry but, Miss, please maintain your decorum."

"Oh, Miya, the advisor. You're too harsh....."

The Princess pouted her lips.

Baron Gu Won-Ha remained expressionless and continued to announce the next arrivals.

"The 4th Pillar, 'The Moon Contemplating Blindness,' has joined."

[The 4th Pillar, 'The Moon Contemplating Blindness,' has joined.]

A Pillar with a face that seemed annoyed by everything from the beginning to the end of the universe, with an expression that seemed perpetually bored, entered the hall.

If likened to an animal, perhaps an otter.

"The 3rd Pillar, 'Legislator of the Beginning,' has joined."

[The 3rd Pillar, 'Legislator of the Beginning,' has joined.]

A Pillar who seemed to have tasted every flavor of life, from bitter to sweet to spicy, and now just wanted to play, entered with a sluggish gait.

An animal comparison? Maybe a hedgehog.

"The 2nd Pillar, 'The God Who Dances in Emptiness,' has joined."

[The 2nd Pillar, 'The God Who Dances in Emptiness,' has joined.]

A Pillar who couldn't care less about the creation or destruction of worlds, focused only on their own interests, entered not with normal steps but... actually dancing ballet... no, literally performing a ballet dance as they entered... and continued to dance even after entering.

What's going on?

Seriously, what is this...?

If I had to choose an animal, undoubtedly an African flamingo.

"The 6th Pillar, 'Staff of Time Immemorial,' has joined."

[The 6th Pillar, 'Staff of Time Immemorial,' has joined.]

A mage who seemed like they would sigh upon being born and sigh again at death, as if they could only respond to life's various events with sighs, glanced at me briefly as they entered.

Compared to an animal? Perhaps an old lion.

"....."

And then.

Thud, footsteps echoed.

"Welcome, Duke."

Unlike the indifferent reception given to the other five Pillars, Baron Gu Won-Ha bowed deeply as the last figure entered. She bent her waist. She lowered her head.

"I apologize for summoning you amidst your busy schedule."

It was a distinctly different attitude. Unlike when greeting the other Pillars, Baron Gu Won-Ha didn't use 'the Voice of the Tower' this time. She didn't send a message. She used only her own voice to directly, respectfully welcome the newcomer.

"The meeting has been convened according to the

regulations you previously commanded, but the legitimacy of the convening is entirely up to you, Duke."

"It's fine. It looks perfectly legitimate, doesn't it? As always, you're reliable, my advisor."

"Thank you."

The Tower Master.

A person who could assume any expression, mimic any voice, known in this world by the alias Kaleidoscope Duke, and familiar to me as Jaa Soo-Jeong, smiled radiantly at me with platinum blonde hair.

And the owner of the Tower, the Duke of this realm, greeted me—

"Hai, King of Death."

"....."



"Hewwo."

"....."

"Ah? You seem a bit underwhelmed. I heard this was the latest greeting method. Wasn't it? Hihi? Hiiii. Hiya? Um. Hellohello?"

No.....

You, no, you.....

From all around, sighs filled the air. Baron Gu Won-Ha sighed, the Staff of Time Immemorial had been sighing from the start, and the other Pillars joined the sighing ensemble, seemingly expecting this. A bountiful harvest of sighs.

"Mom! That's not it!"

Only the Princess, instead of sighing, scrunched her face and spoke up firmly.

"It's Hi UwU!"

"Ah, yes. Thank you, my daughter."

"Yep. I'll gladly accept Mom's thanks. From now on, make sure to use what I taught you without mixing it up."

Tower Master Jaa Soo-Jeong turned to look at me.

And greeted me with an extremely elegant gesture.

"Let me greet you again, King of Death. Hi UwU."

Your final boss aura, where did you sell it off to?

And that's definitely not the latest greeting method, just so you know....

# Chapter 360: The Heaven that Gathers Wails (2)

---

I earnestly explained why "Hi UwU" wasn't considered a modern greeting.

So, I ended up having a session explaining this abomination, "Hi UwU," to the owner of the tower. Never in my life, or the Tower Master's for that matter, did we imagine that such a moment would come... Anyway, no one knew. How could they?

"I knew, King of Death. Did you think I didn't know? I threw that joke to ease your tension, out of consideration for you."

"Ahaha. That was a truly nice, genuinely high-quality joke, Chief."

"It's Tower Master, not chief."

With that, the Tower Master narrowed her eyes.

"Since an objection has been raised, it must be addressed."

Her amethyst eyes flicked between me and the mage.

"King of Death and the Staff of Time Immemorial, please step forward."

"....."

The mage, holding her staff, walked to the front.

The spot in the grand council chamber where the king used to sit and preside over meetings— the throne. The Tower Master was sitting at the base of the chair, casually leaning her head against the throne's armrest.

And there, the Staff of Time Immemorial and I, stood across each other with the throne between us.

"The proposer is The Heaven that Gathers Wails. The agenda

is the no-confidence in the Staff of Time Immemorial. Is this correct?"

"It is."

I nodded.

The Tower Master hummed, resting her chin on her hand.

"It's not just a [complaint] or a [suggestion], but a [no-confidence], you say."

A smile curved like an inverted crescent moon formed on her lips.

"Interesting!"

The Tower Master exclaimed cheerfully.

Before I could even hesitate, she continued.

"Firstly, the Pillars should not take this situation negatively."

The Tower Master looked around at the Pillars as she spoke.

"I know many here are not fond of the King of Death."

Though the Pillars remained silent, the Tower Master continued as if she knew what was on their minds.

"Arrogant."

"Presumptuous."

"A mere fledgling Constellation dares to object to the Pillars' actions."

"And to declare no-confidence, no less!"

"I've had my doubts ever since he started playing with the rules."

"He's been flattered too much, and now he dares to cross the line."

Even now, the Tower Master's words sounded like the hissing of a serpent to me.

"We have always limited our actions."

"Despite having the power to do as we please, we exercise restraint."

"Even that is a grace we extend."

"Yet, he fails to see."

"Impudent."

"Taking care of your world and creating conditions for you to shine, King of Death. Is this how you repay us?"

The Pillars remained motionless, not a single facial muscle twitched.

But the Tower Master's voice swirled around them, wriggling like sinews beneath a layer of skin.

"And above all."

"How dare."

"How dare he challenge the Tower Master."

"Before even reaching the 50th floor."

"Before even earning a Constellation's name."

"Impertinent."

"As if he's ripe for trouble—"

Bang! A sound like a balloon popping dispersed the drowsy air.



The Tower Master had clapped her hands.

"—they say."

The Tower Master once again scanned the Pillars.

"I know some of you must be thinking this."

"....."

"Please, don't."

Her voice was as clear and pure as a crystal newly formed by the earth.

"Because, everyone. The very [arrogance], [presumption], and [immaturity] that the King of Death is displaying right now are exactly what I myself did before I stood here."

And it was transparent.

"Raising a no-confidence, not just a simple complaint or suggestion. Shouting that what you're doing is fundamentally wrong, not just something that can be fixed with a little tweaking. That's exactly what I did in all sorts of ways before I established the tower, and what turned me into an extreme lunatic, something that all the Pillars gathered here should recognize."

For the first time, someone spoke up.

It was the Legislator of the Beginning.

"The Tower Master and the King of Death are not the same."

The Legislator of the Beginning spoke with a calm but firm voice.

"The Tower Master didn't just shout about something being wrong. She proposed a better [alternative]. She didn't stop at raising a no-confidence. She said she would [take over] and she did."

The Legislator of the Beginning looked at me. His eyes were lifeless.

"It's easy to point fingers. It's not hard to criticize. Calling something wrong is convenient. Mocking is fun, and condemning is always a pleasure."

"....."

"Many just stop there. They don't go any further. They don't propose concrete alternatives, they don't say they can do better, and they don't take on the responsibility that comes with it. I understand that, but... Well, isn't it natural to not consider that a fair attitude?"

"That's unfair to the King of Death."

The Tower Master immediately responded.

The Legislator of the Beginning hesitated. The Tower Master leaned her chin on her hand, looking at him.

"Everyone here knows the journey the King of Death has taken so far."

"....."

"He gathered the ceaseless autumn rain and bloomed peonies in the eternal frost. He melted the gilding of hearts and returned the self to a lost puppet. He faced every single bit of criticism and condemnation head-on, instead of avoiding them."

The Tower Master concluded quietly.

"So it's unfair to judge the King of Death like that. I wanted to make that clear."

"....."

"But on the other hand."

The Tower Master turned to me.

"This is the crux of the issue, King of Death."

I didn't speak. I just listened quietly.

The Tower Master continued.

"Let me remind you of something you already know, King of Death. Declaring no-confidence in someone never ends with a mere objection. You have to take their place, do everything they did, and more."

"Yeah."

And finally, I spoke.

"Of course."

"Good."

Bang! The Tower Master clapped her hands again.

"The premise is clear, so what we need to do is simple."

The Tower Master spread her arms.

"As always, King of Death. Prove yourself."

The Tower Master declared the rules to us.

"If the King of Death proves he has the skills and will to match, the vote of no confidence in the Staff of Time Immemorial shall pass. The Staff will step down from its pillar position. In other words, the King of Death will take over the [Netherworld] of this tower on behalf of the Staff."

"On the other hand, should he fail to do so, he must be prepared to face the consequences."

The Tower Master did not specify what those consequences would be.

She simply added with her characteristic smile, "At the very least, it goes without saying that you will no longer be qualified to challenge me."

I clenched my fists tightly.

"Understood."

"Good."

The Tower Master's smile deepened, this time directed at the mage.

"How about you, Staff of Time Immemorial?"

"...No problem."

The Staff responded, as if carefully holding onto a red autumn leaf, like a branch in fall.

The other pillars sat in a circle at a distance from us. Although the audience was lesser, this place was no different from a colosseum.

The stakes of the duel were no less significant than any gladiatorial arena.

[Announcing the current vote status.]

[King of Death: 0 votes, Abstentions: 2 votes, Staff of Time Immemorial: 3 votes.]

As expected, the start was not in my favor.

I had committed the crime of being troublesome numerous times. Even if the Tower Master said to disregard that, it was impossible not to be influenced. Moreover, the Staff of Time Immemorial had been a colleague, working as a pillar for a long time.

But looking at it from another angle, there were still 2 abstentions among the pillars. Two of them were taking a neutral stance towards me. It wasn't a bad situation for me.

"I should start by saying how deeply disappointed I am in this situation."

The mage was the first to speak.

"King of Death, I have favored you. While maintaining my role as an administrator, I went as far as possible to accommodate you within the bounds of fairness. And this is how you repay that favor? I intended to support you, the first divinity to appear since the Sword Emperor. I could have been your patron. Trying to displace me from my pillar position is like cutting off your own fingers."

"....."



"It's not too late even now."

The mage discussed my interests, reminding me of the favors she had granted and what she could offer in the future. She highlighted how much she could help me with her position and power.

It was the simplest yet most powerful method of persuasion.

"Right, I might have made a mistake in appointing Yoo Soo-Ha as the judge. You were right to point that out. I admit it and apologize. But even pillars can make mistakes. To condemn me for a single mistake, isn't that arrogance?"

Next, the mage emphasized his humanity. She pretended to step back, only to disparage me for making him do so.

This too was an effective attack. The mage knew well that the outcome of this duel would be decided by a majority vote. Convincing the pillars was more important than convincing me.

"Let's assume you succeed in removing me."

The mage sighed lightly and continued.

"Since the tower's inception, there have been many discussions on what to do with the [Netherworld]. Among them, my view prevailed, and I was given control of the design from the 70th to the 79th floor."

The history of the tower.

"Don't think this is the first time a vote of no confidence against a pillar has been declared. Since the tower was established, many constellations have coveted the position of a pillar. And as a pillar in charge of a sensitive issue, I've been attacked just as much, but..."

Despite that, the mage, who has maintained his position as a pillar, lightly bit the tip of her staff.

As if holding a pipe in her mouth.

"In the end, the same issue that the Legislator of the Beginning spoke of obstructed them."

"....."

"It's easy to say I'm wrong. Anyone can point out flaws, but what about responsibility? Do you, King of Death, have an alternative to my heavens?"

Finally, the mage argued why he must win. He claimed he was competent and I was incompetent. Although it was merely a relative issue, it could be decided by a majority vote.

"I am making the souls happy. It's the happiness they wished for, the happiness they wanted to enjoy, and the happiness I can give. If you can't give them as much as I can, King of Death, you will never defeat me."

The logic, sharp as a sword, struck me in three ways.

It wasn't an attack that would end if I blocked just one; I had to deflect all three directions to keep myself intact.

"Let's hear your response."

"Hmm."

I gently rubbed a handkerchief with my index finger.

Right. If you're going to dig someone else's grave, you should first prepare your own. And I always keep a few graves dug in my heart.

"You did favor me. That's true, mage."

There is no rush.

Start with the easiest sword to deflect.

"You said I was the first divinity to appear after the Sword Emperor and that you intended to support me. But why did you want to support me in the first place? Surely it wasn't because you had a personal liking for me and just wanted to support me for that reason alone."

"....."

"You don't even think highly of the Sword Emperor. You consider him a troublemaker."

I saw your reaction after I cleared the Heaven of Truth.

「 You, the biggest troublemakers under the heavens! 」

「 Sword Emperor. There's a reason you failed to conquer the Zenith of the Heaven. 」

It was by no means a favorable response.

"So, just because I'm a hunter challenging the 100th floor doesn't mean you'll blindly support me. You must have judged that there's something only I can do, right?"

"....."

"You must have your own hidden reasons for supporting me. Whether those reasons are related to the Tower Master or the secrets of the 100th floor, I don't know. But you were just using me for your own purposes, not for my benefit."

"Everyone does. Are you going to consider me a materialist then?"

The mage's expression remained calm.

My words seemed neither painful nor irritating to her.

I looked towards Baron Gu Won-Ha.

[King of Death: 0 votes, Abstentions: 2 votes, Staff of Time Immemorial: 3 votes.]

The vote status was magically engraved above the Baron's head. The score had yet to change.

I reorganized my stance.

"No, and I'm not condemning you just because you made one mistake."

"That's unfortunate. To my eyes, it seems inevitable."

"A mistake is an error committed unintentionally. But what if it was intentional? What if you knew it would happen and merely ignored it? If you knew it was bound to happen, and it was clear it would, but you merely stood by, would that still be a mistake?"

"As if you're saying I deliberately chose the wrong judge."

"Is Yoo Soo-Ha the first?"

"What?"

"I mean, is Yoo Soo-Ha truly your first and only mistake?"

"....."

For the first time, the mage hesitated.

"Hunters decide where they will be assigned in heaven when they die. You make that decision. And you misjudged that Yoo Soo-Ha would want heaven. Luckily, I noticed the mistake and could point it out this time. But were other hunters given the same opportunity?"

"....."

"Even if you make a mistake, no one can notice. No one could point it out. So it seems like the only mistake, just appearing to

be a mere accident. Can you imagine how many mistakes have been hidden over time?"

I could feel the Pillars looking at me.

I didn't even need to amplify my senses with Aura. Their gaze clung to my facial skin, tingling. Yet, I didn't stop.

"There were six heavens during my time breaking through from the 71st to the 76th floor. Out of six, you made a mistake once. Yes, maybe this was just a coincidental mistake. But what if there was one mistake out of 60 times? Or even one out of 600 times? What if there have always been souls sent to the wrong heaven due to your misjudgment or mistake?"

"....."

"Would you still call that a mistake?"

The mage's grip on the staff tightened.

".....There might be. Yes, there might. But so what? I do my best, King of Death. Can you judge better than I can? Who should go to which heaven? Who can be happier? Can you



judge it better than I, the Staff of Time Immemorial?"

You cannot.

It was a question filled with certainty.

The Staff of Time Immemorial must have delivered judgment to countless souls. She would have reached this point through countless errors in judgment and trials and errors. She must have built her own experience, know-how, and tips through infinite time and countless tears.

I couldn't deny that.

"Yes. I cannot know better than you."

But that was only true for me.

"So, let's ask directly."

"Ask what?"

"The deceased. The ones who come before you after death, waiting for judgment, why not ask them directly?"

That is the only answer.

"Hunters came to the tower of their own volition. It's their right to decide where to go. If you make judgments on your own without even asking them, the same mistakes will continue to happen. Ask them where they want to go."

".....Ha. Ask them?"

The mage scoffed, clearly mocking me with her tone.

"Fine. Let's see you try asking them! If you can, that is!"

Thud.

As the mage tapped the floor with her staff, white ripples spread through the air.

And from beneath the ripples, black fingers emerged.

-Uuuuuh....

They were human hands.

No, to be precise, shadows flickering in human form.

-Uuuuh, uuuuh....

-Uuuuugh!

Fingers, palms, wrists, all were dyed black. There was no light or shadow, only blackness. Swirling black noise was all that defined their existence.

The vast assembly hall was quickly covered with hundreds of wails.

"....."

Baron Gu Won-Ha clapped lightly.

Clatter, clank, clank!

Chains burst from the ground. The chains swiftly bound each noise.

-Uuuuuuh!

-Ugh.... Grrrrr....

The wails growled in their restraints, truly ferocious in nature. It seemed as if they would attack us at any moment if they were freed from the chains.

"See! This is what you call souls, the ones who have died in the tower!"

The mage shouted.

"Only the emotions from their living moments remain, knowing nothing but screams. They are not wounded but are nothing more than rags with nothing but wounds! These are the lives that have ended, the shattered stones! Essentially, no different from that!"

"....."

"Go ahead, ask them. Ask for me. Where do they want to go? After being abandoned by the world once, only to be abandoned again, where must they go to finally find satisfaction? King of Death, I would be really grateful if you could ask them and let me know."

The mage seemed to be mocking someone,

Not just me, certainly.

"They have no memories. They're dead. They don't know why they're hurt, but the cause is gone, leaving only their pain to torment them. No, their torment is them. The only response you can get from them is the scream of 'it hurts.' That might not even be a response. You can't call the noise made by crumbling stones a response. I wonder. What can I-, what can I ask them?"

Crackle,

A faint image appeared in the ripples spread by the mage.

It was a moving picture.

"I can only watch."

Images played from all around.

A summary of the lives the wails had led before they were consumed by the dark whirlpool.

Their faces and laughter from when they were alive were reproduced in the images before being devoured.

"I have no choice but to carefully observe and then make a judgment. That's all. Everything. Yes. Watching alone isn't enough. There are times I don't know. But what more can I do? Apart from [watching], what more can I do here."

Indeed.

So that was it.

I slowly looked around.

-Uoooooooo.

-Ugh, uuuuh...!

The wails couldn't meet my gaze. They had no eyes. They could no longer see or reflect anything. Only deaths that could be observed from the outside or shattered. Countless deaths.

"....."

Death.

".....There is something."

More familiar to me than anything else.

"There is something more we can do here."

We can still do something more.

I turned my face to look at the Staff of Time Immemorial.

"What?"

"There is more we can do beyond just watching and observing their lives, mage. There is still something."

"What are you talking about?"

The mage looked confused.

But to me, everything was clear.

What I can do. What I want to do. If I were to become a Constellation, what Constellation I could be, it all suddenly became clear.

"People tend to do what they have always done."

With that clarity, I acted.



"Come."

Slowly walking forward, I stood in front of the deceased and spread my arms wide.

"Kill me."

Before the mage could understand my words.

The deceased tore at my throat.

[You have died.]

The Staff of Time Immemorial widened her eyes in horror. The instant stretched out like slow motion. Before the mage could fully comprehend the meaning of my actions, had one of the Pillars grasped my intent?

A voice resounded.

[The status of the majority vote is being announced.]

[King of Death: 1 vote, Abstentions: 1 vote, Staff of Time  
Immemorial: 3 votes.]

And then.

[The level of penalty is High.]

[Human Realm.]

[Re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

Let's do more than just watching.

# Chapter 361: The Heaven that Gathers Wails (3)

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Before the world was enveloped in darkness for the last time, the final sight that caught my eye was the Staff of Time Immemorial, standing aghast with her mouth agape.

Perhaps the mage screamed something.

"---, -----!?"

But I couldn't perceive the mage's outcry. My throat had been torn by the wails, and I hadn't even mobilized my aura to postpone my death. Death was swift. It was slow.

[Re-enacting the trauma of your killer.]

She was a fisherwoman born long ago. Thus, I was a fisherwoman born long ago. Within the tautology, she was me,

and I was her.

Just as when I became Raviel. Just as when I became the Master.

Amidst the trauma of the human realm, she, no, I gazed at the wine-colored sea.

『The waves are weeping.』

The waves were rough. A harsh scent was in the air.

The fisherwoman knew that even water had a scent.

On calm sunny days, the water was clean. But when waves surged from afar, the water sweated. It was the smell of salt. When the smell of saliva lingered, whirlpools formed at the straits. It was the stench of decay.

And now, the waves were shedding tears.

『We must escape. The waves are weeping.』

She merely muttered out of instinct.

It was an era when humanity had not yet shed its bestial origins.

They said there was a towering golden temple in the vast desert to the south, where everyone was a shaman or magician, capable of trapping all human voices in bizarre drawings.

I knew that the golden temple resembled a 'pyramid' and that their sorcery was 'writing.' She did not know. In an age when only a minuscule fraction of humanity enjoyed the blessing of writing, a woman was sailing, fishing.

『We must hurry away...』

Kururururu-!

Turning the boat, the woman glanced back. A volcano was erupting in the distance. Hot lava gurgled at the mountaintop. Dark clouds. Lightning. Mud rain. The volcano bellowed as if proclaiming the end of the world.

『 ..... 』

Instinctively, the woman slowed her boat. She steered only where the tears of the waves were faintly detectable. It took more than half a day to return to her home, her village by the sea, which would have been quickly reachable under normal circumstances.

The village had vanished.

『 ..... 』

Only a few pieces of wood remained on the water's surface. With each slap of the waves against the cliffs, the wood trapped against the rocks gently swayed.

There were no survivors.

She looked up at the sky.

Clouds were rolling in. These were not clouds from the sky but clouds that had burped from the ground. The clouds rising from the earth were much denser and had a much stronger scent than those in the sky.

The entire sea was weeping in black.

『...We must escape.』

She steered the boat.

Not only had her homeland disappeared, the neighboring village had disappeared too. And the village neighboring that village. The neighbor of that neighboring village had disappeared too. Clinging to the coastline like clumps of barnacles, barely clinging to a sliver of life, all the villages were gone.

『Did anyone survive?』

Every vanished village left behind at least one survivor. Just like herself.

『I survived.』

『The waves are weeping. They continue to weep.』

The survivors were like me, able to smell the scent of the waves. I, she, nodded.

『I know. I too can feel the tears of the waves.』

『Many have perished. The gods are enraged. Must we also die?』

『We must escape. Quickly. Quickly, we must escape. Follow me.』

『Where to?』

『To the largest village.』

She steered the boat.

One became two. Two became three, four, five, sixteen. They were all survivors. The sixteen survivors represented the death of sixteen villages. Only those most acquainted with the waves from those villages could survive.



『Everyone is dead.』

There were no survivors in the largest village.

『Nothing. No one. Nothing at all.』

『.....』

She looked back.

Unbeknownst to her, the number of boatmen had swelled to thirty.

Crossing one village to the next, and to the next of the next, the survivors' languages changed from mine.

『Where are we going now?』

The first survivor I met sounded exactly like me. Everything was understandable.

『Are we ■ destined to die?』

From the sixth village onward, the sounds began to diverge. Not everything was understandable. Still, there was no problem in mixing sounds and sounds.

『■ It is a divine punishment■. The wrath of ■ gods.』

Passing the twelfth village, the sounds began to howl bizarrely. My ears buzzed. It was difficult, but if I narrowed my eyebrows and listened carefully, I could understand.

『■■ is weeping ■ inside ■■.』

After the twenty-fourth village, she couldn't understand the sounds. Nothing was understandable.

Only the ability to feel the tears of the waves.

That was the only commonality.

『.....』

She looked up at the sky.

For many days, the world had been dark.

It was cold. The fisherfolk huddled. They covered their flesh with whatever straw they could gather, but their teeth chattered. Click, even now, someone's teeth clacked. Click. Click. She, I, quietly listened to the sound of the teeth.

『We must escape.』

『To ■where?』

『Somewhere.』

It was the Little Ice Age.

An era that had provided humanity with comfortable rain and waves for thousands of years was now coming to an end. The volcano had merely hastened the end. I knew this as knowledge, and she knew it as instinct.

To the south. Along the coast to the south. Following the washed-away villages and abandoned ruins, to the south, to the south.

『■■■■!』

How many villages had we passed?

『■■■■ ■■■■! ■■■!』

Before long, the number of boatmen following her had exceeded sixty. They finally succeeded in reaching a 'surviving village,' but she couldn't understand a word the 'villagers' shouted. Not in the slightest.

The villagers were holding spears for some reason. They threw stones. A spear thrown by them pierced a 'survivor's' chest, and a rock shattered someone's head. Splash. Splash. The boats capsized, and bodies fell.

The man from the first village looked this way.

『Are we to die?』

A question always asked.

And for the first time, she opened her lips to answer.

『No.』

A massacre ensued.

The boatmen drew stone knives and killed the 'villagers.' Including her, all the survivors were the most skilled helmsmen. Killing people was always easier than steering boats.

『What are these people saying?』

After the battle, she called the survivor from the forty-eighth village and asked. He was a fisherman who had lived relatively close to here. He should still be able to hear the sounds of this place.

『■■.....■■■■■■■■■■.....!』

『 It seems they're saying we'll receive divine punishment. 』

The forty-eighth survivor interpreted. He said he wasn't entirely sure.

『 And they called us pirates. 』

『 Pirates? What does that mean? 』

『 It seems to refer to seafolk. 』

From that village onward, the survivors were no longer called 'fishermen' but 'pirates.'

The sixty pirates grew to ninety. More. More. More. More. Like the remnants of shipwrecks gathering and surging like waves, like young animals rubbing their skins together on a cold day, all the survivors of the destroyed seaside villages came to her.

『 ■■■is ■■■. 』

『The world has ended.』

One boatman filtered the words of another boatman.

『■■■ ■■ing.』

『Everyone is dead.』

『■■do ■■■ ■■■?』

『Must we also die?』

A hundred fishermen looked at her.

And she now knew what she had to say, what she could say, and what she wanted to say. It was as clear as the scent of the waves.

『No.』

Even in front of two hundred.

『No.』

Even in front of three hundred.

『No.』

She answered the same.

『We must escape. Follow me.』

Five hundred boats followed her.

『■■■■!』

Fights broke out wherever they went. They didn't know why they had to fight. But what they could gain from fighting was clear. 'Unruined villages' hid grains. There were clothes. There were sharp stone knives.



There was no reason to refuse a fight.

『■■■■! ■■. ■■■■ ■■■■■.....!』

To the south. Along the coast to the south. Sweeping through villages and discarding ruins, to the south. To the south.

『■■■■■■■■!』

The world was cold.

The world was dark.

Just like the white seashells clinging to the sea cliffs, merely clinging on with their fingernails, holding onto life, the world wouldn't end as long as they clung here.

『■■■.....』

Splash.

Beneath the burning 'large village,' she swung her sword.

『■■■■.....』

『■■, ■■■ ■■■■■.....!』

『■■ ■■■■■.....』

The 'large villagers' shed tears.

Looking at the bodies, and at the 'large villagers' who weren't bodies yet but would soon be, she suddenly said.

『What are these people saying?』

『.....』

She called the survivor from the twelfth village. The twelfth survivor called the thirty-second. The thirty-second called the fifty-first, the fifty-first called the hundredth, the hundredth called the hundred and seventieth, and the hundred and seventieth called the two hundred and fifty-second.

『Why are you trying to listen to what these people are saying?』

Eventually, the five hundred and eighty-first asked. To exchange a question and an answer with the five hundred and eighty-first, dozens of interpreters were needed. Dozens of people chattered away.

Like waves.

Like waves, like waves, like waves. Overlapping dozens of times, the fishermen whispered to each other.

『These 'large villagers' are shamans.』

She too whispered.

『They know a magic that traps sounds.』

She picked up a clay tablet and showed it to the fishermen. There were pictures on it. She didn't know how to read or write it.

But magic is always like that.

『With their magic, we can also leave behind our sounds.』

『Why do we want to leave our sounds behind? The wave is a wave only when it crashes. Sounds disappear. That is the way of the wave, and we follow the way of the wave.』

『This is the 'somewhere' we can escape to.』

She pointed to the clay tablet. One by one, she spoke while making eye contact with each fisherman. She wanted them to look here, at this place.

『We must escape. Here. The place I told you to follow me to is here. We've arrived. We're here. Tell me.』

『.....』

『What are these people saying?』

The waves stopped.

『I don't know.』

The five hundred and eighty-first wave said.

『I don't know.』

『.....』

『I don't know what they're saying.』

Then the two hundred and fifty-second wave said they didn't know. The hundred and seventieth wave, the hundredth wave, the fifty-first wave, the thirty-second wave, and the twelfth wave, softly, said they didn't know. As the waves receded, making sounds,

『No one knows.』

The wave lapped at her feet for the last time and gently rippled.

『.....』

And the sound of the wave disappeared.

『.....』

Only the waves were shedding tears.

『.....』

The scent of tears was perceptible. Very close by. And she knew why the scent never ceased. Maybe she knew it would come to this.

Towards the burning flames, she threw the clay tablet.

『Where should we go now?』

『I'm sorry.』

Thud.

『Whe■. Where should we ■o?』

『I'm sorry.』

The flames blazed.

『■■ where should ■■ go■■?』

『I'm sorry.』

Thud, the fire blazed. Thud. Thud.

『■■ ■■■ ■■■■■■■■■?』

『I'm sorry.』

Quietly.

[Trauma re-enactment complete.]

[The target's ego has remained intact.]

[Penalty Finalized.]

Somewhere, I think I heard the sound of waves.

"What the hell are you thinking!?"

I staggered to my feet.

The procedure to regress 24 hours had not been activated.

This was the first basement floor. Was it said that the flow of time here differs from other floors? Or did the Pillars, the administrators, arbitrarily apply a brake on the skill? Now that the fox isn't by my side, does my timeline no longer hold absolute priority?

Either way, it doesn't matter.

-Grrrr...



Before me stood the wails.

Life that had become wails.

Something that could no longer make any sound, merely growling, whatever it had been. Clank! It thrashed as if it was about to pounce on me, chained.

"So, by using trauma, you can live the life of the dead? And so, you can make a more accurate judgment than me, who can only watch? Is that your answer? Ha."

I drew my sword.

"Yeah. Maybe. But didn't you insist that you have to ask the soul directly? Even if you witness the trauma, no matter how close you get, it's not the soul speaking direct--"

And I cut through the wails.

"-----What?"

The mage had no chance to stop me with words. My blade sliced through the wails. The wails didn't scream, perhaps already screaming in its state, and were lightly severed.

The wails dissipated like ash.

"Y-You. What have you done....."

Skill card open.

[Activating the skill.]

That was the gold card I had earned long ago.

+

[Ghoul Reincarnation]

Rank: SSS

Effect: You summon those you've personally killed. The deceased do not inherit their abilities from life. However, if you wish, they can inherit their memories and appearances from when they were alive. If you do not wish it, they will only be summoned as monsters.

+

I lived the life of the wails.

Thus, I identified the [coordinates] of the wails.

I became the wails, and I cut through the crying wails.

Thus, I could [summon] the wails.

Therefore.

[Ghoul Reincarnation has been activated.]

All conditions were met.

The ash that vanished into the air turned into black liquid ash from below and rose. The black water gradually took shape.

Eyes I recognized, a face I knew.

With the movements that were once mine.

"....."

The one with eyes as blue as the sea blinked, looking at me.

Silence surrounded us.

The Staff of Time Immemorial was silently watching us. The other Pillars remained silent too.

At this moment, only she and I were permitted to speak.

"....."

She opened her mouth.

"Who are you?"

Somewhere.

I think I heard the sound of waves.

"Hello."

I said.

Not in the first language I learned, not in the language automatically translated by the tower, but in the language I learned through living her life, through her ears and mouth. Rough and rugged. Carrying the scent of the sea. Just as it had briefly rushed from the distant sea, crashed against the cliffs, and vanished, white and white. In the sound of the waves.

I could say her name.

"The First Wave."

And what I would become for her.

"I am your Last Wave."

I will become somewhere for you all.

# Chapter 362: The Heaven that Gathers Wails (4)

---

"The last wave?"

"Yes."

"What does the last wave mean?"

She looked at me. Her eyes were bright blue, more akin to those of a beast than a human. They did not distinguish much between humans and animals, and they made no distinction between humans and the sea.

I said,

"I can understand all your sounds."

"....."

"From the second wave to the five hundred and eighty-first wave, all of them. The sounds you make, I can hear them."

It meant 'I can interpret all the languages of the warriors you command.' Yes, I could have said that. But I spoke in her words. I wanted to speak that way.

With pronunciations and words that left no trace, like a village that had been obliterated by a tsunami long ago, leaving not even ruins behind. I spoke in sounds that only two people in the world could exchange now, reminiscing about destruction.

"You don't need to wander from village to village. You don't have to go to a large village. I am your last wave, and this is the last village in the world."

"....."

She looked at me. Her bright blue eyes were rippleless. Suspicion, doubt, consternation and confusion filled them. Usually, anyone's emotions would imprint on their eyes like fingerprints. Her eyes bore no such marks.



"Are you a god?"

"I wish to be your god."

From a distance, the Staff of Time Immemorial could be heard taking a breath. However, she did not turn her gaze. Nor did I avert my eyes from hers.

"Tell me your wish."

"Wish?"

"Yes. You can go anywhere. Which village would you like to visit? This is a very large village. Every village is here. I will take you to wherever you wish to go."

"....."

She blinked. Once. Twice. Thrice. Like waves that rush to the gentle shore only to recede again, her eyelids fluttered.

"Teach me the spell to trap sounds."

"Okay."

I turned my head.

"Could you bring me some ink?"

"....."

The Staff of Time Immemorial bit her lip. The greatest mage in the tower, versed in all spells; her eyebrows were trembling. Instead of her, the Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages brought the ink bottle.

"Here."

"Thank you."

"But why ink, King of Death?"

The princess looked up at my face attentively.

"Wouldn't it be easier with paper and a pen?"

"Pens would be unfamiliar to her. Someone who has never held a pencil before would find it hard to write. However, if you write with your hands, you'll get used to it quickly. So it's easier to just dip your fingertips in ink and write on the ground."

The princess listened to all I said. Slowly, after listening, she nodded once.

"That makes sense."

Once more.

"It does."

Her voice echoed softly.

[The current status of the majority vote is being announced.]

[King of Death: 2 votes, Abstentions: 0 votes, Staff of Time

Immemorial: 3 votes.]

I think I heard the sound of waves from somewhere.

"What's this?"

"Ink. It's black water."

"Does it hurt?"

"It doesn't hurt. I'll teach you the spell with this."

I crouched down on the floor. She hunched her body too. The pillars surrounded us silently, watching. We ignored them, turning the white stone floor into our canvas.

A, E, I, O, U.

"This way, you can trap sounds."

I wrote on the floor. My fingertips turned black. Black strokes were drawn on the floor. She watched clearly as black waves were drawn across the white sea.

"Try it too."

"Okay."

Her fingertips turned black.

Half a day passed.

A whole day passed.

A day went by.

Her fingernails turned black, her fingers turned black, her palms turned black. Strokes were drawn and redrawn on the floor, endlessly bringing black waves to the white sea. The pillars watched us without moving.

The conference hall was vast. The canvas was almost

infinite. In a crouched position, we slowly shifted spots, spreading the black waves inch by inch.

Every wave she drew was distinctly marked with fingerprints.

Three days passed, or maybe four. In the timeless depths of the underground, only the expanding sea marks around us testified to time.

Upon closer inspection, the words were all pieces of wood. Shipwreck debris fluttered here and there on the sea. She was writing letters. Splash. Being a ferryman who knew the black sea's waterways, she rowed with her fingers, splash, splash.

"Do you understand now?"

"Yes."

So, I am listening to the sound of waves.

"I understand."

I asked the princess for clay tablets. They were still soft, their surface squishy.

"....."

Looking at the clay tablet before her, she blinked. It was her tension. This was her 'somewhere.' After her hometown was submerged and many villages drowned, this was the island she had searched for.

Facing the small island.

She rowed.

『I love the sea.』

The waves crashed.

『We love the sea.』

The ripples surged.

『The waves shed tears.』

Fingerprints.

『We also shed tears.』

Gradually.

『Still, I love the sea.』

Blue eyes looked up at me.

"Did I die?"

I nodded, letting her know she had reached the island village.

"Yes. Do you want to live?"

"People."



She said,

"I killed many people."

"I can't live anymore. Too many people have died. I'm sorry. I can't live anymore."

She looked at me.

Waves surged in her sea-like eyes.

"Thank you."

I think I heard the sound of waves from somewhere.

"Thank you."

[You have acquired a follower.]

[The first wave has become your follower.]

And then...

The wave subsided.

"....."

Only black writing remained on the floor. Just like her hometown that sank into the sea, the drowned people submerged and were unseen. For the first time, she could stop breathing in the sea she loved.

"....."

The pillars remained silent.

".....Why."

Only after a while, or perhaps just for a moment, the Staff of Time Immemorial opened her lips, her voice squeezed through clenched teeth.

"Why didn't you assign her to a heaven?"

"I don't assign heavens. I only listen to where they want to go. Heaven is a place people want to go. The wave went to the island it wished for."

I lifted the clay tablet with both hands.

Holding the place that had become someone's small island tightly to my chest.

And I wrapped it in aura, before my water could overflow and wet the fine beaches of the island village.

Hoping that people would not burn people.

If I were to be a flame, let it be one that only burns the voices of people.

"So, it's done."

"....."

The Staff of Time Immemorial bit her lip.

[The current status of the majority vote is being announced.]

[King of Death: 2 votes, Abstentions: 1 vote, Staff of Time  
Immemorial: 2 votes.]

There was still much noise.

Hundreds.

The wails summoned by the mage filled the vast conference  
hall.

I stayed amidst the wails, giving my body to each of them.

The wails tore at my life.

[The current status of the majority vote is announced.]

[King of Death: 2 votes, Abstentions: 2 votes, Staff of Time  
Immemorial: 1 vote.]

They gnawed at my life, and I cut theirs, calling their lives here just as I did for the first wave.

And I said,

"Where, where is this? Where am I?"

Someone was confused.

A merchant who had lived selling furs all his life.

He was attacked by a nomadic tribe on his trade route and killed. The merchant felt it was unfair. He was willing to pay the price for his life. Taking his life would not have helped the nomadic tribe much. But the foolish people did not understand even this simple principle.

Why a blade instead of money? Why not trade with him?

Why is the world so cruel?

".....Who are you?"

Someone was wary.

A paladin who had been on battlefields all his life.

He died hoping for the appearance of a god until the very end. The knight screamed. If there was a god in this world, it would descend in the most horrific and miserable places. The knight had only traversed the most horrific and miserable battlefields. If the god did not appear, he moved to a more horrific place, and if still not, to an even more horrific place, believing that one day it would appear, into the hell of hells.

Is it still not enough? Is it still not miserable enough for a god to extend a hand?

Why can't the world be saved?

"I don't want to die! Please..... Save me. I can't die yet!"

Someone pleaded.

Many did.

The one who starved to death in a drought, the one who suffocated in a fire, the one who set the village on fire after eating human flesh due to famine following a bad year, and the one who suddenly felt a noose around their neck when their sight was obscured and they saw the adult from the next house looking down at them.

Why,

And people silenced their voices.

Why is the world so.

"It's okay."

I said that to those who had an island they wanted to go to.

"You can abandon the world if you want. It's okay."

It really was okay.

"You can go to another world that you can't abandon."

I asked them directly.

"Where do you want to go?"

The merchant wanted to go to the Heaven of Gold. He wished to breathe in a world known for its golden radiance. The merchant did not want a life where rationality was stifled under foolish blades.

The knight wanted to go to the Heaven of Music. He thought that if everything from a handful of wheat to a single leaf sang, everything would have a god. He cried while saying he wanted to laugh in a world where he didn't have to search for a god.

[The current status of the majority vote is being announced.]

[King of Death: 3 votes, Abstentions: 1 vote, Staff of Time Immemorial: 1 vote.]

As the final procedure.

[Activating Skill.]



I shared my gold with them.

+

[Earth Bone Dragon's Skull]

Rank: SSS+

Effect: Stores the memories of the living. Stored memories are kept in a 'box.' This box can only be destroyed by the owner of this skill.

As long as the box remains intact, you can repeatedly produce bodies of individuals inheriting the same memories. The bodies can roam the world, accumulating new experiences, which can then be 'updated' into the box. Of course, only if you permit it!

Even if the body of the individual is destroyed, the box remains unharmed. Bestow the privilege of immortality on those around you.

+

That was how I resurrected ghouls.

Like when I breathed life into Silvia Evanair and Ester, the Four Demon Lords, the children of Demonic Heaven, and Yoo Soo-Ha.

[The box of the Earth Bone Dragon has been activated.]

[The box of the Earth Bone Dragon has been completed.]

I provided bodies for the noises that had become my ghouls.

"You have now chosen the world you will live in."

Returner's Winding Clock.

I lived through their traumas and gathered their memories.

Ghoul Reincarnation.

I gathered their memories and called them forth.

Earth Bone Dragon's Skull.

If they wished, I gave them memories and bodies.

"You were allowed to live in the world because you wanted to live."

The conference hall was silent.

There were no more rumbling noise.

Hundreds of gazes, hundreds of breaths watched me.

Looking around at the people watching me, and watching them in return, I said,

"Please live in a world you can love."

"....."

"If you want to abandon it, tell me. I will listen. If you want to go somewhere, tell me. I will listen. But now, all your choices, all your words, all your contempt, and all your love are yours. Take life and be responsible for what you loved. Then, I will take responsibility for the inevitable deaths."

I said,

"May fortune be with you all."

White light enveloped them.

Everyone left for the island they wished to go to.

[The current status of the majority vote is being announced.]

[King of Death: 4 votes, Abstentions: 1 vote, Staff of Time Immemorial: 0 votes.]

The conference hall fell silent.

"....."

The Staff of Time Immemorial hung her head. She did not lift her bowed head. The pillars simply turned their gaze quietly, without a word, to their master.

Thud.

The Tower Master stood up and walked towards me.

"Kim Gong-Ja."

The tower master took my left hand and caressed the back of it.

"King of Death."

"Yes."

"You will gain authority. You will be able to bestow blessings. Irrefutably, you will become a complete Constellation."

Her amethyst eyes looked up at me.

"From this moment on, you will be known only as 'The Heaven that Gathers Wails.'"

A voice was heard.

[The current status of the majority vote is being announced.]

[King of Death: 5 votes, Abstentions: 0 votes, Staff of Time Immemorial: 0 votes.]

[The Master of All Lives wishes blessings upon The Heaven that Gathers Wails.]

From now on, that was my name.

---

# Chapter 363: The Heaven that Gathers Wails (5)

---

The duel had been concluded. The Staff of Time Immemorial was defeated, and I emerged victorious.

It was a unanimous decision, so all that remained was the aftermath.

"King of Death... No. Are you planning to establish [The Heaven that Gathers Wails] as a new Pillar, Duke?"

Baron Gu Won-Ha inquired. However, the Tower Master lightly shook her head.

"No. Wailing Heaven currently does not wish to become a Pillar."

"Wailing Heaven?"

I tilted my head in confusion.

"Are you referring to me?"

"Yes. [The Heaven that Gathers Wails] is a bit lengthy, isn't it? Since it involves wails, hence Wailing Heaven. Gathering people's memories equates to collecting their names, leading to a Wailing Heaven (名天). Giving back a lifetime to those souls leads to a Wailing Heaven (命天). Lastly, as the heaven that rules over the netherworld, the dark realm of the dead, that's the Wailing Heaven (莫天)."

"You have a knack for naming."

"I have many children, you see. It was a necessary skill."

For some reason, there was a moment when not the Tower Master but the princess boasted proudly.

"So, do you wish to become a Pillar right now, Wailing Heaven?"

I looked around.



"Becoming a Pillar now would mean..."

"Your ascension would end here."

The Tower Master continued.

"A Constellation controls a single floor, but a Pillar manages the entire tower. Just as a Constellation cannot achieve feats by merely frolicking within its own governed floor, it's incongruent for a Pillar to climb the tower."

I pondered deeply.

And then, I responded.

"I wish to reach the 100th floor first."

This statement seemed to have surprised the Pillars.

But the Tower Master nodded, as if she had anticipated this response.

"Okay. In that case, let's conclude by making you a perfect Constellation for now, Kim Wailing Heaven[\[a\]](#)."

"I'd rather not be renamed like that..."

"Kim Weirdiot[\[b\]](#)."

"That's going too far!? Did you just come up with a plausible set of reasons just so you could name me that?!"

"To be reborn as a true Constellation, there's a condition."

A condition.

"You might call it a procedure. Once you complete this procedure, you will be able to bestow blessings upon your followers."

"What is it?"

"Once you become a complete Constellation, you can never erase a skill again."

"....."

"Let's see."

The Tower Master snapped her fingers.

Immediately, rectangular shapes materialized and floated leisurely in the air.

Adorned in gold, silver, and bronze, they were none other than my skill cards.

"[I Want to Become Just Like You (S+)], [Returner's Winding Clock (EX)], [Sword Constellation (A+)], [Ghoul Reincarnation (SSS)], [Goblin High Society (F)], [Demonic Heavenly God Art (A+)], [The Torn Goddess's Salvation (A+)], [Demonic Formations Art (S)], [Earth Bone Dragon's Skull (SSS+)]..."

The Tower Master looked at me with an incredulous expression.

"Really. You have the cream of the crop. Don't you feel a bit guilty?"

"To say I only have top-tier skills, there's [Goblin High Society (F)], you know?"

"What are you talking about? That's precisely your identity. Even if you give up all other cards, you must protect the Goblin High at all costs."

"Your eye for quality is indeed high."

As expected, the Tower Master understood me.

"So, what opportunity will you give me, the Wailing Heaven?"

"An opportunity, you say..."

"It's simple. Previously, Wailing Heaven upgraded [Ghoul Summoning (SS)] to [Ghoul Reincarnation (SSS)] as a reward for clearing floors 11 to 19, right? The same reward. In other words, an opportunity to consolidate your skills."

A comprehensive consolidation of skills.

"When a baron ascends to a duke, it's like reorganizing one's titles and fiefs at once. Gathering scattered lands to form a [Dukedom], trimming and weeding out as necessary."

The Tower Master, being a noble of some kingdom, naturally used a noble analogy.

".....Can I manipulate the skills as I wish?"

"That is correct. Though you'll need to convince me."

The Tower Master chuckled behind her hand. Flap. Her long sleeves, unlike any Earthly fashion, fluttered, revealing her amethyst eyes.

"But this isn't just a reward, Wailing Heaven. As you know, this solidifies what kind of Constellation you will become."

"....."

"A god must be clear. Intuitive. Because a god is a helper, and only when it's clear who can be helped, can the followers seek assistance. Look at Mutia. 'I can regress your life.' How clear is that? On the other hand..."

"Taotie wasn't clear about what kind of Constellation it was. Indeed. The power of a Constellation lies in the intuitiveness of its abilities."

"Yes, yes. Exactly. In short, 'Get your skill set right.' Simple, right?"

I rested my chin on my hand and gazed downward, lost in thought.

'What can I do for people?'

In other words, what is my power?

'For whom can I provide?'

In other words, what is my domain?

'.....What do I need to remain myself?'

In other words, what is my pillar?

The deliberation was lengthy. I came up with some answers on my own. Then, I realized the Tower Master was quietly watching and waiting for me.

'Baron Gu Won-Ha could have taken care of things and left. The duel is over, and this is just the aftermath. Why stay?'

Sure, the Tower Master was showing me favor. She might prefer to reward me personally rather than delegating it to a subordinate.

But I reached a different conclusion.

".....I can ask you. I can seek your advice on what would be best for me."

The Tower Master smiled broadly.

"Correct."

Indeed.

I felt a weight lifting from my heart. The Tower Master is the god of this tower. The central Pillar, the star pinned to the highest night sky.

If I wished to grow stronger as a Constellation, where else would I find a better advisor?

'Nowhere. Absolutely nowhere. This is an incredible opportunity.'

The Tower Master's words were infallible. She was offering me an [opportunity]. Not just to consolidate skills, but to utilize the Tower Master. To not use such a chance would indeed make me Kim Weiridiot.

"Thank you."

"No need for thanks. Rewarding effort is the most basic virtue a noble should have."

"Then, I'll ask straight away. How do you never tire?"

I could feel the remaining Pillars in the assembly hall staring at me. Their gazes were charged with emotion, not bothering



to hide it, allowing me to immediately grasp the nature of their feelings.

Jealousy. Envy.

The Tower Master was their master. Given her life and temperament, she was likely the sole recipient of their affection. And naturally, those monopolized desire to monopolize in return.

'I'm truly competing with the Pillars now.'

Knowing I was utterly devoted to Raviel, they still felt this way?

'Probably.'

Just the fact that I occupied the Tower Master's time at this moment was enough to make them envious.

Not because I was receiving the Tower Master's favor.

But because the Tower Master was bestowing her favor upon me, they were envious.

From now on, they would likely try to hinder my ascent to the 100th floor. They wouldn't cheat; that would risk losing the Tower Master's favor. They would compete with me fairly, adhering strictly to the game's rules.

The Staff of Time Immemorial had already been defeated. They would never underestimate me.

It was going to be a tough battle, which is why the Tower Master granted me such an [opportunity] now.

Fight well. Stay strong.

Therefore, I must make the most of this opportunity.

"Hmm. How do I not tire, you ask?"

"Yes. I'm not tired yet, but things might change once I become a Constellation."

I thought of many people.

"The fox was tired. The first time I met Ester, she was tired because of me, but even before that, she was already festering inside."

How could it be just them?

Most of the Constellations I met, including Hamusutra, were tired of themselves, not anyone else.

Living a long life is like that.

"So, I'd like to hear about the Tower Master's case."

"Love."

The Tower Master answered simply, like a priest revealing the truth.

"I surround myself with loved ones. No, I make those around me love me. If I'm troubled, my lovers are even more troubled."

If I'm happy, my lovers are happier. That makes life enjoyable."

".....Wouldn't it be torturous for the lovers?"

"Indeed."

The Tower Master affirmed just as simply.

"But I can make my lovers the happiest."

"....."

"Only I can gift the utmost happiness to my lovers. If they're in pain, I understand why better than they do. I feel more pain. I'm happier. Therefore, even if my lovers suffer because of me, it doesn't matter. After all, there's no one who can make them happier than me."

With a madness that could be deemed conviction, the Tower Master spoke.

"When I can feel my lovers' pain and happiness, I truly feel

alive. Vividly. Tangibly. How do I not tire? It's simple. As long as life feels real, I don't tire."

Indeed.

It wasn't a life I'd cling to even in death, but it was a tactic worth considering.

I made up my mind.

"Grant me a skill."

"Hmm? If it's a minor adjustment, maybe, but giving you a completely new one is a bit..."

"It's fine. It's not entirely new. In fact, it's almost like I already have it."

"If that's the case, I see no reason not to. What is it?"

"[A Certain Returner's Love]."

The Tower Master's eyes widened.

"Oh?"

"As you know, it's a skill Raviel possesses. A skill that connects Raviel's time and mine. I want the same skill as Raviel."

"Technically, having it on one side is enough for the effect. I could grant it, but don't you think it's a waste? You're running out of skill slots."

"Our Tower Master lacks sense."

I smiled.

"Aren't wedding rings supposed to be held by both parties? Please, give it to me."

Hearing my words, the Tower Master burst into laughter. It seemed the analogy of a wedding ring amused her greatly. Embroidering the air with laughter that sounded like tearing silk, she tapped the void.

[Supreme Love and Pure Longing.]

[The Master of All Lives acknowledges your love and gifts you a skill.]

A golden card materialized before my eyes.

+

[A Certain Returner's Love]

Rank: EX

Effect: For a returner, love is like poison. No matter how much they struggle, they can't share time with the one they love. Thus, a certain returner had a burning desire, 'Let my beloved keep her memories.' This desire reached the tower and was granted.

You share a timeline with your beloved. If your lover goes back a day, you go back a day. If you go back a day, so does your lover. This is the vow of a ring. This is a marriage of time.

May fortune be with both of you.

\*However, it only activates when you and your lover mutually love each other.

+

The same as what Raviel had.

If I were a constellation, I would be the brightest star at the forefront.

"Alright. Shall I be generous? I'll throw in a service, Wailing Heaven."

Sararak—

The golden card descended onto the back of my hand, melting away.

Literally melting and disappearing.



As the card vanished, it infused my left ring finger with golden light. Naturally, the wedding ring I had matched with Raviel was on my finger.

"I linked [A Certain Returner's Love] with the wedding ring. Unless the skill card is torn, the wedding ring won't be destroyed either. Oh, but now that Wailing Heaven is a complete Constellation, you can't get rid of skill cards, right?"

"It's practically an indestructible equipment item now."

"That's right. Now it's truly a wedding ring. Congratulations."

The Tower Master beamed with a smile.

The Pillars around us intensified their stares, but neither of us cared. Of course, there was a difference. I thought I had to bear it anyway, while the Tower Master was deliberately ignoring it.

"What other skill would you like to revise?"

"Remove the penalty from [Ghoul Reincarnation]."

I immediately requested.

"Being able to use the skill only once a week is too harsh. Sure, if I used it to summon ghouls for a mob attack, it would be an overpowered skill, but I don't do that. I just want to return memories to the souls I've collected. Please remove the penalty."

"Well. You have a point."

"And there are three, four, five points."

"Five?"

"Quack quack."

After the most absurd exchange, the Tower Master acquiesced to my request.

[Skill Revision.]

[The penalty on Ghoul Reincarnation has been removed.]

[Ghoul Reincarnation (SSS) transforms into Ghoul Reincarnation (SSS+)!]

"Again? Consider this your last chance. Don't come to me with regrets later. Speak up now while you have the chance."

"Revise [The Torn Goddess's Salvation] for me. She's not a torn goddess anymore, right? She's the [Goddess of Protection]. It's only right that I'm granted full access to Hwiya's power."

"That makes sense."

"Five?"

"I have no idea what you're saying... Mr. Kim Gong-Ja, do you like such jokes...? I'm starting to feel embarrassed being here....."

"Damn it!"

[Skill Revision.]

[The Torn Goddess's Salvation has been consolidated.]

[The Torn Goddess's Salvation (A+) transforms into Protection of the Goddess (S)!]

"As for [Goblin High Society]..."

"No. I won't change it. Go back."

[Skill Non-Revision.]

[Goblin High Society has been preserved.]

[It's absurd to even think about erasing it!]

"The fox has sworn to be with me for eternity. If I'm tied to the same timeline as Raviel, the fox is the sentinel ensuring that timeline remains unbroken. I wish her presence to be acknowledged."

"As you say, so it shall be."

[Eternal Alliance of Time.]

[The Master of All Lives acknowledges your skill.]

[You obtain A Music Box Just for You (EX).]

"What about Hisimet Cretsu and Mutia, Wailing Heaven?"

"They were merely under my command for a while, not eternal allies I will be with. They wouldn't want that anyway."

"You're right and wise. Those subjugated by force, not heart, will rebel when weakened or faced with a stronger force."

"Yes. So, while I might borrow their powers occasionally, they are not my powers. However, please consolidate [Demonic Heavenly God Art] and [Demonic Formations Art]."

I spoke emphatically.

"They're both skills that paint the heavens of Demonic Heaven."

"That too is a reasonable request."

The Tower Master nodded.

"Let's name it Demonic Heaven."

[Skill Revision.]

[Demonic Heavenly God Art (A+) and Demonic Formations Art (S) have been consolidated.]

[The skills merge into Demonic Heaven (SSS)!]

And so.

My skill set was complete.

+

Name: Kim Gong-Ja

Rank: S-Class

Skills (10/10)

1. A Certain Returner's Love (EX)
2. Returner's Winding Clock (EX)
3. I Want to Become Just Like You (S+)
4. Ghoul Reincarnation (SSS+)
5. Earth Bone Dragon's Skull (SSS+)
6. Sword Constellation (A+)
7. Protection of the Goddess (S)
8. A Music Box Just for You (EX)

## 9. Goblin High Society (F)

## 10. Demonic Heaven (SSS)

+

Skill 1, [A Certain Returner's Love], is the foundation that allows me to be myself. It's the wick that keeps the candle burning.

Skills 2 to 5, from [Returner's Winding Clock] to [Earth Bone Dragon's Skull], are my powers. They allow me to see others' traumas, summon them as ghouls, and give them physical forms.

Skills 6 to 8, from [Sword Constellation] to [A Music Box Just for You], represent my allies. More than just being together, our souls are intertwined.

Skill 9, [Goblin High Society], is... well, Goblin High Society. Does it need an explanation?

Skill 10, [Demonic Heaven], is my force. My sword. My source. It's the hilt I grip to not be devoured by this world, and



the blade I wield to cut through this world.

"Mr. Kim Gong-Ja."

After all the work was done.

The Tower Master looked up at me quietly.

"Just nod, and the process to become a complete Constellation will be finished."

"Alright."

"From now on, you can't erase a skill."

"Okay."

"From now on, you can't die."

"....."

"Until now, you could always tear up [Returner's Winding Clock] if you wished. You could return to a life that ends with death. But once you nod, you can never go back to how things were before."

That's what it means to not be able to tear up a skill.

"Even in death, you'll just go back a day. Even if you wanted to return to childhood through death, skills only work within [the world inside the tower]. You can't return to the past before you set foot in the tower, to the outside world."

Once more, the Tower Master asked.

"Do you truly accept eternity?"

"Yeah."

Despite knowing the weight of the word, I nodded.

I had walked this far just to bear that weight.

"I will remain the heaven that gathers the screams of people forever."

"....."

And the Tower Master, having walked all this way just to deliver these words to someone, spoke.

"May fortune be with you."

Tick-tock.

The halted time began to flow again.

[You have cleared the 76th floor stage.]

[You have cleared the 77th floor stage.]

[You have cleared the 78th floor stage.]

[You have cleared the 79th floor stage.]

With the defeat of the Staff of Time Immemorial, the stages she managed were all instantly cleared.

What happened to Yoo Soo-Ha, who had been the judge?

Perhaps, I would know soon enough.

Light seeped from beneath my feet, obscuring my vision.

[You have leveled up.]

[Your skill slots have expanded.]

And then.

[You are now an SSS-Class Hunter.]

[You are 'The Heaven that Gathers Wails.']

Paaat!

As I was declared an SSS-Class Hunter, I was enveloped in white light.

---

[a] Kim Myeong-Cheon

[b] Kim Mung-Chong

# Chapter 364: The 1st Floor (1)

---

There's a story to tell later.

"I don't recognize this ceiling..."

After being engulfed in white light, the first words I muttered were probably among the top 100 most clichéd quotes used in novels throughout human history. However, it was a lie. The scenery that came into my view wasn't unfamiliar at all; in fact, it was quite the opposite.

-Oh? ...Oh? Why am I suddenly here?

This is Café Planetarium.

Once the lobby of the Great Library, it had now been transformed into a café stage.

Under the lofty ceiling of the library, the Guardian Spirit floated leisurely.

-Ah, it seems you, Zombie, were summoned to a meeting or something again? I couldn't attend because I don't have the authority, right?

'Yeah, that would be correc.....'

I was about to finish my sentence when a mischievous thought struck me. If there was anyone you shouldn't play pranks on, it was the Guardian Spirit. He ranked last on that list. I acted immediately.

[The Heaven that Gathers Wails agrees with the Sword Emperor's statement.]

I merely thought it, yet strangely enough, a message flowed through. It wasn't the first time, but it was certainly the first time Guardian Spirit received a message from me.

---Huh.

The Guardian Spirit forgot what he was about to say and

stared at me intently. The emotions in his gaze were diverse but starkly evident. Satisfaction and a hint of regret.

-Well, yes. It's about time you became a complete Constellation. You little rascal. Not even 100 years old and already parading around as a Constellation, you've grown a lot.

'Hey, if you add up all the time spent in traumas, it would easily exceed 100 years, don't you think?'

I shrugged nonchalantly.

'Anyway, it's just as you thought. I returned from the meeting of the Pillars. I won. And as a reward, I got the chance to revise my skills once.'

-What? Skill revision? We didn't have such a thing in my time!

'Well, you've never defeated a Pillar, nor do you remember them, right...?'

-Damn it! This is discrimination against hunters! Why is it



only Kim Zombie who gets all the favoritism? Hey! Pillars or Tower Masters or whatever you bastards are! If you had shown me even 1/100th of the kindness you show to Kim Zombie, would I be here munching on ghost rice cakes?!

Guardian Spirit yelled at the top of its lungs, truly believing its voice could reach the tower. I chuckled softly.

As this scene unfolded, a man approached us.

"Hey, slacker."

Thump.

A man dressed in a part-time uniform. Despite being on duty, he was nonchalantly chewing gum, and his gaze was so frivolous one might wonder if it belonged to a human. His mere presence seemed to lower the average moral standard of humanity by 1%. Who else could it be?

It was Yoo Soo-Ha.

"What? You're the one roaming around."

"Weren't you busy climbing the tower? Why are you suddenly here? Just a moment ago, this spot was empty, and now you're sitting here."

We were in a rather secluded part of Café Planetarium. The customers were far enough away that they hadn't noticed my presence. Being quite well-known myself, there would be chaos if they did.

".....Do you not remember?"

"Huh? Remember what?"

Yoo Soo-Ha furrowed his brows, clueless.

'Is that so.'

It was to be expected. Hunters associated with the Pillars all lost their memories. Yoo Soo-Ha couldn't remember the encounter with the Staff of Time Immemorial, nor his role as a judge.

It was a painfully obvious fact, but why did it leave a bitter taste in my mouth?

"Hey."

I swallowed that bitterness, pushing it down my throat.

"Do you want to see me dance?"

"....."

Yoo Soo-Ha's expression seemed to say, 'I knew you were crazy, but this is a whole new level of insanity.'

"Don't tell me, you, a guy who already has a partner, are trying to hit on me to go clubbing? No way, kid. I don't want to get involved with your duchy and suffer for it."

"Are you nuts? Delusional? I'm not talking about clubbing. I was asking if you want to see me embarrass myself with a Cossack dance."

"No, what you're saying sounds even crazier... Hmm."

Finally, Yoo Soo-Ha crossed his arms. It seemed he was

intrigued. But he still looked at me with suspicion, wondering if I was just joking. A reasonable doubt, since if there was a list of people humanity could do without joking with, Yoo Soo-Ha would be right after the Guardian Spirit in second place.

"Alright. If you're willing to entertain an old man by showing off, I'll watch. Go on, dance right here in the café- What the hell are you doing, you lunatic!?"

"Cossack, dance, I am, dancing!"

"Stop it! Fuck, ah. Don't look here! Anyone who makes eye contact with me will forever wonder what's in their coffee from now on! Hey! If you stare for more than a second, expect phlegm, and for more than three seconds, fuck, I don't even know! Hey! Hey! Why are you still looking?!"

Yoo Soo-Ha screamed. The customers who glanced over at the commotion and met Yoo Soo-Ha's fierce gaze quickly averted their eyes. The handsome part-timer, who had become a fixture of Café Planetarium, was now more famous for his temper than his looks.

"Phew... Wow, shit. Crazy bastard. You actually danced when asked to?"

"Yep. If you ever want to see a Cossack dance, I'll perform it for you anytime."

"Why are you like this? Did you eat something weird...?"

"No. Just thought, if dancing for you makes this world a bit more bearable, then why not dance?"

"....."

Finally, Yoo Soo-Ha's expression reached its peak. It was a look of having heard something utterly unbelievable.

"Good heavens. You're really mad. No, I knew you were mad, but to think a madman could go madder, what should I call that?"

"Yoo Soo-Ha. I am... a god who can dance for you."

"If a normal hunter went mad, I'd report them to the Vigilante Corps, but what do you do when the top-ranked bastard goes insane? Seriously, should I send a message to the Ivansia duchy...?"

Yoo Soo-Ha muttered seriously. Though there was nothing serious to take from his words, except for one thing I heard for the first time.

"Top rank? What are you talking about? I'm still second."

"Huh? .....Ah, right."

Yoo Soo-Ha frowned, as if realizing, 'Ah, this guy didn't know yet,' lost in thought. He sighed heavily, filled with reluctance.

"Go see for yourself."

"Where?"

"Babylon Square. You could check on your smartphone easily, but you don't carry one, right? If you stay here, it'll only cause trouble with the customers. Better leave before it gets annoying."

Yoo Soo-Ha waved his hand dismissively. True to his words, I had long since abandoned my smartphone. I patted Yoo Soo-Ha's back as a farewell (which earned me a punch in the solar

plexus, but I took it. Damn, that hurt), and teleported to the first floor.

Upon reaching the square, I was greeted by a gigantic hologram floating in the air.

+

1st. King of Death

2nd. Sword Saint

3rd. Black Dragon Witch

4th. Viper

5th. Countess

6th. Heretic Inquisitor

7th. Paladin

+

"....."

I stood motionless in the middle of the square, looking up at the ranking list.

"Hey, isn't that person over there..."

"King of Death, isn't it?"

"Eh, he's back? I didn't hear any news."

"He might have taken a break from climbing! Look! He looks exactly like the photo here. Compared to..."

Buzz buzz.



The square began to stir with excitement.

Numerous people were coming and going in the square. Compared to when I first challenged the 10th floor, or even to the future when I decided to undergo the 4000-day return, Babylon Square was much more vibrant.

The Great Guilds chose cooperation over invasion. The 10th, 20th, 30th, 40th floors... The endlessly unfolding fertile lands and new markets promised the tower an eternal new world. Raviel was my lover, and Uburka was my son. The procedures were strict, and the policies precise. Under the cooperation of the Great Guilds and local forces, the tower was prospering.

Even at this moment.

Humans from the outside world were also walking in the square. Although still a minority, there were empire exchange students selected by the Ivansia Duchy, Ghost Tribe members who joined Celestial Martial Guild following Viper, Earth Spirit Tribe warriors leading the trend of the Blood Fire Drama, among others of various races.

There would be discrimination, of course. Contempt, too. But while I was endlessly climbing the tower, taking care of external affairs, my comrades poured all their sweat and blood into internal management.

At least, there was no Babylon Square turned into ruins by countless terrorist attacks in our world. We, and I, will not allow even an inch of ruin to encroach upon this place.

Never ever.

"Hey, look over there!"

Someone pointed at the hologram. The reaction was minimal because most of the crowd was looking at me.

However, a clear change was happening on the ranking list that was enough to divert people's attention.

Fzzt fzzt-

Noise interfered with the hologram, and suddenly the text changed.

+

1st. The Heaven that Gathers Wails

2nd. Sword Saint

3rd. Black Dragon Witch

4th. Viper

5th. Countess

6th. Heretic Inquisitor

7th. Paladin

+

As if waiting for me to come and see it, my title on the ranking list changed.

A few people witnessed the change. The magical power inherent in the sound "Huh?" instinctively drew people's attention. Dozens of passersby shifted their gaze, and in no time, the "Huh?" spread throughout the square.

"What's that? The Heaven that Gathers Wails?"

"That's where the King of Death used to be."

"Di-Did the King of Death die and get removed from the list...?"

"My god. The King of Death might be dead?"

"The King of Death is dead?"

"King of Death got whacked?"

"King of Death was brutally murdered!!"

Dear citizens of the Tower, such a commendable example of information distortion you're showing....

"Why The Heaven that Gathers Wails, though?" or "Even if King of Death died, it's impossible for a new Hunter to suddenly take first place," or "That person standing there looks exactly like King of Death..." were some of the voices, but the

rumor of my death buried all minority opinions.

And so, the square was in uproar for about four minutes.

"Really!"

The first person to rush towards me through the commotion was the Black Dragon Witch.

To be precise, she didn't exactly rush. She used her specialty, the [Teleportation] skill, to appear right beside me.

"Can't you stop yourself from causing trouble for one damn minute!?"

"Hewwwo. Nice to see you UwU."

".....What's with that sound, like scraping the bottom of a dog bowl?"

"Didn't you know? This is the latest greeting these days."

"What nonsense..... No, forget it. Rather than trying to make sense of you, I'd rather charge infantry into the Maginot Line. You come back after so long, and the first thing you do is spread a rumor that the top-ranked hunter might be dead!"

"It wasn't me."

I felt slightly wronged.

I just gained a new alias, and the rumor was spread by the people here. There must have been members of the Black Dragon Guild among the crowd. They must have rushed to inform the Black Dragon Witch as soon as they heard the commotion. Thanks to that, the Black Dragon Witch used teleportation to arrive here in less than five minutes.

'But it's been a while.'

Indeed, other comrades don't remember the events of the heavens floors either. If they had, I would have shared the story with the Black Dragon Witch too.

That's what I thought.

"Long time no see. How have the other comrades been?"

".....Huh? What are you talking about."

Thus, I was completely unprepared for the Black Dragon Witch's response.

"You're talking as if we haven't seen each other for months. Didn't you just meet the Countess a few days ago?"

I was momentarily stunned.

".....What?"

"What? What do you mean 'what'? I heard about it. The heavenly floor, right? There's no one else who would climb such a terrifying place as nonchalantly as you. What would you have done if the judge had betrayed you?"

My eyebrows twitched.

The commotion among the bystanders began to subside. The

Black Dragon Witch had appeared in person and was bantering with me.

If I were not truly the King of Death, this would have been impossible, and thus the rumor of "King of Death is dead" quickly died down.

Contrary to the calming crowd, my mind was in turmoil.

"Wait a minute. How do you remember..."

"I'll let you explain that."

Thud.

Footsteps approached.

"It wasn't difficult."

I blankly turned my head. Cat-eared Merchant's Union members were escorting someone through the crowd, parting the bystanders.



There stood the Countess, smiling with a fan in hand.

# Chapter 365: The 1st Floor (2)

---

[Come when I call you. Perform tricks if I ask you to, and if I command you to open a snack bag, then do it. Of course, you cannot lie to me and must always speak the truth. And that's not all. If I tell you to meow, you meow, and if I get sick of it and tell you to bark, then bark willingly.]

---

The Countess surveyed her surroundings.

"There are too many ears here for a conversation. Let's move elsewhere."

It was a sensible suggestion. We left the square.

Well, we just moved to a cafe clinging to the edge of the square.

'It's been a while since I've been here.'

This cafe was where we first met. The place where I was acknowledged as the vice guild master of the five great guilds during our first meeting. A place with its own significance.

Originally, this place was occupied by the most famous franchise in the world, the Green Star Octopus Mermaid Queen, but at some point, it turned into a cat cafe.

"Welcome! Woof! Master!"

To be more precise, it changed today.

Cats that I clearly remember seeing in the Heaven of Gold, undoubtedly the [The Cat that Bites Gold Coins], Nyangnyang Legion, rushed to the entrance.

"Woof! We are overwhelmed by the master's arrival and cannot contain our excitement!"

"Ah, I have already prostrated myself on the ground in my devotion...!"

"We have composed an ode to the Countess out of our devotion, woof!"

The Nyangnyangs lined up in a row, prostrating themselves. Their heads bowed but their tails were sticking up, wagging furiously.

The reason the cats didn't meow but barked instead was because the Countess commanded them to do so.

"Hmm."

The Countess covered her lower face with her fan, her eyes smiling.

"Not a bad welcome. Well, being the God of Commerce, you'd expect at least this level of service. Lead us to our table."

"Woof! Right away!"

The cats stood up and led the way.

We arrived at a window seat. It was arguably the most luxurious spot in the cafe, where sitting alone could justify the cost of the coffee. And literally, a hotspot.

"We warmed up the seat in anticipation of the master's arrival! Woof woof!"

Because the cats had already taken a seat on each chair.

"Our body heat shall warm up the master's cold body even if just a little! What an honor it would be! Woof!"

"Please, sit, master. We wish to serve you!"

"We've sent all other customers away. Don't worry! We gave them 10 gold coins each and asked them to leave politely, so they left happily!"

"If they realized their insignificant lives contributed to the Countess's comfort, they would surely rejoice too! Woof woof!"

"What the..."

I shuddered.

"I've never seen such a servile being..."

"I wondered where to best utilize them to earn such praise. It seemed there was no punishment greater than being eternally stroked by the very humans they scorned. So, I bought a cafe."

"I believe this cafe's land is the most expensive in the tower..."

"Well, money is something I have in abundance."

We took our seats by the window.

In other words, this cafe was situated in the square. Although the cats controlled the entrance and no one followed us inside, pedestrians could still glimpse us from outside the window.

Passersby snapped photos and waved, shouting through the glass. When I awkwardly waved back, a burst of cheers shook the soundproof glass.

Terrifying.

"Shouldn't we sit somewhere more secluded...?"

"No."

The Black Dragon Witch firmly refused.

"Do you know how long you've been away? I won't say you need to spend 90 out of 100 days in Babylon, but at least stay for 30 days. You're practically a king. There's nothing worse than a leader who abandons his throne."

"So we came to a cafe on purpose..."

"That's right. At the very least, when you're on the first floor, you need to be visible to the people. It's better to let the citizens see and feel reassured that the top-ranked hunters are living close to them, rather than holding meetings in some hidden depths. Right?"

So this was also part of reputation management.

Unlike me, Anastasia effortlessly smiled and waved. The glass vibrated again with the crowd's cheer.

Really, the Black Dragon Witch is flawless.

"Now, you must be curious why I remember the heavenly floors."

"Yeah. It's puzzling."

"As you know, I made [The Cat that Bites Gold Coins] bow before me."

Indeed, beneath the Countess's seat, four cats were kneeling in a row, a fact I recognized but chose not to react to.

"Tsk."

Regardless, the Countess clicked her fan.

"I demanded absolute obedience from the god. But in truth, I had another aim. To hide a beast, you must first create a forest to conceal it. To me, absolute obedience was that forest."

"And what was the beast?"

"The inability to lie to me."



Recalling the Countess's terms, I remembered:

「Of course, you cannot tell any lies to me and must always speak the truth.」

Indeed, such a condition was included in the Countess's surrender terms. Noticing my recollection, the Countess nodded.

"Seems your brain is still sharp, Kim Gong-Ja. Then let me ask from my side."

With a swish, the Countess's fan closed.

"Did the [The Cat that Bites Gold Coins] lose its memory?"

I blinked.

"Pardon?"

"A simple question. The [Staff of Time Immemorial] can distort the memories of hunters and Constellations. So, one

might think that the [The Cat that Bites Gold Coins] would also lose its memories of the heavenly floors and the pillars. However, upon hearing that, I suddenly thought."

Tapping the table lightly with the tip of her fan, the Countess continued.

"There's no way that could be."

"....."

The Countess did not explain why she thought it impossible. Instead, the cats lying under the table pricked up their ears.

"Woof! Your thinking is correct, master. We are in cooperation with the [Staff of Time Immemorial]! When the pillar sends a soul, we receive it. Even if other Constellations can't remember the pillar, we, the collaborators of the heavenly tier, must remember!"

"Indeed."

I felt as if I had grasped the whole situation.

"Nisha lost her memory, but the cats retained theirs. Then, Nisha asked the cats about what happened and learned the whole story. Since lying was impossible, Nisha realized the full extent of the events."

"My, my. Now the two of you even address each other by your real names..."

Anastasia murmured in amazement beside us. Or perhaps, she just seemed dumbfounded.

The Countess shrugged her shoulders and then lifted one of the cats onto her lap.

"Wow, woof..."

"Hmm. Right, but that alone wasn't enough to be certain."

The Countess stroked the cat's head. Trembling. The cat shivered in terror, as if it were a mortal who had been blessed with a pat from a mythical monster.

"I needed assurance that, come what may, the pillar would not tamper with the Constellation's memory. Regrettably, I

was not in a position to demand such a guarantee from the pillar. From the pillar's perspective, I am nothing more than a mere hunter. So, I thought of a counterintuitive solution."

"Counterintuitive solution?"

"Simple. Create an event where [no matter what happens, the pillar cannot tamper with the Constellation's memory]."

The Countess flicked the top of the cat's head. The cat trembled.

"Meow... We became the Countess's slaves according to the agreement. That was the deciding factor. The moment we became slaves, the [Staff of Time Immemorial] could no longer distort our memories under any circumstances."

"Why is that?"

"Because it would be a complete mockery of our feline lives."

The tricolor cat wagged its tail.

"If the pillar erased our memories, we would become the Countess's slaves overnight without knowing [why this happened] or [being clueless]. Isn't that unfair? It's as if, in the blink of an eye, we became the servants of the most noble being in the world! Woof! Of course, we would be very pleased with this situation and praise our master's elegance as we do now, but objectively, it's nothing but utterly unreasonable violence!"

"I see."

The Countess rubbed the cat's ears, causing the cat to jump in surprise and cry out "Meow!? Wow, woof! Woof!" in a pitiful protest, but to no avail.

"In short, I needed an absolute point that could not be rolled back. A point that could neither be erased nor distorted. That's why I let you rampage through the heaven and subtly pushed you until the Constellation submitted."

"....."

The moment the heaven's administrator was summoned and lost their memory, suspecting that the [cat bitten by gold] might be involved, the Countess aimed for the Constellation's surrender.

Listening to the Countess's grand strategy, I wet my lips.

"Weren't you worried?"

"Hm? About what?"

"That the [Staff of Time Immemorial] might have a ferocious nature. That it might endure irrational violence, that kind of entity. How could you trust that pillar?"

The Countess's eyes widened.

She covered her mouth with her fan and laughed softly.

"What are you talking about? Kim Gong-Ja, I have never once trusted the [Staff of Time Immemorial]."

"Excuse me? But..."

"I trusted you."

The Countess looked at me.

"You care about the tower more than anyone else. If the pillar managing such a tower were a ruthless dictator, you would have been the first to crush it. Isn't that so?"

"....."

"You tolerated the existence of that pillar. Not reluctantly, but willingly. Kim Gong-Ja. if you respect someone, they must be worthy of respect."

From afar, the cats wobbled towards us. They each served us a cup of coffee. The Countess held an Americano in one hand and smiled brightly.

"Just as you trust my abilities, I trust your judgment."

"...Nisha."

"You are our leader, and we are your comrades. And comrades, in my belief, strive to be equals."

The Countess said.

"What we did, how we conquered the stages, the conversations we had, a world remembered only by Kim Gong-Ja alone, oh dear. I would vehemently reject that from my end."

The smile that the Countess wore made it seem plausible why Patricia, despite their utterly opposite personalities, fell for the Countess.

"I lost my memory but when I opened my eyes, I found these cats scurrying around my feet. When I asked what happened, the cats showed me an ultra-high-definition hologram of the events in the heaven. I'd like to boast that everything went according to my plan."

"Woof."

The cats that delivered coffee to the Countess now pressed against my legs. Three cats combined their strength to lift a tray.

"White Mocha Frappuccino Venti Quad Shot Java Chip with Half-Half Chocolate Drizzle!"



I had never ordered it, but the cats brought my custom menu. I chuckled and turned to look at their master.

"A gift."

I was momentarily at a loss for words.

"Ah. Of course, the real gift is something else."

"Really."

"I just wanted to tell you this."

"Really..."

"Welcome, Kim Gong-Ja. You've worked hard conquering the heavens. We will always remember what trials you faced. The only thing you need to remember is one thing."

"...My comrades are amazing."

"Even if you leave us behind, we will never leave you alone."

I must have been making a face too embarrassing to show to passersby. To hide my expression, I took a sip of my coffee.

That day's White Mocha was exceptionally sweet.

# Chapter 366: The 1st Floor (3)

---

Feeling reassured by the presence of my trustworthy comrades guarding the rear, I wished to say that I had started climbing the tower again. However, there was still unfinished business around the first floor.

"Where do you think you're going? There are hundreds, if not thousands, of interviews that have been put off. The press has been giving us the side-eye for a while now, making things quite burdensome, but this is a good opportunity. Let's get them out of the way."

Looking into Anastasia's eyes, it seemed there was indeed a lot left to do.

"Also, there's this, Kim Gong-Ja. There's going to be the first marriage between one of our hunters and a member of the Earth Spirit Tribe."

"What?!"

"Yeah, I had the same expression when I first heard the news. It feels too sudden, but it's something to celebrate, right? The wedding hasn't taken place yet. Since you're the oldest friend and a deity to the Earth Spirit Tribe, go and give them your blessings. Wait, hold on! First things first, the interviews! Hey! Kim Gong-Ja! You arm-flailing bastard!"

And so, I went to offer my congratulations.

The Earth Spirit Tribe has a unique marriage culture. Each partner searches through their respective homes' hearths, transferring the burning embers to a lantern. At the wedding, they combine their flames into one.

The guests also bring empty lanterns to the ceremony. Once the couple's flames merge, the guests pass on their congratulations by transferring the flame to their lanterns.

Guests carry this newly kindled flame back to their own hearths, [certifying the birth of a new couple] among all attendees. In homes without a hearth, they at least light a campfire.

It was a fittingly splendid ceremony for the Earth Spirit Tribe, who worship fire and revere their community... Naturally, there was a problem.

"W-We don't have a hearth at home! What do we do, King of Death?"

One half of the couple, the hunter, looked distressed.

Indeed.

Our citizens, enjoying the pinnacle of modern, or rather, future civilization, naturally did not keep hearths.

"Ugh. I'm not fixated on such things. Isn't love all that matters?"

"Ah, my love! But I'm interested in your traditions too! Surely, when we press our foreheads together, a brilliant idea will come to us!"

"My love...! Your heart is more delicate than the dew-kissed blossoms at dawn!"

Hmm.

Well.

A couple that loves each other to this extent would indeed be the first to marry across species. Yes, that makes sense...

"Ah, what a lovely occasion."

Despite feeling a surge of nausea from the saccharine display, I managed a smile.

"Argh! I've shown something unseemly before the great Kekerkker, ugor! Forgive me!"

"It's fine. I'm the one who should bear it, having intruded upon a couple's home uninvited."

"That's right. That's why I told you to forgive."

Uburka and our children really have no sense of how to treat a deity.

"Given that it's the first marriage of its kind, it's bound to

attract a lot of attention. The major guilds are even planning to use this as a chance to promote harmony between species, but wouldn't that be too burdensome for you?"

"Ugor? Is that so?"

The Earth Spirit Tribe member tilted their head in confusion, but the hunter beside them cautiously nodded.

It's the difference in cultures, after all. I did well to rush over.

"I'll handle the press intrusion at the wedding venue. What business do merchants have interfering with the sacred union of flames?"

While pretending to address the Earth Spirit Tribe, I first reassured the hunter.

"And on this occasion, I'll arrange for a Holy Fire in the center of the square."

"Ugor, by Holy Fire you mean...?"

"I'll personally prepare the flame using my Aura. We'll set up something like an Olympic cauldron in the square to keep my fire burning continuously."

I turned to look at the hunter.

"You can take the flame from there to the wedding. For the Earth Spirit Tribe, it's as good as bringing divine fire, which should be more than sufficient. Of course, whether or not you choose to respect the Earth Spirit Tribe's marital traditions is entirely up to your agreement."

"Ah, um... Th-thank you for your consideration!"

The hunter bowed deeply, perhaps a bit too earnestly.

I smirked wryly. To them, it must seem like the top-ranked hunter is intervening on their behalf.

Imagine, someone of my stature blocking the press and installing something in the middle of Babylon's most expensive square. Naturally, they would feel immensely pressured.

'It reminds me of when I married Raviel...'



Back then, notable nobles from across the empire flocked to the ceremony.

Compared to Raviel, my status was lower, necessitating my adoption by the Imperial Chamberlain.

Even now, when dealing with official matters in the empire, it's more convenient to act under the title of 'Consort of the Ivansia Ducal House' than as the 'Top-ranked Hunter of the Lone Child World'. Am I the only one? The Black Dragon Witch and the Heretic Inquisitor also hold nominal noble titles.

Such are the differences between worlds.

"That's all I can do for you."

Raviel used her power to summon the Imperial Chamberlain and facilitate my adoption, which could be seen as either a kindness or a burden on me. Ultimately, it was my choice to make.

I will support the couple before me. If two people can transcend the differences in status and even species, they will surely navigate their future wisely.

"I'll do my best to suppress the press and provide a ceremony that's flawless from the Earth Spirit Tribe's perspective. However, there will undoubtedly be challenges that you must face on your own."

"Ah, um... What... What are your plans for the media?"

"Simple."

I grinned.

"Just give them a bigger scoop than interspecies marriage."

---

「 Shock! Encounter with a new species! 」

The media was ablaze with excitement just one day before the wedding.

「 Intelligent life discovered living in a city underground on the 5th floor! 」

「A splendid city hidden beneath the 5th floor, previously thought to be a mere hunting ground!?」

「An unexpected encounter. Who are the beings of this underground city?」

「Was the city legend true?」

「It's said that the darkest place is under the candlestick, but this place under the candlestick is mighty strong!」

「The Black Dragon Witch comments on the news, expressing 'it's shocking but a warm welcome'...」

The reaction was quite explosive.

"Die! Just die, you crazy bastard!"

As evidence of this, Anastasia was currently storming into my room in real-time, throttling me.

"Can you not?! Gah?!"

"Am I crazy? Do you really want to see me drop dead from overwork? I'm already buried under a mountain of tasks, and now you've piled this colossal event on top?!"

Anastasia shook me violently, her grip tightening around my neck.

This was no joke. A dark Aura emanated from Anastasia's grasp. Though not as strong as me, Anastasia was a hunter who would not be outdone in terms of Aura by anyone.

"I'm dying... Can't breathe... really... dying..."

"Good. Just die. It's not like it's your first time. Just die and go back to yesterday, then fix this mess immediately!"

"Help... help me..."

It was only when I was on the brink of death that Anastasia finally let me go, heaving a huge sigh as if bidding the world goodbye.

"Haah... Fine. I'll listen to your excuse. But how did you even find out about an underground civilization on the 5th floor?"

Catching my breath, I answered.

"Whew. It was Mutia, the Constellation I met on the 62nd floor."

"Mutia?"

"Yes. Officially known as [The Ruin-Harvesting Cow]. She has the power to regress people, showing them what lives they could have led, the myriad possibilities they hold. You could say she has a rough grasp of these possibilities."

The Black Dragon Witch slightly furrowed her brows.

"What? That's... overpowered."

"Yep. An overpowered character, indeed. Anyway, this overpowered character fought me and pulled all sorts of tricks."

If Flame Emperor had not obtained [Returner's Winding Clock], a worldline based on this assumption.

In that worldline, I didn't lose my life to the Flame Emperor but instead forged my own path. Roaming around from the 2nd to the 9th floor, I eventually discovered a city hidden underground on the 5th floor, thanks to a combination of luck and happenstance.

"Thanks to Mutia showing me my possibilities, I incidentally learned about the 5th floor's underground civilization. Since I knew about it, I had to make use of it."

"...I understand the situation, but you should have waited to reveal it. Now, our kids might collapse under the workload."

"Hm, actually, that was part of the plan."

"Huh?"

Anastasia asked, baffled by what seemed like nonsense.

But I was serious.

"The guild masters of our guilds trust each other completely now but the situation is different for the guild members below us. They've been fiercely fighting for years, so suddenly

becoming all buddy-buddy?"

"...That's true."

"Exactly. They might refrain from fighting for now, out of respect for us, the guild leaders. But this is a matter of emotions."

The top-ranked hunters chose the path of cooperation after countless battles across stages.

However, it's different for the average guild member. They couldn't actively participate in stage conquests past the 12th floor. They lack the experience of [sharing hardships together].

"Anastasia is right. It's busy. With the discovery of an underground civilization on the 5th floor, no single guild can handle the workload alone now."

So, I deliberately created an experience.

"Driven by a desire to avoid death by overwork, the guilds must cooperate. Only by all guilds working together at full

capacity can this hellish workload be managed.

"The world...!"

"And what about past conflicts? Old grudges? That's all well and good, but drop a 9-month overtime bomb in front of them and see. Do you think the guild members don't want to sleep or go home? They'll have no choice but to cooperate."

"You're truly a devil..."

Anastasia looked appalled.

I just shrugged.

"In the next few months, all the major guilds will effectively function as [one company]."

"But what about our kids' stress?"

"There's an easy target for stress relief. Announce that I was the one who discovered the underground civilization. All the



guild members will collectively berate me, and I'll be the sole target of their ire."

"A scapegoat, then..."

"Right. After all, that's also a leader's responsibility. Besides, it's part of my role to scatter crumbs to the guild members while I solo conquer stages, right?"

To the members of the major guilds, I am a figure of mixed feelings.

Because of me, their workload has skyrocketed, making me an object of hatred. But thanks to me, they've also gained numerous benefits from many stages, making me an object of affection as well.

'If someone has to be the scapegoat, it's better if I take on that role.'

Don't want to work? Then leave the great guild. Give up numerous privileges.

Even now, there are countless hunters begging to be

recruited by a great guild, even if it means working like an ox, just for a chance.

Practically, only hunters affiliated with major guilds have the freedom to come and go from worlds beyond the 11th floor.

We strictly regulate the entry of hunters to other worlds to minimize the shock they might experience, making it quite difficult for members of smaller guilds to find opportunities. There are hunters like [Apothecary] who succeeded purely on their own merits.

"If being hated prolongs life— as the saying goes, Kim Gong-Ja, you'll live a very long time..."

"If that joke holds true, I'm set for eternity."

"Eh?"

"I'll explain later."

I turned to close my laptop.

The screen was filled with articles ecstatic about the discovery of the 5th floor's underground civilization.

Among the flood of summer-like articles, a small, two to three-line piece stood out.

「The first marriage between a Babylonian and an Earth Spirit Tribe member! A modest but beautiful ceremony. Citizens shower blessings on this news...」

Smiling, I closed the laptop.

# Chapter 367: Taboo (1)

---

Not everything went as smoothly as a wedding.

Time flew by swiftly.

A month had passed by in the blink of an eye. It wasn't an exaggeration, everything felt like a mere moment. Time had raced ahead, leaving me feeling somewhat aggrieved.

"It can't be helped."

Isn't it said that the older you get, the faster time seems to fly? Although my physical age is what it is, my mental age is already beyond measure.

I once tried to calculate how old I truly was, but I gave up once the count surpassed three digits.

It's fine. My physical age is still in the twenties... This sounds like I'm insisting I'm still in my twenties, doesn't it?

"May glory be upon the Moon of Ivansia! Consort, as per your command, we have surrounded the city gates!"

As I was ruminating on the cruelty of time, a knight rushed over and saluted.

I snapped back to reality with an "Ah."

"Good work, Knight Commander."

"It's nothing, my lord!"

"Have you sent the envoys for surrender? Still no response?"

"Yes! They continue to cry out for a desperate resistance!"

"How foolish."

I clicked my tongue.

Surrounded by elite soldiers of the Ivansia duchy, including the Knight Commander, the military discipline was strict. A formidable army of six thousand had encircled a small town.

If you're wondering how I, who was just interviewing on the 1st floor, ended up in the midst of a medieval battlefield, the reason is simple.

Raviel was nearly assassinated.

To be more precise, she was assassinated.

---

After winning the duel against [The Staff of Time Immemorial], I had been staying on the 1st floor for a while, showing my face to the public now and then, as Anastasia had strongly suggested.

But just when the interspecies wedding had concluded smoothly and the underground civilization turmoil had begun, in the middle of an interview with a journalist, a message resounded in my head.

[Skill activated.]

I was perplexed...

...Because I hadn't used any skills.

Noticing something off about my expression, the journalist in front of me asked, "Is something the matter?"

Just as I was about to respond with a smile, claiming it was nothing, I experienced the activation of 'a certain skill' for the first time in my life.

[A Certain Returner's Love (EX) has been activated.]

That was the beginning.

[You share a timeline with your partner.]

[The timeline has ended.]

W-What?

My vision spun. The scenery twisted like ink-soaked spaghetti. The journalist's voice, exclaiming "King of Death? King of Death!?" seemed to fade into the distance.

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours before.]

And so, I probably became the first human to experience 'dying without doing anything at all.'

"....."

"Die! Just die, you damned lunatic!"

When I blinked my eyes, the scene had changed. The journalist who was interviewing me had vanished without a trace. Instead, Anastasia was shaking me back and forth, holding my neck.



I had returned 24 hours before.

"What madness."

I realized the whole situation. Why I had suddenly died.

The message had clearly stated that [A Certain Returner's Love] was activated.

[A Certain Returner's Love] is a skill that allows Raviel and me to share the same timeline. If I go back a day, Raviel also goes back a day, ensuring we always breathe on the same timeline.

If Raviel dies, meaning her timeline ends... naturally, my timeline would end as well. We would die together.

But I have [Returner's Winding Clock].

If I face death, I immediately return 24 hours before. Since my timeline is reversed, so is Raviel's.

In short, as long as [A Certain Returner's Love] and [Returner's Winding Clock] are intact, we will never face a true death.

We'll just die for a day.

"....."

I wasn't in any immediate danger of dying just moments ago. Literally, I did nothing. Yet, the winding clock had been activated, meaning someone else had died.

And that meant Raviel's death.

"Right! Die, you insane bastard! Just die!"

Anastasia hadn't realized that I had just returned from the future. My muttered 'what madness' seemed to have been interpreted differently by her.

"There's no need to scream for death, Anastasia."

I murmured.

"I've just died, after all."

"What?"

"I returned from tomorrow to today. Right now."

"....."

Only then did Anastasia take a proper look at my face.

"...Why do you look like that?"

"What's wrong with my face?"

"It looks like you're about to kill someone. It's slightly scary, you know. Did something so shocking happen that you need to make such a face now?"

"This time, it's different."

"Oh, hmm. It was different... May I ask what made it different?"

"It wasn't me who died, but Raviel."

For some reason, Anastasia's complexion darkened drastically.

Silence ensued.

Anastasia released her grip from my neck, then clenched her eyes shut and sighed deeply, as if the ground was about to swallow her.

"This is insane..."

"I apologize for causing a stir with the underground civilization issue without consulting you first. However, I believe this incident will lead to stronger cooperation among the members of the large guilds. If you need a scapegoat, use me."

"I see... Ah... Well, that's possible."

"Anastasia."

"Speak your mind..."

"I'm truly sorry to impose on you during such a busy time, but I must visit the empire."

I spoke quietly.

My voice sounded strangely cold, even to my own ears.

"I can't say how long it will take. However, I promise to deal with the matter as quickly as possible and return."

"...Kim Gong-Ja."

"Yeah."

"Don't kill too many..."

"I can't promise that."

I gathered my holy sword.

"Squeak?"

"Yip yip."

The holy sword, playing with the snake and the fox, looked up at me, as if asking, 'What's going on?'

But upon seeing my face, both Constellations immediately closed their mouths.

"....."

"....."

The snake quietly coiled around my wrist, and the fox silently became a scarf. I didn't wait for the Constellations to wrap around me and walked out into the hallway of the quarters.

"Silvia Evanair!"

Silvia was waiting in the hallway. Once known as Lady Goldencup, Silvia had become entirely my subordinate since the defeat of [the Ruin-Harvesting Cow]. She was the Chamberlain of our family.

Silvia looked bored at a glance. She was idly yawning in the hallway when my call made her flinch.

"Ye-Yes? My lord?"

"Call all the household members together. However, there's no need to go out of your way to summon those far away. You have 5 minutes to gather everyone who can be here now in the garden."

"Eek. What a hassle. And 5 minutes is too short. Why all of a sudden..."

Silvia caught my gaze.

"...Oh, why indeed! There must be a heavenly reason from my lord! Yes! I'll gather the children right away! Yay! Work, it's work! I'm truly delighted to have work! Damn it!"

Silvia ran off in a hurry.

I went down to the garden first to wait.

Where I stayed was a kind of communal residence. Not only my family and vassals, but also the Black Dragon Witch, Heretic Inquisitor, Countess, Paladin, etc., lived together. However, it was ambiguous to say we lived in the same mansion. Each of us stayed in separate buildings, and the only shared space was, at best, the garden.

My family members quickly gathered in that one shared area.

"....."

The first to arrive was Ester. Holding the position of an advisor within the family, Ester was the heir who would lead



the household in my stead during emergencies.

After exchanging glances with me, Ester quietly waited. Without asking why they were urgently summoned or what was happening, Ester didn't utter a single word.

Following Ester came Kim Yul. After Kim Yul came the Four Demon Lords. Then the cult gathered.

They alternated glances between me and Ester, then, just like Ester, they sealed their lips.

Finally, 5 minutes passed. Many vassals had yet to arrive, but I had no intention of dragging things out any longer. Frankly, it took a tremendous amount of patience to even wait for 5 minutes.

"Where's Uburka?"

"The Chief Warrior has been dispatched to the 5th floor to assist in negotiations with the underground people, my lord."

Ester replied emotionlessly.

"The Earth Spirit Tribe loves the scent of the earth and finds comfort in the dampness of the underground. Expecting that they would communicate well with the tribe that founded the underground civilization, we sent them. Should I call them back?"

"No. It's fine. There's no time."

I turned around. About a hundred vassals were looking at me. They weren't panicked by the sudden call, but they were curious about the reason for the assembly.

I answered their questions.

"Raviel is dead."

Thud.

The breath in the garden halted.

I smiled.

"To be precise, she will die tomorrow. Thanks to my skill, I was able to know of Raviel's death in advance. Truly, it's divine intervention."

I tried to make a joke in my own way. Being the representative of the Machen, it was divine intervention that I, through my skill, predicted Raviel's death.

However, no one responded to the joke. Not a single vassal forced a smile.

Ester's expression hardened. Kim Yul closed his eyes. Among the Four Demon Lords, the Sword Demon broke into a cold sweat, and the Hell Ghost Demon let out a long sigh.

"I can't imagine who would harm Raviel. How parched and twisted one's brain must be to commit such an act is beyond me."

I curled the corners of my mouth. Since no one laughed at my joke, I might as well laugh myself.

"One thing is certain, though— that bastard's imagination falls far short of mine. Why? Because that bastard can't imagine hell."

"....."

"No matter what kind of hell that son of a bitch imagined, the hell that bastard will experience from now on will be nothing but a blissful paradise in comparison. I intend to show that no one is as capable of creating hell as those who dare to speak of heaven in this world."

I turned my back.

I didn't utter pleas or commands to follow me or come with me. I simply walked ahead.

The footsteps of about a hundred people followed behind me.

[You are being transferred to the 25th floor.]

The destination was Sormewin Academy.

Originally one of the empire's top academies, Sormewin developed even further after the exchange agreement between Babylon and the empire was signed.

An office in charge of exchanges was established, and houses for the bureaucrats working there were built. As rare trade items from Babylon began to arrive, even agencies to handle them were created. Currently, Sormewin was more of a city than just an academy.

As soon as I was transported, an imperial bureaucrat greeted me warmly.

"Welcome! Welcome to the empire! If you don't mind me asking, what is the purpose of your visit..."

"I am the Consort of the Duke of Ivansia."

I looked at the bureaucrat.

"I am here not for Babylon's affairs but for a family matter."

"Oh....."

The bureaucrat stuttered. It seemed he recognized me. Indeed, if someone tasked with handling exchanges didn't recognize my face, they would have no excuse even if they failed.

The bureaucrat's complexion soon turned ashen. Following me, about a hundred vassals had been transported. The immigration office, or rather, the tower entrance office, was flustered by our sudden appearance.

"Let me repeat, this is a family matter."

Unfortunately, I had no time to persuade them gently.

"If you don't intend to make an enemy of the Ivansia duchy, step aside. Immediately."

The bureaucrat couldn't stop me. The knights and soldiers guarding the office made way for us. Hunters dispatched from Babylon, and guild members from the Black Dragon and the Merchants Union, also stepped back upon seeing my face.

I headed towards the Ivansia duchy's annex built next to Sormewin.

"Co-Consort! What in the world is this!"

Soldiers of the duchy, flustered, blocked my path.

"If you were coming, you should have sent us a message in advance so we could welcome you properly...!"

"Do you have any shame blocking my way when you couldn't even protect your master?"

"Ye-Yes?"

I smiled wryly.

"I'd like to tie you all up and hold you accountable right now, but I'd rather see Raviel's face first. I won't repeat myself. Move aside. Well, it doesn't really matter whether you do or not."

"What do you mean..."

"I mean, I don't have time to waste on someone like you."

I nodded slightly.

Ester made a move. Ester applied a joint lock to the soldier, immediately neutralizing him.

A fraction of a second after Ester, the clergy stepped forward. In just a moment, the duchy's annex was subdued by force. The Blue Lion Knights attempted to resist us, but like decaying leaves, they were easily trampled.

I walked down the corridor.

In front of Raviel's bedroom, six servants were standing guard.

All were servants trained to defend against assassinations, cherished confidants of Raviel. Normally, they were reliable, but at this moment, to me, they were nothing more than leeches sucking on the duchy's treasury.

"Consort."

"Step aside from the Moon of Ivansia."

"Even if it's you, Consort, you can't just barge in from here on..."

Was there any need to listen to this babble?



'No.'

I lightly tapped their pressure points with aura.

".....!"

The servants collapsed in the hallway. They were not allowed to make a sound or even groan.

I purposely did this so they could feel the bitter humiliation of not being able to block my path for even a second while remaining conscious.

Leaving the twitching servants behind, I opened the bedroom door.

Creeeak—

The door opened.

"Hmm."

Raviel was sitting in a chair, looking down at a winding clock.

Despite all the commotion and outrage I had caused, Raviel seemed hardly surprised. Instead, she nodded lightly, as if she had expected it.

"13 minutes and 27 seconds, huh."

Her red eyes shifted from the winding clock to me.

"I thought it wouldn't take you more than 5 minutes if you came alone, and not more than 15 minutes if you brought your forces. Indeed. Our distance was 13 minutes."

"Sorry for the delay, Raviel."

I smiled.

"So, which son of a bitch do I need to beat to death?"

Raviel gave a bitter smile.



# Chapter 368: Taboo

## (2)

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I gently nudged the chair beside me.

The fan used to tap on the chair's armrest was a premium gift I gave.

I bit my lip.

It wasn't just an expensive gift. It was a fan crafted with great care by NamGung Woon, once my master's formidable rival and now the retired Head of the Martial Alliance and the Great Guardian of the Celestial Martial Clan.

Raviel must have anticipated my arrival. She was wise. She had devised a way to quell my emotions far more effectively than any words of 'calm down' could.

Indeed, Raviel's intentions were spot on. Seeing an item that even remotely connected to my master, ice poured over my raging heart.

Though it was like pouring ice into lava.

".....If I am not to harbor murderous intent now, when should I?"

"Whenever that time may be, even if it's this very moment, it's clear that the place for you to harbor such intent is not before my eyes. It's not a matter of timing, but of place."

"I am aware but I do not wish for my anger to dull. The more I speak with you, the more my reason will rein in my emotions."

I spoke softly.

No, from the moment I realized Raviel's death, my voice has only flowed quietly. Not to maintain composure, but quite the opposite.

I didn't want the heat of my anger, soaked in my heart, to leak out even a bit. Not a single drop.

"I want to stain my hands with blood in pure rage, in sheer emotion. Please, tell me who dared to lay their hands on

Raviel."

"All I hear is a wish to go mad."

"You heard right."

"....."

Raviel lifted the corners of her lips.

She seemed satisfied, as if discovering a new toy, and for a brief moment, it seemed she shuddered at the wave of my emotions.

Seeing the curve of her lips etched on her pale face, I realized.

It was over.

Raviel was more interested in my reaction, fueled by rage at her death, than her own demise.

"Do you wish to kill the one who murdered me?"

".....Yes."

I tasted the metallic tang of blood in my mouth. My teeth had finally bitten through to the red flesh of my lips.

"How do you want to kill them?"

"I want to kill them by ripping their life out of them."

I knew where this conversation was heading, into which terminal it would crash and the sea that it would flow into. Yet, I answered, making my teeth a wheel of fate, my tongue a stream of water.

I couldn't remain silent to the question of my beloved. Never.

"I want to finely slice the lips along the edge of the teeth. I want to see their voice twist grotesquely through the gaps between bared teeth and severed lips."

"And the eyes?"

"I'll gouge them out and connect the lost veins and nerves with my aura. Then, I'll place them back in the sockets. Every blink will bring them pain, wishing they were blind instead."

"....."

Raviel's laughter deepened.

Now it was visible in her eyes. A slight twitch under her left ear, along the slender neckline. Raviel was savoring the sight of me completely losing my reason, tasting the rare madness of her husband.

"Raviel."

"I see. I was not considerate enough. Close the door."

Raviel gestured towards the bedroom door wide open behind me.



"I cannot leave such a voice, such a face of yours to be witnessed by others. It's a luxury that should be allowed only to me."

"Close it. Please, Gong-Ja."

I closed the door.

The air in the bedroom grew denser.

The poison was the scent of blue lilies.

"What about the hands? The wrists? The back of the hands. The fingers. The nails. What do you plan to do?"

The source of the poison was her red eyes.

"I want to hear."

I opened my mouth.

"Tell me, my love."

I told her.

Every imaginable hell, hells that would mock hell itself for being lukewarm, spilled from my lips, carrying the warmth of my heart and the poison of my blood.

Raviel indulged in my warmth and poison to her heart's content. It would be fair to say she devoured it.

As my rage roared for red blood, the gleam in Raviel's red eyes shimmered more brightly. Polished. My poison was sweet vitality to her.

"So, will you kill like that?"

Raviel asked lazily, like a lioness sated after a feast, as if all predation was done.

"Yeah."

"Among those shadows you've gathered, murderers are more common than not. Some are even mass murderers."

"Ah....."

"The one who killed me must certainly pay the price. Gong-Ja, my love, I have no intention of stopping you from executing that price. However, whether the weight of that price will be justly measured, I wonder."

I pressed my forehead.

Raviel was urging me to be fair. I, who had accepted Ester and even forgiven Yoo Soo-Ha. Raviel was saying that the same standards I set when accepting them should apply now.

"Raviel..... but."

"Wouldn't I have felt the same rage if you had died?"

My heart slowed.

"How many times do you think you've died since we exchanged rings? How many times do you think I've held back? Gong-Ja..."

Raviel smiled.

"You must endure as much as I have."

I couldn't say anything.

Raviel knew my rage. The way to quell it. And the one sentence that would prevent me from ever bursting into fury.

Even if I had more to say, it wouldn't have escaped my lips.

Raviel pulled my wrist, sealing my lips with hers. It was hot. So hot it could scald my tongue. The heat vomited from my heart, she must have stolen it all.

The closed door remained shut.

---

It was only when the sun set, the twilight spread, and the silver moon peeked through the window that we began to speak calmly.

"It's the Crown Prince."

Raviel spoke in a voice that had cooled down significantly. Her voice always had a resonance as if submerged in an icy sea. It was the voice of Raviel I loved.

"Damn it."

But the content Raviel revealed included a figure I could never like.

"That noodle hair bastard. Wasn't his blond hair enough that now even his brain's turned into noodle strands, swollen and bloated?"

"Hmm. I always look forward to what you'll compare the Crown Prince to. This time too, I'm satisfied..."

My anger, which had barely subsided over four hours, reignited.

However, after the fire had swept through once, only ashes remained. Just as Raviel intended, a fury comparable to before didn't arise.

Moisture seeped into places unburnt by the flame. It was reason. Cold judgment. Like old dampness clinging to my skull, reason let me make almost habitual judgments.

".....Indeed. If not for the royal family, who else would dare to assault the Duchess of Ivansia?"

Once the lubricant started flowing, the rest was easy.

My thoughts raced.

"However, the current Emperor is a wise ruler. He's aware that the power of the empire is tilting towards the Ivansia family. This isn't a scheme of the entire royal family, but rather the unilateral action of the Crown Prince."

"Hmm."

Raviel rested her chin on her hand.

She was enjoying herself, encouraging me to continue with a gesture.

"But with your death, everyone would immediately suspect the royal family. The Emperor would claim his innocence, but it would be difficult to dispel people's suspicions. That's when the Crown Prince would stage a rebellion against the Emperor."

Crack.

I gritted my teeth but continued with my deduction.

"[The Emperor, blinded by power, assassinated a loyal subject of the empire, the Duchess of Ivansia. As the Crown Prince, I cannot stand by and watch the empire fall. With tears in my eyes, I take up arms in rebellion. Although I'm committing a great disloyalty to my father, if I alone can bear this shame to save the empire, I will gladly draw my sword.]"

Raviel did not contradict my words.

Her silence gave me confidence. That madman. That noodle-brained fool blinded by power. To think that sparing the successor to the throne, turning a blind eye out of respect for the Emperor and the royal dignity, he dared...

"At one point, the Crown Prince was Raviel's fiancé. [Although our engagement ended unhappily, I cannot overlook the death of a noblewoman with whom I once shared a bond.] He plans to cry out for such a plausible cause to gain the support of the Ivansia family."

"Truly unfortunate....."

Raviel sighed as if savoring a sweet.

"People always marvel at your effortless accomplishments. They're unaware of the well-concealed sword in your mind, but then again, what do people know?"

"....."

I cleared my throat.

".....If the Crown Prince secures the support of the Ivansia family, it's essentially the same as having the backing of the noble faction. He probably calculated that the coup has a high chance of success. Yes, in his own way."

I looked at Raviel.



"For this plan to succeed, people need to be convinced that [the Emperor is the assassin of the Duchess of Ivansia]. Raviel, where were you supposed to meet your end tomorrow?"

"If the moon of Ivansia is this wise, the people of the empire should rejoice."

Raviel fully affirmed my reasoning.

"I was waiting to meet His Majesty in the palace."

As I thought.

".....So it wasn't an assassination, but a poisoning. The idiot who dallied with Goldencup after leaving Raviel is the culprit. He probably seduced a palace attendant with his half-decent looks."

"Correct. Even if I were to score your answer sheet 120 out of 100, no one would blame me."

"Of course, the Crown Prince himself wouldn't have been in the palace at that time. He needed to avoid suspicion. Was he on a hunt, perhaps?"

"150 points, then."

"Ha. He must have taken a few of the royal guards on a hunting trip as an excuse. That way, upon hearing of your death, he could storm the palace with his soldiers!"

"200 points... Troublesome, Gong-Ja. Even if you are my consort, giving more than double the perfect score might make me appear biased as a judge. Are you trying to subject me to accusations of partiality?"

"Fine. I'll go kill the Crown Prince and his sycophants who joined his hunt and be back."

"By returning to 100 points, you've shown great consideration."

"....."

I looked at Raviel.

Raviel looked back at me.

"Thinking about it, five hours seems too short to quell my anger."

"Indeed?"

"The more I think about it, the more I realize how long it's been since you and I spent such exclusive time together. And to think we can't fully enjoy this time because of that damn Crown Prince really pisses me off. That bastard!"

"And so?"

"Let's just play all day."

"Are you planning to hand over an entire day to the Crown Prince and his rash actions?"

"No. After playing for a day, we'll turn back the day."

"An excellent plan. I see no reason to refuse your proposal."

We played all day.

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

And then we played another day.

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

Playing made it hard to find a reason not to play for yet another day.

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

The world? Assassination? Power struggles and political fights? Forget it.

For now, I'm going to play with the person I love.

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

It took us a whole week to come back to our senses. The silver moon still twinkled from the same spot beyond the window. Raviel and I, side by side, propped our chins, pondered together, and murmured in unison.

"Did we go too far?"

"It does seem we might have gone a bit too far..."

"Indeed, a week was too much..."

"Perhaps a week was indeed excessive..."

"Then we should play for just one more day."

"Yeah, let's play for just one more day and then exercise restraint."

[You have died.]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

And so, two weeks passed.

As for the chaos we caused during those two weeks, I choose to remain silent. However, if you could turn back time and nobody would remember what you did during that reverted time, imagine what you could do. Just about three times that imagination came to fruition.

We were utterly satisfied.

"Now, what do you plan to do, Gong-Ja?"

Fully satisfied, Raviel asked as I shrugged my shoulders.

"First, I'll go see the Crown Prince."

"Don't kill him. If you must, it shouldn't be now but later. When no one cares, quietly remove him."

"Yes. I'll be back."

Right. I won't kill him.

I'll just show him pain worse than death.

# Chapter 369: Taboo

## (3)

---

As soon as I emerged from Raviel's chamber, I ordered the household knights of the Ivansia family to assemble.

The vassals of the Duke were visibly disconcerted. It was understandable; I had never interfered in the affairs of the Ivansia Ducal household before.

For the servants who had been pinned down by my aura and forced to kiss the cold floor for half a day, their faces were twisted in outright hostility.

"Consort, with all due respect, even you cannot command the knightly order..."

"Respect? Thought it didn't exist? It's surprising that it does."

I drew the family crest from my pocket and showed it to them.



"Raviel has given me full authority. My commands are as good as those coming from the Ivansia name itself. Unless you're considering a career change to rebels, I'd suggest you comply quietly."

"....."

The servants gnashed their teeth and glared at the crest as if staring it down could turn it into a fake.

I smirked.

"What? If you doubt it, run to the Duchess and verify my words. Though, it'll just be another step on your already trampled pride, but hey, it's all valuable experience. It'll fertilize your life."

".....We shall comply with your command... Consort."

"Oh, how kind of you."

I pocketed the family crest and waved my hand flamboyantly, imitating Yoo Soo-Ha's infuriating gesture. In some sense, he was the perfect role model.

"What are you waiting for? Get to work! Are you dining on the family's dime for free? I knew Ivansia was charitable to its subjects, but I wasn't aware it extended to free meals for its vassals. What? Have I, the consort of the house, been too neglectful?"

".....Grr!"

"If you have time to growl, accept the orders. Echo after me, summon the knightly order."

"Summon the knightly order!"

The servants dispersed with a look that promised retribution.

Not that I was scared. They had left Raviel exposed to potential poisoning; they were bound to be scorned by me for a long time.

It wouldn't take long for them to realize that it wasn't they who had marked me, but I who had marked them.

"Silvia Evanair."

"Ah, y-yes, m-master..."

After issuing the summon, I called for Silvia.

The vassals who followed me had already seized control of the Duke's annex. Among them, the close aides waited in the corridor outside the bedroom, and Silvia, once known as the Goldencup Lady, was among them.

Silvia approached me tentatively, gauging my mood.

"It seems you're in a better mood than before, thankfully..."

For reference, from Silvia's perspective, I had reemerged from the bedroom just an hour after entering.

In reality, Raviel and I had been playing for a full two weeks, repeating a single day. We perceived time differently.

"What did I look like before?"

"Do you want the honest truth, or something more pleasant

to hear?"

"Just be honest."

"It was like a lunatic whose eyes had flipped, smiling with just the tips of their lips twitching. 'Wow, this guy could become even crazier,' I thought. 'He's striving to surpass the very definition of lunacy.'"

I let out a bitter laugh.

The fact that Silvia could speak to me this way meant my mood had significantly improved. She judged that she could joke without repercussions, given my apparent good spirits.

"Silvia, I have something I want to ask you."

"What is it?"

"You were once seriously involved with the Crown Prince, even discussing marriage. So, did the Crown Prince truly love you?"

"....."

Silvia furrowed her brows.

".....Wow. That's an unexpectedly serious question."

Her face barely changed, but an air of aristocratic haughtiness was palpable. Positively regal if spoken kindly, or downright annoying if not.

After all, wasn't she once a lady who, alongside Raviel, dominated the empire's social circles?

"Love? Hmm. If you're asking whether the Crown Prince was smitten with me, I'd say yes since I seduced him. But hmm..."

Silvia tapped her chin thoughtfully.

".....Probably not. No. The kind of love you're asking about wasn't there."

"Why do you think so?"

"For starters, since I've been taken in by you, the Crown Prince hasn't once sought me out."

Silvia laid out the facts plainly.

"Do you know what we talked about most when the Crown Prince and I were alone?"

"I can't even begin to guess."

"Try to imagine. Gossip. When we met, we'd gossip about the Silver Lily... Ah, I shouldn't call her that now, should I? Anyway. We'd gossip about the Duchess of Ivansia."

Silvia sighed and shrugged.

"We purposefully chose dating spots where students could see us just to ensure someone would witness us cuddling and run straight to the Duchess with the news."

"To make Raviel feel humiliated?"

"Exactly."

"The couple was more pathetic than I thought..."

"What did you expect? You know better than anyone, don't you? The Duchess of Ivansia is someone who doesn't get shaken by anything others do."

Silvia narrowed her eyes.

"Her only weakness was love. Love. The Crown Prince, aside from having an affair with me, had no other way to shake the Duchess. That's all he knew."

"....."

"In every aspect, he was inferior. Studies, diplomacy, administration, public affection, and even schemes. Probably even in swordsmanship. Despite being born into the most noble family in the empire, he had nothing on the Duchess of Ivansia."

"So you had a secret affair with him to feel superior to Raviel?"

"Yes."

"Truly a piece of trash."

"Is this your first time seeing trash?"

Silvia replied nonchalantly.

"There are many like that in the world."

Indeed.

The problem is, even if such people are plentiful, this one happens to be the Crown Prince of the empire.

".....I've been patient, warning him to behave. But it seems that won't do anymore."

Silvia looked up at me, and I returned her gaze.



"I'll bring him down."

Silvia's eyes widened, but that was it. The surprise she showed was just that brief.

In fact, what Silvia said next surprised me more.

"Umm, I'm kind of against that..."

"Because of some loyalty to your old flame?"

"Loyalty is just talk. No, it's just that it'd be much easier if the Crown Prince ascended the throne as is."

"What do you mean?"

"He won't be able to govern the empire smoothly once he becomes Emperor."

Silvia declared confidently.

"Ten years at most, five at the least. Complaints about the Emperor's incompetence and tyranny will start erupting from every corner of the empire. From the nobility and even the common folk. Then, when that happens, it'd be a breeze for the Ivansia family to dethrone the Emperor."

"....."

"Sure, we could replace the Crown Prince now if we wanted to. Easily. The real power of the empire is already shifting to Ivansia, but the common folk still don't know what a mess the Crown Prince is. If Ivansia is to become the new royal family of the empire, it'd be best to have the support of the people as well... What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"No, it's just unexpected. You actually have a political mind."

Silvia made a disgusted face.

"Hey. If it weren't for you... ah, sorry. If you hadn't been there, I would have become the Crown Princess and then the Empress, bringing down the Ivansia family... Yes?"

Right. She was a returnee.

"Your advice is sound, but the head maid seems to be misunderstanding something."

"Misunderstanding?"

"Yeah. I plan to bring down the Crown Prince, but it's not because I want Raviel to become the new Emperor."

"Eh? Why not?"

I answered calmly.

"Because if Raviel becomes the Emperor, she'd be even busier than now."

"....."

Silvia was speechless.

".....Really? Is it really just for that reason?"

"What other reason could there possibly be?"

"What a lunatic... ah, right. If it's you, that makes sense. And you have room to spare. Damn it. Being around you skews my perspective on everything, and it's annoying."

Silvia rubbed the back of her head, mumbling something about how it made sense for two such people to be in love.

"So, you just want to replace the Crown Prince while keeping the current royal family intact? Is that correct?"

"Spot on."

"Then... we'll have to support either the Second Prince, the Third Prince, the First Princess, the Fourth Prince, or the Second Princess. Damn it. Am I the only one well-versed in the imperial situation to be chosen as your advisor?"

Silvia grumbled.

"If you ask me to recommend someone, it'd be the Second Prince. He might lack the ability to think for himself, but he's not capable of causing a mess like the Crown Prince. He's

harmless."

"Isn't there a royal family member who could become a sage ruler or a wise monarch?"

Silvia scoffed.

"If there was, do you think the Crown Prince would have maintained his position?"

Truly, the chamberlain knew how to strike with facts.

---

The next day, Raviel and I entered the imperial palace.

It wasn't the main palace in the capital but a separate palace suitable for the second capital's growth, Sormewin. The Emperor happened to be staying here at the time.

"If it had been the capital's palace, the Crown Prince wouldn't have dared to command a servant to poison."

Raviel noted.

"However, this place is different. Excluding the Emperor's entourage, the servants handling menial tasks are mostly the Crown Prince's people. It was relatively easy to plot a poisoning here."

Of course, it was only "relatively" easy.

The Crown Prince had mobilized all his connections and power for this assassination attempt. Yet, in the end, only two servants in the separate palace were actually involved in the poisoning.

Unknown at the time, we now fully grasped who participated in the poisoning.

During those two weeks of leisure, the nearly fortnight of rest wasn't just spent indulging in decadence within the bedroom. We uncovered everything: the servants' family backgrounds, personal circumstances, and connections to the Crown Prince.

"Please, I beg you, show mercy to my family...! I'll accept being enslaved, or you can chop me up and throw me to the sea. Just please, spare my family..."

We easily extracted confessions from the culprits.

Their confessions were promptly reported to the Emperor. Initially skeptical, the Emperor had no choice but to sigh after personally interrogating the culprits.

"Foolish child... Was he always this foolish..."

The Emperor lamented.

He might have been lacking, but he was the chosen successor. It was natural for the Emperor to feel sorrowful. However, I was ready to deliver an even greater blow to the Emperor.

"Your Majesty. The foolishness of attempting to poison the Duchess of Ivansia is already shocking, but there's an even more tragic foolishness Your Majesty must consider."

".....And what might that be, sovereign of another world?"

The Emperor regarded me not as the Consort of Ivansia but as the monarch of the World of the Lone Child.

In official settings, I might pay utmost respect to the Emperor, but in a secured space like this, the Emperor didn't bother with maintaining his dignity.

"The Crown Prince is currently away on a hunt with his close associates. According to intelligence, their gear is unusually heavy for a mere hunt."

I bowed slightly.

"Armored horses for hunting mere beasts? Isn't that an over-preparation?"

"....."

The Emperor's sigh deepened.

He was an astute ruler despite his son's betrayal. He grasped the hidden meaning in my words immediately.

Turning his head, the Emperor ordered his chamberlain (the very same elder who had adopted me as his foster son) to act.



"Immediately inspect the main and rear gates for the guard troops."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The elder promptly checked the palace's security and returned.

"Your Majesty, there were no issues at the main gate, but the guard responsible for the rear gate was absent, and his subordinates were barely half the required number."

"Ah..."

The Emperor heaved a long sigh.

"Is it true... is it true that my son intended to harm me?"

No one responded.

Raviel remained silent throughout. Her mere presence was enough.

Whether it was reporting on the poisoning, detailing the culprits' confessions, or exposing the Crown Prince's intentions, such potentially treasonous words flowed only from my mouth.

Even when reporting this calamity to the Emperor, I spoke not as the Consort of Ivansia but as the representative of another world. It was best not to give anyone a reason to hold me accountable later.

"Your Majesty. Summon the Crown Prince who is away on his hunt."

I urged him towards the final nail in the coffin.

"If the Crown Prince truly considers himself innocent, he will respond to Your Majesty's call. He would have no reason to refuse. However, if he truly orchestrated this entire tragedy, fearing his plan might be exposed, he will flee."

".....Very well. It shall be done."

Following my advice, the Emperor sent a messenger.

Anxiety filled the air as we waited.

Only after a considerable time did the messenger return. The imperial chamberlain whispered something to him. Once the messenger left the audience chamber, the chief servant spoke up.

"Your Majesty."

"Is the child coming...?"

"I regret to inform you, Your Majesty, but the Crown Prince turned his horse around and fled with his followers."

Silence enveloped the audience chamber.

During this time, the Emperor seemed to age five years. Despite the arrival of people from another world, he had maintained his composure and ruled the empire as peacefully as possible, but the rebellion of his son seemed to have broken his heart.

"Duchess..."

For the first time, the Emperor addressed the Duchess.

Raviel, as if she had been waiting, slowly bowed her head.

"Yes, Your Majesty. Speak, I am listening."

"What should I do with you...?"

"I shall always remain loyal to Your Majesty."

Raviel's words meant she had no intention of using this incident as a pretext to rebel against the empire.

The Emperor closed his mouth again.

Silence lingered.

".....I have done you a great disservice."

The voice that escaped the Emperor's lips sounded less like

the sovereign of an empire and more like a father to a child.

"I knew my son was lacking and foolish, and I knew you were a bright child. I thought that even if he was lacking, with your support, he could manage the country, but was that judgment blinded by paternal affection? Even that..."

".....Your Majesty."

"I let you go for the sake of a lady from a baronial family, and the story was over from that moment. How can I blame only my son for his foolishness? My foolishness is far greater."

"Your Majesty has always shown concern and kindness to me since my days as a lady."

"I am sorry."

The Emperor closed his eyes.

".....The Crown Prince is no longer the empire's Crown Prince. Nor will he be my son any longer."

At this moment, the fate of the Crown Prince was sealed.

Born a prince, but not destined to die as one.

"Let the Ivansia Ducal family handle this matter."

That day, I led the ducal knightly order in pursuit of the Crown Prince.

# Chapter 370: Taboo

## (4)

---

The Crown Prince, along with his close aides, stealthily took refuge in a small city. It was more of an escape than a flight, akin to escaping from reality.

"Let's send an envoy to recommend surrender for starters."

I surrounded the small city with the ducal knights, the imperial knights, and my own vassals. Then, as a formality, we sent an envoy to politely request their surrender.

Of course, the Crown Prince, who had escaped into his own fantasy, was far from observing such formalities.

According to the envoy, His Ramen Highness yelled something along the lines of, "You are invaders from another world! I am the foundation of the Empire! I will never bow my head to the likes of interworld scoundrels!"

Hearing this, I clicked my tongue.

"Foolish."

Indeed. Had I rashly intimidated the Crown Prince, I would have been treated as an invader from another world.

Among the empire's nobility and citizens, there were quite a few who viewed the otherworld unfavorably. The Crown Prince's claim that they must fight against the threat from another world could have gained momentum.

But I had the justification from the Emperor.

Even the clothes I wore were of the empire's style. I was the Consort of the Ivansia ducal family, acting under the solemn command of His Majesty, the Emperor, not as a monarch from another world.

Checkmate.

"What are you planning to do now?"

Silvia approached me and asked. She was well-versed in the empire's affairs and was assisting me.



"Based on my past experience of dating him, I'd say drop any expectations of the Prince surrendering. That man never backs down once he's made up his mind."

"So what if the damn prince refuses to surrender?"

"Heh?"

I gripped the hilt of the Holy Sword.

"I'll capture him."

That night, I scaled the city walls alone.

The Crown Prince's forces, perhaps preparing for a siege, had a fairly tight security. In other words, it was only "fairly" tight. If they wanted to stop me, they needed an incredibly meticulous security setup. Not something like this, buddy.

Before an hour had passed, I had infiltrated the Crown Prince's bedroom.

"Huff... Uhm..."

The golden-haired ramen lay unaware of the world, asleep. Even with the knights who were guarding outside his bedroom all knocked out.

I snickered and gently poked his cheek.

"Hey, you gonna wake up?"

The Crown Prince groggily opened his eyes, still not fully grasping reality.

"Ugh, hmm... What's... going on...?"

"What do you mean what's going on? Get up already. I'm the one who married your first fiancée and took your second fiancée as my vassal."

"What...? Huh!?"

Only then did the Crown Prince's eyes snap open. I was

waiting for this moment. I immediately flicked his eyelid with my finger.

"Aaah! My eyes, my eeeeyes!"

The Crown Prince fell off the bed, covering his face.

"Kid, that's quite the overreaction for a little flick."

"Guards! Guuaaards! There's an intruder! The intruder has appeared! What are the guards doing?"

"Your guards are all out cold. You're like an order of spaghetti alle vongole with clam shells but no clams, waiting over 30 minutes for your seolleongtang and it still hasn't arrived. Can't you sense anything even when I'm gently stroking your eyebrows?"

"Guuaaards! Guards! Guaaaaaards!"

I squatted down to look at the Crown Prince.

The so-called first-rate posture.

The Crown Prince, having never seen such a posture in his royal life, shuddered as soon as our eyes met.

"Why is no one responding to my call...?"

"Because I've covered a 6-meter radius with my aura like a dome. No matter how much you whimper, the curtain blocks the sound."

"That's impossible—"

"It's possible. And it will continue to happen. Your Highness, I don't want to face you any longer than necessary, so let's wrap this up quickly."

I pulled out a scroll from my robe. It was an imperial edict with the Emperor's seal.

"What, what... That's...!"

Recognizing the seal, the Crown Prince's mouth dropped open. I flicked my finger again, this time hitting his lips. A comically pitiful cry echoed.

"Listen, kid. For the sake of your pea-sized brain, I'll personally interpret His Majesty's sublime words."

Facing the Crown Prince, whose lips were now swollen red, I smiled.

"From today, you're going on a study abroad program to our world."

"Study abroad? What nonsense is that?"

"Well, it sounds nice, but it's actually exile. Did you really think you'd get away unscathed after attempting to poison Raviel and even threatening the Emperor?"

The Crown Prince's face turned ashen. He must have realized that I held all the evidence.

"There are countless nobles who follow me. They won't tolerate such tyranny!"

"It's funny you should say that because they're about to lose their heads and their families are on the verge of extinction due to treason, but I'm going to give them a chance."

"A chance...?"

"Yes, the chance to cut ties with you and save their lives."

I tapped the Crown Prince's forehead with the scroll. Each time the edict touched his forehead, he flinched.

"The nobles didn't join your rebellion. [The Emperor ordered you to study abroad in another world.] But [you were unfamiliar and afraid of going to another world, so like a teenager, you stubbornly refused.]"

"Ah...?"

"And you didn't throw a tantrum alone. [You begged the nobles to please hide you.] And the nobles, unable to harshly refuse the Crown Prince's request, [secretly hid you here,] but the secret didn't last long, and [they were caught by His Majesty.]"

The Crown Prince looked up at me blankly.

I curled my lips up.

"Don't you get it? This is my scenario. According to this, the nobles don't have to bear the crime of treason. They'll only be guilty of indulging in the whims of a pathetic Crown Prince."

".....!"

"See? If you go on a study abroad program alone, everyone gets their happy ending. What do you think the nobles will do? Eh? Will they say, 'Even if our heads fly off and our families are destroyed, we will follow His Highness the Crown Prince to the end'? What do you think?"

"Aaaah! Aaaaaah!!"

Finally grasping my intentions, the Crown Prince began to struggle desperately.

"You plague from another world! It's all because of you! Everything fell apart after you came! You took Ivansia's lady, and even my cute and lovely Lady Goldencup! It's all your

fault! If it weren't for you—"

"Sweet dreams, Your Highness."

I pressed a point on the Crown Prince's body.

"When you wake up, the world will have changed."

And with that, the Crown Prince's world went dark.

---

"—Huh?!"

The Crown Prince sprang up.

Drenched in cold sweat, he swallowed his saliva.

"Was it, was it a dream? Phew..."

"Did you have a pleasant dream last night?"



"Aaaah!!"

Startled by my face, he jumped as if he had seen a horrifying monster. My delicate heart might just take offense at such a reaction.

"Wh-Where is this place!?"

"We're on the 29th floor, sir."

I beamed a smile.

"It was once a school genre stage, ruled by the [Holed-Up Head Librarian]. One of my vassals, Kim Yul, used to live here."

"Ha, ha?"

"Of course, such information is useless to you. The one and only Crown Prince of the Empire, who was destined to don the Emperor's crown. There's only one thing you need to remember: in this world, no one will treat you as a Crown Prince."

Knock, knock.

Someone knocked on the door from behind.

"Come in."

"Yes, I'm coming."

With a lively voice, Silvia entered. What greeted her was a tiny studio room. No, calling it a studio was too generous; it was more like a cramped goshiwon (a type of very small Korean apartment).

Silvia glanced around the room and frowned.

"Wow, it's cramped... My Lord, can that man really live in such a small space? I don't think it's possible."

"That's the reality he has to face now. Did you speak well with the goshiwon owner?"

"Ah, yes. When they saw the gold bars, their eyes lit up and

they said they looked forward to our patronage. They seemed to mistake us for a mafia from overseas."

Good.

The 29th floor was currently operating as a school city. There were schools in Babylon, but a systematic public education system hadn't yet been established. Hence, this place, the 29th floor, which was frozen in time during Kim Yul's era, was used as an educational venue.

"Si-Silvia...?"

The Crown Prince, unaware of such circumstances, was simply dumbfounded by Silvia's appearance.

Silvia, not in her voluminous dress but in modern clothing, smiled sweetly.

"Yes, Your Highness. I'm Silvia Evanair."

"Oh! My Silvia! The nightingale bearing the name of Goldencup! You must have rushed here to rescue me from this demon's clutches...! I believed, no, I only believed in you. My

delicate Goldencup!"

"Ugh, what's this? It's like reading through a diary filled with embarrassing memories."

Silvia made a disgusted face.

"Anyway, I've taken care of various documents while greeting the goshiwon owner. Starting next week, the Crown Prince can enter school. He'll become a blond prince of a transfer student."

"Good work."

"Yes, it's really just hard work... Though I'm not one to talk, but don't you think the bureaucrats of this stage are too corrupt? The administration is like a sponge, full of holes."

"Well, the almighty power of gold bars has just been proven."

"I wonder how much you bribed them with..."

As we casually chatted, the Crown Prince merely stared at us, lost for words.

"Si-Silvia? Why did you call me 'Crown' earlier? And... why didn't you recognize me?"

"Ah, I almost forgot."

Silvia rummaged through her bag and pulled out something. It was a card.

"This will be the only means to prove your identity from now on."

Silvia politely handed over a student ID card. On the newly made ID, a photo of the Crown Prince, barely keeping his eyes open, was printed in a square.

Below it, the following text was written:

+

[Student ID]

Name: Kim Hwang-Tae

Affiliation: Shinseo High School

+

".....Kim, Kim Hwang-Tae?"

"Yeah, that's your name from now on."

I flashed a bright smile.

"Hwang-Tae, you're a second-generation overseas Korean who has somehow returned to the country, but you were kicked out of your house and now live alone in this goshiwon. Naturally, you have no allowance and must find a job or do odd jobs to earn money. Got it?"

"Odd jobs? Odd... Odd jobs? What nonsense are you spouting!"

"Yes, our Hwang-Tae seems to have no clue about the situation, which is quite satisfying."

I gently patted Kim Hwang-Tae's head.

"If you're three months behind on your rent here, you're out. If you skip school and refuse to attend for more than a week, you're also out. For our Hwang-Tae, who has been pampered as a prince his whole life, this world might seem harsh. But, Hwang-Tae... that is the real world!"

"....."

"Hang in there! Be strong! You can do it!"

I clenched my fist.

"Although no one in this city will treat you like a Crown Prince! And no one cares where you rolled in from like a stray bone! Originally! The world! Has no interest in you!"

"....."

"Work! It might be hard to find a job with a student status, but that's just how it is...! Money is hard to earn...! Work and work, and with your effort and sweat, secure food for the day! If you can't, you'll starve... and, well, die... but that too is a natural law!"

"....."

"Hwang-Tae!"

I grabbed Kim Hwang-Tae's shoulders.

And asked him, looking into his soulless face.

"How many days have you gone without food?"

"What... what...?"

"Don't worry. After two days of fasting, you'll see the world differently! I'll be cheering for you from afar as you start your new life, Kim Hwang-Tae! Fighting!"



I left 30,000 won and turned to leave.

Silvia also bowed slightly to Kim Hwang-Tae.

"Goodbye, Your Highness. Honestly, if you had sought me out even once after I became indebted to our Lord, I might have been able to help you now. But, it can't be helped! I'll be cheering for you from afar too!"

We both swiftly exited the room.

As we walked down the gloomy staircase, Silvia spoke up.

"So how many years do you plan to let him stay before sending him back to the empire?"

"Send him back? He's going to live here forever. They've already designated the second prince as the successor, so what good would his return do other than get him purged? Leaving him here is an act of mercy. Mercy."

"You really are a devil, my Lord..."

A desperate scream echoed from beyond the goshiwon stairs.

That day, a blond prince of a transfer student arrived at Shinseo High School on the 29th floor.

According to later accounts, Kim Hwang-Tae, who had starved for four days straight, eventually began to assist with odd jobs for the goshiwon owner and embarked on his second school life.

Hang in there, Kim Hwang-Tae! You are the protagonist of this spin-off!

# Chapter 371: Home Sweet Home (1)

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Over three months had passed since my return to Babylon.

During those three months, I spent time with Raviel, established new diplomatic relations with the underground city civilization, was surprised by Raviel, witnessed Kim Hwang-Tae transfer to high school, played with Raviel again, and caught up on a multitude of backlogged tasks.

It was indeed a fruitful time, but after a hundred days, I suddenly lifted my head.

"It's time to climb the tower again."

Silence followed my declaration.

At the moment, I was lying on the sofa, flipping through a magazine. It was one that featured an interview with me. The magazine was filled with cheesy headlines like "What Does Kim Gong-Ja Think of Being a Hunter!?" and "Everything You

Want to Know About the Hunter Industry! 100 Questions, 100 Answers!" Who would even read this?

After a pause, a response finally came.

"...? Why all of a sudden?"

It was the Black Dragon Witch.

Anastasia was seated on the opposite armchair, engrossed in the same magazine. Incidentally, she was also the cover model for this issue.

The magazine cover seemed like humanity's attempt at visualizing the concept of 'nobility,' but at this moment, Anastasia was the epitome of a lazy sunday evening vibe at home.

Dressed in a school gym uniform that seemed more suited for high school students, she was nonchalantly munching on squid legs.

Scenes like this made one want to ask, "Does Ukraine have brown gym uniforms?" or "Do Ukrainians also snack on squid

legs?" It was tempting to tease her relentlessly.

But everything about Anastasia was perfect– her posture, her expression, and even the crunchy sound of her chewing the squid legs.

She was the Ultimate Korean Slacker Lv.99.

Anastasia's pose was so natural that I had no choice but to accept it as part of life's natural flow.

"No... Staying here any longer and I feel like I'll rot away. How should I put it? Moisture is seeping into my heart, making me feel like mold is going to grow in my brain."

My words made my friends look up one by one.

We were in the communal living room of our lodging.

In the evenings, when everyone returned from their day's work, they would naturally gather here in groups of three or five. As a result, the Countess, Viper- the Celestial Clan Master, and the Heretic Inquisitor all looked up at the same time, creating a harmonious moment.

"Mold? Moisture? I'm not sure what you're talking about. Liǎofàn, do you understand?"

"I doubt it. That guy's been spouting nonsense not just today, but for a while now."

"Ah, Silvia! Could we have another half plate of fries, please?"

By the way, my friends were wearing yellow, navy, and blue gym uniforms respectively.

I'm not exactly sure when made in Korea gym uniforms became the dress code for this communal lodging.

From what I can vaguely recall, I was the first to wander around the lodging in a black gym uniform. Anastasia, having seen me, commented, "Oh, that looks comfortable. What is that?" and then the tragedy began the very next day. Yes, it's best to bury this memory for the sake of my mental health.

"That's exactly it! Right there!"

I abruptly stood up and pointed accusingly at the Heretic

Inquisitor.

Just then, Silvia delivered the fries with a sour expression, and the Heretic Inquisitor cheerfully picked one up.

With ketchup smeared on his lips, the Heretic Inquisitor blinked in confusion.

"Me?"

"Not [me?], but [me?!] Bambolina, you're eating those potato fries with your bare hands! Wearing a gym uniform! And with ketchup smeared on your lips!"

"Aha, Master. Fries are traditionally eaten with bare hands. I hope you're not one of those heretical types who use a fork or chopsticks just because they don't want salt on their fingers!"

"I'm more on the chopsticks side, actually..."

"My goodness."

"Dear me."

"Are you insane?"

"I'm really disappointed in you, Kim Gong-Ja..."

In turn, the Heretic Inquisitor, Countess, Viper, and Black Dragon Witch looked at me with disdain, as if I were trash.

And just at that moment, Paladin passed through the living room with a towel around her neck.

"For the record, I'm in the camp that prefers socks with sandals."

Paladin nodded her head and continued on her way through the living room.

We watched his retreating figure in silence, looking like she was about to fetch water from the mountain spring.

"...Anyway, that's not the point!"



I quickly regained my composure.

"You all! You've rotted! Completely rotted! There used to be a more edge-of-the-knife vibe around here! How did you all become so terribly slack?"

"Rotted, you say? That's quite rude, my friend."

"If you're going to say such things, at least take off those triple-stripe slippers!"

"Eeeh, but they're comfortable."

Yes, Anastasia, seated on the armchair, was indeed wearing triple-stripe slippers with bare feet.

Not just Anastasia, but everyone here was dressed the same: school gym uniforms and triple-stripe slippers, a fashion terrorist combo only found in South Korea that had taken over the top echelons of the tower.

Could this also be due to my influence? Did they start copying me one by one after seeing how comfortably I moved around? Oh, God. No one ever asked for this kind of Hallyu

wave.

"If I keep hanging around with you guys, my brain will start to rot too! You should be working, not lounging around! There must be tasks piling up, with subordinates dying off while you're here relaxing!"

"Well, we're not subordinates, are we."

"Right. We only work when we need to and leave the rest to our subordinates. Isn't that what we pay them for?"

"Relaxing occasionally is very important, Master!"

Wrong. These guys... their brains must've already been infected with mitochondrobacktertetracyinfluenza bacteria. There's no hope or dreams left.

"I'm going to climb the tower."

"Seriously?"

"Yes, seriously. I'm really going. I can't bear being with you any longer! If I stay cooped up here any longer, I might lose all interest in conquering the stages and end up a bum, so I'm going!"

My friends stared blankly at me.

"Hmm. Well... do as you wish. Live your life."

"Since all the urgent matters are dealt with, you're free to do as you please."

"Everything will flow according to your will, Master!"

"Man, these fries are fucking delicious. Hey, Gong-Ja's maid! What oil did you use for these? Let me get the recipe so I can cook for my kids too."

It seemed like only about 0.5 people were genuinely interested in what I had to say.

Are these really my friends? My comrades with whom I've entrusted my life? I doubted it for a moment. Then, the Paladin, who had left the living room earlier, returned.

Holding an electric toothbrush in one hand, she surveyed the room.

"By the way, I think socks are better with sandals."

Then she nodded and walked past the living room.

We silently watched her receding figure until the Countess threw her slipper with all her might at Paladin's head.

"I'm really going... See? I'm going. Really."

No one answered.

The fight between the Countess and Paladin began, but astonishingly, no one paid any attention to me.

I mulled over the feeling of being the neglected adult in the family as I weakly headed towards the next stage.

[You are being transported to the 80th floor.]

"---And that's how I ended up here. Ah, yes. As a hunter, or rather, now a Constellation, climbing the tower is a must. I suppose I should be called a Hunter-cum-Constellation? Anyway, one must ascend to higher places. See? As soon as I reached the 80th floor, even the air felt different."

"You..."

[The Staff of Time Immemorial] looked at me with incredulity.

"Sorry, but have you ever been told you sound like an idiot?"

That was a bit harsh.

---

The administrator who welcomed me on the 80th floor was [The Staff of Time Immemorial].

The mage, with her ever-unwavering silver eyes, looked at me, especially with a very dopey gaze.

"What? I was wondering when you'd start climbing again. I thought maybe you wouldn't come at all, but you've timed it

just right."

"Yes, I've finished everything I needed to do on the 1st floor... Huh?"

I suddenly noticed something different about [The Staff of Time Immemorial]. Her eyes hadn't changed, neither had her face or attire. It was her staff, the symbol of his identity.

Her trademark staff, as thin as a little finger but extremely long, was snapped in half.

"Why is your staff like that? Did you get into a fight with someone?"

"Get into a fight? Are you seriously asking me that?"

[The Staff of Time Immemorial] let out a sarcastic laugh.

"I lost in a fight with you. After the management of the Netherworld was handed over to you, I've been stuck as a broken staff."

"Ah, but you're still managing the heavenly floors, aren't you?"

"For now... for the time being, at least."

The mage sighed.

"If you fail to reach the 100th floor or give up halfway, I'll return to being a complete pillar. If you succeed in conquering the 100th floor, I'll be done for. It's frustrating, but right now, my role isn't to [guide] you but to [serve] you like a superior."

"I see."

I nodded.

"Then could you fetch me some vending machine barley tea?"

".....First of all, I get that you're trying to boss me around as soon as I say I'm in a position to serve you. I'll concede that point for argument's sake, but why, of all things, a vending machine barley tea?"

"Think about it, mage."

"Speak."

"Imagine your boss, of all things, asking you to fetch barley tea, and from a vending machine at that. Just that, nothing else. How would you feel while you insert the coins, press the button, and wait?"

"I'd feel just like I do now."

"See? You know exactly. What are you waiting for? Go fetch it."

"This son of a..."

Three minutes passed.

I slurped the barley tea the mage brought from the vending machine. The mix of barley powder and sugar created a chaotic taste, blurring the lines between what was barley and what was sugar.



"Mm. This is the taste. The Principal of Memorial Gourmet said this was the taste of memories. Maybe we could turn this into a spin-off series."

"You won't die a peaceful death..."

I was already incapable of dying.

Now, even more so.

"Did you enjoy the barley tea I went through so much trouble to get for you?"

"Yes. It's delicious."

"Then listen while you enjoy your honey. From the 71st to the 80th floor, it was the phase where you were established as a Constellation. And you've passed this course more perfectly than any other Constellation. Now, from the 81st to the 90th floor, it's time to build [Your Own Kingdom]."

I paused, straw in my mouth, and tilted my head.

"My own kingdom?"

"Yes. Also called a Star Domain or Sanctuary. Some call it a Sacred Domain or Dragon Kingdom."

The mage tapped the air with her broken staff.

A white cube appeared, displaying a familiar scene on its surface.

"That's the Great Library of All Knowledge."

"Right. The Great Library of All Knowledge was the Sanctuary of [The Holed-Up Head Librarian], or Hamusutra."

Interesting.

With this example, I got a sense of what was expected of me.

"[The Ruin-Harvesting Cow], Mutia's Sanctuary was a temple buried in the desert. [The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth]... The Hisimet Cretsu you're currently wearing as a bracelet, his

Sanctuary was a doll exhibition. Even hunters who haven't become Constellations are allowed to have their own space if they pass through the 90th floor."

"In essence."

I removed my lips from the straw.

"I'm about to have my own home."

"Yeah."

Thump.

The mage tapped the floor with his staff.

"A palace that is solely yours."

[You are being transferred to the 81st floor.]

White light enveloped my vision.

# Chapter 372: Home Sweet Home (2)

---

Emerging through the long light, I didn't find my own kingdom waiting for me, unfortunately.

It was a world engulfed in darkness.

"Whoa, what's this... It's really dark here?"

Darkness was all there was.

Taking a cautious step forward, my ankle squelched into something, sinking down. It felt as if I had accidentally stepped into muddy water. The texture of the darkness was akin to a mass of mud.

"That's because nothing has been created here yet."

[The Staff of Time Immemorial] spoke from behind me.

"This place is, so to speak, bare ground where not even the skeleton of a house has been erected. There's no built-in furniture, let alone a roof. Wailing Heaven, you've cleared stages and earned enough for land, but you haven't built a house yet."

"So, I've become a landowner but not a homeowner."

If you think about it, I had struggled from the 10th to the 80th floor just to buy a piece of land. When compared to a 100-floor life, acquiring land meant I had already achieved 80% of life's goals.

Hmm. It's uncomfortably realistic...

"Where can I find an architect and interior designer to hire?"

"Sorry, but you're the architect and the interior design company. You're no longer a hunter who passively accepts quests and performs tasks. Well, if you still want to frame it as a quest..."

The mage engraved letters in the air with her staff.

"This should do."

Wherever the tip of the staff passed, white letters emerged.

+

[Build Your Own Kingdom]

Constellation: The Heaven that Gathers Wails

Difficulty: Undecided

Objective: Create a sanctuary.

+

I nodded.

"Sounds simple enough."

"Be a pillar. Save the world. Help humanity. The most difficult tasks in the world are always expressed in a single sentence. So, I'll just watch from the side as you diligently build your palace, commenting on it along the way."

The mage sighed softly.

"There's one problem, though."

"Life is nothing but a series of problems."

"Right, but this problem needs immediate resolution. You usually leave things tidy before moving on... But it seems there's one bond you haven't properly concluded."

A bond not tied off? An unfinished human relationship?

Did I still have such a thing? After I danced the Cossack dance for Yoo Soo-Ha, I thought my relationships were so clean that they were practically bleached.



"Haha. You must be mistaken, I've settled all my affairs."

"In fact, I've been waiting for you to come up. [That thing] has been breaking in every day, tormenting me to no end, and I can't stand it any longer."

Jjeojeojeojeok-

An ominous crackling noise came from somewhere. Turning my head, I saw a crack in the distant upper area. To call it the sky, the ceiling, or simply darkness was unclear, but a fissure had opened.

"Congratulations, Wailing Heaven."

The mage stepped back three steps from me as if avoiding something. He was wearing an ominous smile.

"What's that supposed to..."

"In the Constellation system, there's a stalker that only follows the popular ones. You've attracted the attention of many Constellations, so unfortunately, it seems the stalker has heard about you too. I can't help you, but good luck."

Chwaah!

The crack widened, and pus flowed down. It was dark here, but the other side of the curtain was just as dark. However, the being that fell to the ground, covered in pus, was not black.

[Warning.]

[The Constellation Killer has appeared on the 81st floor.]

[The Constellation Killer harbors hostility towards you.]

The being had hair as silver as platinum.

"Are you [The Heaven that Gathers Wails]?"

"....."

The man with silver hair spoke in a voice familiar to me, but that was the only familiar thing. The temperature of his gaze looking at me was entirely different from that of my servant, who had reclaimed the name Kim Yul.

More than anything...

The man in front of me was still tying his hair with a yellow rubber band.

“...Leafanta Aegim.”

Constellation Killer slowly tilted his head.

His eyes, as fresh as a newly born star, looked this way.

"Do you know me?"

Yeah.

You were the one left.

"I know you very well."

As the mage said, there was indeed one cause and effect that

I had left untied.

The Constellation Killer is made up of multiple slaughter dolls.

I once snatched the existence named Kim Yul from the Constellation Killer. To be more precise, I succeeded in restoring him.

The Constellation Killer originally gained strength by abandoning memories. He had discarded his past as Kim Yul. However, through trauma, I was able to forcibly see his past, and by peeking into the past this way, I restored Kim Yul.

Nevertheless, I merely created a new being with memories identical to [Kim Yul].

Still, a slaughter doll called Constellation Killer, suffering from memory loss, roamed the world.

Thanks to his S-grade skill.

## [Puppeteer's Parade]

Rank: S

Effect: There once lived an old puppeteer in a world. The puppeteer feared being loved by someone. But he was not strong enough to endure eternal solitude.

"Let's create another me." The puppeteer thought. "Let the other me be loved. Let it live. With people, among people. And if it gets hurt--- let's throw it away." The puppeteer whispered. "Erase it forever."

Countless puppets lived.

Countless puppets were discarded.

This skill is a sorcery for the weak. The right to choose memories to keep and discard. You can create 13 puppets with the same appearance and abilities as you. When a puppet dies, another wakes up. Broken puppets can be repaired.

Granting you a replicated immortality. An assembled eternity.

\*However, memories are not shared between puppets.

+

13 puppets.

A being that slaughters Constellations day by day, losing memories continuously, and equalling the prowess of the Sword Saint.

I created the 14th puppet, infused it with Kim Yul's memories, and named it Kim Yul, not Constellation Killer or Leafanta Aegim.

In other words, the 13 puppets I couldn't take in were still thriving somewhere.

"I'm sorry. I do not remember you."

And thus, he arrived here.

To confront me, whose reputation as a Constellation had

soared.

"If you can tell me when we met, I could look up the record."

Constellation Killer pulled out a worn notebook from his pocket. I knew what that shabby item was.

A diary. An item Constellation Killer carries to overcome the absolute weakness that the puppets can't share memories.

Even though memories are disconnected, the sentences written in the notebook are shared verbatim with other diaries.

"No need."

I shook my head.

"We have definitely met. We shared time together. However... you won't find any record of me in that diary you're holding."

"Why wouldn't there be?"

"Because I met you in the past before you obtained that diary. A time you can never return to or retrieve."

"I see. So you are a master of time."

The Constellation Killer was calm. Despite my claim to have seen his past, he showed no curiosity at all.

"A troublesome opponent. I thank you for the clue about your ability."

"I know far more about you than you do about yourself."

"Everyone in this world does. It's not a notable personal detail."

The Constellation Killer wrote something in the diary.

I read the direction of the moving pen, backtracked, and constructed the sentences written in the notebook in my



mind.

+

The Heaven that Gathers Wails.

Possessor of a time skill.

Able to know the opponent's past.

Presumed to have had contact with me in the past.

+

Reconstructing the letters was incredibly easy, and for good reason.

".....It's in Hangul\*."

\*Hangul is the Korean Alphabet system.

"Hmm? I don't understand what you mean."

The Constellation Killer's expression remained unchanged. Watching him, my heart clenched. He was using these letters without even knowing what they were.

To the Constellation Killer, these characters were likely [somehow naturally learned letters]. He used them when writing sentences that others shouldn't understand, when using his diary, like a personal cipher.

He was a refugee who had lost his homeland. Because he had forgotten the language, he was aphasic. Because he had discarded his own existence, he was nonexistent.

Looking silently at the one who had become aphasic and nonexistent through exile, my heart was heavy.

Although he used the same yellow rubber band and the same letters from our shared homeland, unlike when I saw Anastasia and others in gym clothes— my heart was filled with turmoil.

"I have been pursuing you for 31 days."

The Constellation Killer slammed the diary shut.

The dull sound interrupted my thoughts.

"Since 31 days ago?"

"Yes, but every time I attempted to invade the World of the Lone Child, an old swordsman who blocked my path was there. An old man wearing a black suit."

The Constellation Killer mumbled to the puzzled me.

"The old man introduced himself as Sword Saint."

My eyes widened.

So that was it. Sword Saint Marcus had been absent, fighting the Constellation Killer without my knowledge!

During my 100 days in Babylon, I never met Sword Saint Marcus. Even my companions were unaware of the Sword Saint's whereabouts. I had assumed he might have gone on a

solitary training journey, but who would have thought he was fending off the Constellation Killer's invasion!

『I wish to become your guardian.』

『As your guardian, I wish to protect your life and forever guard the humanity of those around you.』

Sword Saint Marcus's words about wanting to be my guardian were no empty promises.

He had become a palisade to protect us, a wall of the World of the Lone Child, battling the invader unbeknownst to us.

My heart, which had been troubled at the sight of Constellation Killer, was filled with a sense of pride.

"I attempted to invade through different routes numerous times, but each time, the old man was one step ahead, blocking me. He likely had a skill to sense my movements, or a skill to detect outsiders trying to invade that world."

The Constellation Killer continued.

"Only now, after you left the World of the Lone Child, have I successfully pursued you."

"That's good news."

I grinned.

"Because it means you ultimately couldn't defeat Sword Saint Marcus. And I am stronger than him. Constellation Killer, no matter what you try, you can't defeat me."

"A sound conclusion."

Constellation Killer responded indifferently to my blatant provocation.

"Sword Saint said that even if he were to lose, it would be certain that I would ultimately succumb to you. After receiving that information, I assessed your threat level as the highest. As you said, with my current capabilities alone, I cannot defeat you [no matter what I try]."

That moment.

"Therefore, I have concluded that I must [use every means possible]."

Jjeojjeok! Jjeojjeok, jjeoeok!

The cracks already in the sky widened further. From the gaps, one, two, three, something kept falling.

And then.

[The Constellation Killer has appeared on the 81st floor.]

I witnessed that all of them were flaunting silver hair just like the first.

[The Constellation Killer has appeared on the 81st floor.]

[The Constellation Killer has appeared on the 81st floor.]

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[The Constellation Killer has appeared on the 81st floor.]

[The Constellation Killer has appeared on the 81st floor.]

I unconsciously pressed my lips together.

"....."

A total of 13.

Just one would be enough to wipe out most Constellations, and a match for Sword Saint Marcus. The slaughter dolls, all thirteen with cascading silver hair, stood up.

Thirteen pairs of eyes simultaneously looked this way.

“The Heaven that Gathers Wails.”

“.....Ah.”

“I designate you as the highest level o

f threat. From now on, I will utilize my full power to annihilate you.”

I couldn't help but burst into laughter.

"Hamusutra would pass out from happiness if he saw this scene!"



The moment I grasped the hilt of the Holy Sword, all thirteen Constellation Killers charged at me simultaneously.

# Chapter 373: Blue Blood (1)

---

The first flower to bloom in spring was blue.

Spring had arrived in the world where the Constellation Killer resided.

-.....

The Constellation Killer gazed up at the flower that resembled his own pupils.

In his original homeland, the first flowers to bloom were yellow, or perhaps pink, but he had forgotten the spring of his homeland. To Leafanta Aegim, spring was now merely blue.

-.....If one wishes to not become a Constellation, what must be done?

The Constellation Killer gently touched the flower petal with his pale fingertips.

-The stars should no longer dictate the lives of people. To ordinary humans, Constellations are far too mighty. Merely by existing, Constellations lead people to make decisions about their lives. To flee from their responsibilities.....

As he continued speaking, the Constellation Killer suddenly stopped.

It wasn't because he doubted his own logic. There was a very tangible reason. Enchanted by the scent of the flower, a bee, buzzing, suddenly landed on the nail of the Constellation Killer.

-.....

For a long while, the Constellation Killer observed the wings of the bee. Then, he slowly stroked the bee.

Ouch!

The bee perceived the touch of a human as an attack.

Immediately, it regurgitated its insides and stung the finger of the Constellation Killer.

The poison of a bee, which holds no concept of kindness in this world, was venomous. The toxin, nurtured within the insect's body for its entire life, seeped well into the flesh of Leafanta Aegim.

That was all there was to it. Having lost its sole purpose of existence, the bee soon fell to the ground, trembling.

Unaware until it was used, the poison was only capable of bringing death upon itself.

-.....

The Constellation Killer could have easily neutralized the insect's venom using his aura.

But he chose not to.

Merely observing with his blue eyes, the swelling caused by the sting of a mere mortal insect.

-Indeed.

He had realized something.

-I should have a child.

The Constellation Killer turned his head.

He was standing in the garden of a noble house.

Chosen by the [Goddess of Protection], Leafanta Aegim, who became the emperor above all, renounced the throne and wandered through various worlds.

In this world, which he happened to visit by chance, Leafanta Aegim had stayed longer than expected. Why? Perhaps it was because he had taken a liking to this garden.

A nameless maid was working in the garden, tirelessly shoveling the earth. It wasn't until the Constellation Killer approached her that she noticed his presence and looked up.

-Is there something you need?

The maid's pupils were red.

-Is there anything I can assist you with, noble sir?

The noble house where the maid worked was indebted to the Constellation Killer. One of the children held captive by the Constellations was a lady of this noble house. The family treated the Constellation Killer as a noble, and the maid, too, showed him all due respect.

But that wasn't the only reason.

-I know you steal glances at me whenever you find the time.

-.....

The maid flinched.

With a cautious look, she gauged the Constellation Killer's mood. However, there was no sign of anger or reprimand from

him. Relieved, the maid shrugged her shoulders with a sigh, "Phew."

-Yes, I did sneak a peek. Frankly, aren't you a bit too handsome?

-Is my face to your liking?

-If a passerby turns their head unwittingly at the sight of a work of art, it's not the fault of the passerby, but the person who placed the artwork in the middle of the road.

The maid seemed adamant about asserting her innocence. However, that wasn't what concerned the Constellation Killer.

-I desire to spend a night with you.

Thud.

The maid, who had been actively chatting, suddenly froze.

---Eh?

-Of course, only if you consent.

-Eh? Ah. Uhm...?

The maid could not comprehend the situation.

-Wait a moment, noble sir. Do you have feelings for me?  
Gasp. Don't tell me, your occasional strolls through the garden  
were all strategies to approach me...!?

-No. I have no such feelings.

-.....

The maid was bewildered by the situation.

-Then, why are you propositioning me now...?

-I have long pondered how to escape the path of becoming a  
Constellation. Or rather, how to preserve my humanity.  
However, I am one who loses memories. Even if I wish to  
remain human, I cannot.



The maid still could not grasp the situation, nor could she understand the Constellation Killer's words, and Leafanta Aegim did not place much importance on whether the other party understood him.

In short, he continued regardless.

-But perhaps things might change if I have a child. Proof that I was human. A clear evidence of being human.

-Oh...

The maid hesitantly spoke up.

-Um, I'm not sure if I understood correctly, but in any case, are you saying you want to spend a night with me to leave a proof that you've lived?

-That's correct.

-.....

The maid seemed to finally grasp the situation.

In essence, the man before her was a madman with a pretty face.

-Wait a moment... Let me think about this...

-Do as you see fit.

The maid put down her shovel and crossed her arms.

-...Anyway, you're a hero among heroes who saved this country. Hmmm. To inherit the lineage of such a person could turn my life around. Considering the way you speak, you don't seem particularly interested in the child, so this largely depends on me... But perhaps it's not a bad gamble to consider...

The maid mumbled to herself endlessly.

Peeking sideways, she looked at the Constellation Killer seriously from head to toe. Then, her gaze momentarily rested on the Constellation Killer's hand, noticing the swollen finger from the bee sting.

-You've been stung. Doesn't it hurt?

-No, it does hurt.

-Then why don't you seem bothered?

-Because it doesn't bother me.

The maid stroked her chin, seemingly understanding something, and muttered, "Indeed..."

-You are alone.

What did that mean?

Before the Constellation Killer could comprehend, the maid clicked her tongue shortly.

-All right, noble sir. I will sleep with you.

The maid's red eyes looked up at the Constellation Killer.

-But there's a condition.

-What is it?

-Stay with me until the child starts to walk. Protect me and the child. And when the child is born, announce to the world that it's your offspring. If you find these conditions difficult, I will never...

-Accepted.

...Um, I'm not sure if it's my place to say, but didn't you agree too easily? I thought I was being quite demanding.

-It's an easy condition.

The maid looked at the Constellation Killer with mixed feelings, then sighed.

-Alright, you madman. Just wait until I finish my work for

today. The children are suffering from spring fever, so I need to take care of them meticulously.

-As you wish.

-Madmen can be heroes too...

Shaking her head in disbelief, the maid picked up her shovel again. Thud. Thump. As she resumed moving the pile of soil in a corner of the garden, the Constellation Killer suddenly spoke up.

-I still don't know your name. What is it?

-Ivansia.

The maid turned and answered.

-A commoner, so just the last name.

-Ivansia. That's my name. Long ago.

Red pupils reflected in the blue flowers.

A total of 13 slaughtering dolls charged at me all at once.

I was stronger than the Constellation Killer. Undoubtedly stronger. However, it was uncertain whether my strength would remain effective when the Constellation Killer multiplied into 13. To put it more bluntly, I was terrified.

Utterly terrified!

Demonic Heavenly God Art.

The First Form.

Sword of Starving Death.

It's customary for a warrior to unleash their most confident strike first when they're scared. I did just that. I drew my full-power sword and lunged at the slaughtering dolls.

"How about this!"

"As expected, you're strong."

Swoosh—

A spray of blood erupted. A slaughtering doll that took a direct hit from my sword lost an arm.

Considering that I had managed to sever the arm of 'that' Constellation Killer with a single slash, I undoubtedly demonstrated tremendous martial prowess, but what did my objective assessment of strength matter? It was irrelevant. I was in the midst of battle, and only the outcome mattered in battle.

The enemy numbered 13, and naturally, all of them had both arms.

In other words, I had only managed to reduce the enemy's fighting power by  $\frac{1}{26}$ .

"The fact that you would be more powerful was..."

"Already anticipated."

A slaughtering doll that lost its right arm, along with another doll, attacked me from both sides. Although I managed to slice off a leg and an arm from each with a sword wind, damn it, it was all in vain.

The Constellation Killer had no intention of blocking my attacks from the start!

Two dolls grabbed my right and left arms. Panicked, I shouted.

"What kind of madness is this! Only Hamusutra would be happy with this kind of treatment!"

I drew upon all the aura in my body, attempting to shake off the two Constellation Killer dolls. I managed to shake off one, but as if waiting for this moment, another slaughtering doll rushed in and grabbed my arm tightly.

"Wait, just a moment...."

Meanwhile, the remaining slaughtering dolls were charging their swords with aura. Nine dolls, to be precise. Despite having dolls identical to them clinging to my body, they aimed their swords at me without any hesitation.



I felt a chill down my spine.

"You can't mean, a suicide attack!?"

"Abandon the memories of the past 30 days."

A flash of light engulfed me.

Boom-----ahhh...ahhhhh.....

What was initially an unbearable explosion quickly turned into a ringing in my ears. My vision whitened.

Somehow, by smearing my body with a defensive barrier made almost entirely of aura, I managed to survive the Constellation Killer's attack at point-blank range without dying. My body was relatively intact.

However, as soon as I regained my hearing and sight, the voice of a second slaughtering doll coldly echoed.

"Abandon the memories of the past 30 days."

Flash...

My vision flickered.

At first, there was no pain. I had withstood that strike. But the very next moment, whoosh! The blood vessels throughout my body simultaneously screamed in agony.

To block that strike, my blood vessels had been burned to the extent that my aura was depleted. Drastically.

"This is..."

Blood reeked from the gums around my teeth.

"Fuck...!"

"Abandon the memories of the past 30 days."

The third doll spoke.

The Constellation Killer's 30 days struck me once again.

"-----!!"

Excruciating pain surged throughout my body. Since becoming a Constellation and rising to the rank of an absolute overlord in the World of the Lone Child, I had never experienced such a complete depletion of aura.

I felt dizzy. I struggled to breathe.

Even as my heart screamed, I barely managed to maintain my existence.

The two slaughtering dolls that had been holding my arms were swept away by the recent strikes. I had withstood the attacks, but the dolls had not.

Unfortunately, it wasn't just the dolls that couldn't withstand the Constellation Killer's triple strike.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth vanishes.]

Madness.

I almost coughed up a lump of blood. Vanish. To vanish! Vanish, for heaven's sake!

Hisimet Cretsu was a top-tier Constellation. Although it had been severely weakened due to entanglements with me, it wasn't the type to be beaten up anywhere.

Yet, it died from the blasts the Constellation Killer just fired.

And it didn't end there.

"Abandon the memories of the past 30 days."

The fourth strike.

[A Music Box Just for You cries out in deep wounds.]

[Goddess of Protection screams for the hero not to lose consciousness.]

No, this is insane.

Truly, madly, deeply insane.

# Chapter 374: Blue Blood (2)

---

For thirteen full days, the thirteen slaughter dolls honed their blades, all for the purpose of capturing me alone. The Constellation Killer, a name that evoked fear among the constellations, had marked me as an unmistakably more powerful being and had been preparing to hunt me down.

"I'll abandon the memories of the last thirty days."

And this was the result.

"Argh, ugh... Keuh, ah...!"

Ultimately, I vomited blood. It was the price for dispersing my aura to protect the fox and Hwiya. Thanks to that, both the fox and Hwiya were safe. However, the aura that once flowed nobly in my veins had dried up, and the aura that filled my heart was also depleted.

'I'm going to die. This is it.'

I fell to my knees.

'No, let's die.'

Blood kept flowing from my mouth.

'Let's die like this and return to a day ago. Knowing what kind of strategy the enemy will use next time, I can respond. Let's die. Dying is the only way to survive.'

Even amidst the excruciating pain that wracked my head, I was searching for the only path to survival, or rather, the path to death.

'Anyway, I don't have the aura to block the next strike. Let's not block it. Leave it. I'm going to die!'

Coughing up a clot of blood,

I waited for the sixth attack to strike me down. Little did I know that a hunter of the Constellation Killer's caliber would regard himself as the weaker party and me as the stronger, attacking me with full force, but this would only be this time. I was caught off guard this time. Next time, in the next battle, I

would definitely...

"Cough! Keuh, huh... ugh...?"

Why, though?

"What are you doing...?"

The next attack didn't come.

"Hurry up and kill me..."

Straining, I lifted my head.

A pair of fresh green eyes,

And more eyes.

Nine pairs of blue eyes surrounded me, looking down from all sides.



"I won't kill you."

"What...?"

What does that mean?

"I won't kill you, The Heaven that Gathers Wails."

Five of the nine slaughter dolls approached. My right arm. My left arm. My right leg. My left leg. Each limb was grabbed, and even the ki point on my nape was pressed. My entire body was literally sealed by the dolls.

"I've researched a lot about you."

As the ki point was pressed, I couldn't even move my mouth freely. Breathing was difficult. No, it was made so that I could barely breathe by blocking my ki point.

"Many constellations were interested in you. I went to each of them, trying to learn what they knew about you. Only after annihilating nine constellations did a clear picture of you emerge."

Looking back, it wasn't just about deploying all thirteen to capture me; it seemed he had also exterminated nine constellations to gather information. This madman.

"You're strong, and you've grown too fast."

"Keuh, hrmph..."

"To think of it as growth within a limited time, it's abnormally fast. It could mean you have tremendous talent, but I came up with a more logical hypothesis. It's that [time is not limited for you]."

Damn it.

I remembered the conversation I had with the Constellation Killer before the fight began.

『We have definitely met before.』

『I see. So you are a master of time.』

At that time, the Constellation Killer had reacted quite blandly.

I thought it was because of his inherently calm nature, but could it be, that before the fight even started, he had speculated that I possessed time-manipulating abilities?

Was his bland reaction because he had already anticipated it?

"Of course, I couldn't figure out how you were manipulating time. There were too many possibilities, but regardless of the method, it was clear that [time] was your resource and strength."

Thinking about it,

The Constellation Killer was originally a hunter.

He always made sure to know what kind of entity he was dealing with, its strengths, weaknesses, and only then would he engage in battle.

Long ago, when I first encountered the Constellation Killer

on the 50th floor, didn't he say this while hunting monsters?

『To kill [those who split and die], one must precisely [split them in half].』

『The true body of the Screamer lies in its scream, kill it by burying it in sound." 』

A meticulous strategist who studied the enemy's weaknesses.

That was the Constellation Killer.

And this time, he had thoroughly studied me before making his move.

"Therefore, I won't kill you, The Heaven that Gathers Wails. I'll merely seal your time away."

Seal.

"How would you..."

"It's simple. I'll cause a rift between this space-time and the outside world. Then, I'll encase you in ice and leave you here. This isn't ordinary ice, but ice that will never melt."

"You will be forever trapped in this place where time has come to a halt. I will make sure of it."

Damn it.

"To trap a person... in eternal torment... you say it so casually...!"

"I don't understand what you mean."

The Constellation Killer tilted his head slightly as he drew a dagger from within his cloak.

Thrust!

A cold sensation sliced through my chest and pierced my heart.

[‘The Claw Stained in the Dawn - Replica’ begins to seal you.]

The dagger the Constellation Killer had plunged into my heart was made of ice. Having wandered through worlds for countless years, he must have acquired all sorts of curious items. It seemed this ice dagger was one such item in the Constellation Killer's collection, and as soon as it penetrated my chest, it triggered an extraordinary effect.

[Warning. Once the seal is complete, only conscious thought will be possible.]

[Your world will soon be sealed.]

[Time remaining: 61 seconds.]

Crack, crackle, snap.

From the point of impact, ice formed. It started with my chest, then spread to my collarbone and shoulders, expanding around my chest like the blossoming of a blue flower bud.

"You're too late even if you try to send a message to your comrades now, asking for reinforcements."

Sensations faded away.

"In 60 seconds, no one will be able to reach this place in time to rescue you. And after a minute, this stage will be isolated. I will make it so."

As I became numb, I realized that I had felt this sensation, this chill, this coldness somewhere before.

"Winter..."

"What did you say?"

"The martial realm... The sealing technique used on 'The Golden Dragon Dwelling in the Great Lake'... Is this it?"

The Constellation Killer slightly tilted his head.

"That's right. I'm surprised you knew."

"....."

"When I was searching for a way to defeat you, I came across this item. I used several items to seal the 'Golden Dragon,' and the records clearly state that this item was also used."

How could I forget? This sensation. This chill. This coldness.

It was none other than the ice and snow that had forever trapped the world of my master.

'The Golden Dragon Dwelling in the Great Lake' was originally the ruler of my master's world. The dragon had an empathetic sword embedded in its chest, eternally unable to die, merely decaying. It was the Constellation Killer's doing.

Now I knew that not only the empathetic sword but also the item currently impaled in my heart had been used by the Constellation Killer to seal the dragon.

So,

The winter that killed my master's world was now trying to kill me.

[Time remaining: 21 seconds.]



If I had the strength to clench my teeth, the grinding noise would have resonated throughout the space.

[Time remaining: 20 seconds.]

Yes, Constellation Killer.

I acknowledge it.

You are a fearsome hunter. Now I truly understand why the Sword Emperor couldn't kill you, how you managed to draw with the Sword Emperor.

The Constellation Killer, who went all out deploying thirteen bodies, is undoubtedly on par with the Sword Emperor. You're comparable even to the only one who reached the 99th floor.

[Time remaining: 19 seconds.]

And so, you have led me to defeat. Not just a simple death, but a true defeat in every sense. Soon, I will be frozen in time, and the 81st floor stage will be isolated, becoming a deserted island unreachable by my comrades.

Yes.

If I had been a lone being.

[Time remaining: 18 seconds.]

If I had been a solitary existence like you.

[Time remaining: 17 seconds.]

Raviel.

[The Heaven that Gathers Wails sends a message to Silver Lily Duchess.]

I'm sorry.

[The Heaven that Gathers Wails asks Silver Lily Duches to bring about his death.]

Now, please die.

".....?"

The Constellation Killer looked at me once more, tilting his head in confusion.

"I can't comprehend."

Ice had now covered my entire body. It was cold. My whole body was freezing. Only my face, specifically my eyes and mouth, remained unfrozen by the ice. The Constellation Killer watched the last bits of my exposed skin being enveloped by ice.

"Why are you smiling?"

"Ah..."

Is that so? Am I smiling?

Ice had crept up to the very edge of my mouth, and I hadn't

even noticed, but surely, my lips were curved in a smile. Not a mocking one, but a genuinely happy smile.

"Can you imagine..."

"What?"

"Someone who can die upon being asked— within 10 seconds."

My left eye was covered in ice.

"Do you have such a person?"

My right eye was sealed by ice.

"You don't."

My nose.

"Despite having the chance, throughout centuries, you chose to remain alone... Always."

Finally.

"That's why you lost to me Constellation Killer."

My lips.

[Time remaining.]

[5 seconds.]

My heart.

[4 seconds.]

Just before being completely frozen.

[A Certain Returner's Love (EX) has been activated.]

[3 seconds.]

My breath stopped.

[You share a timeline with the other party.]

[The timeline ends.]

[2 seconds.]

Death closed my eyes before the winter could engulf me.

[You have died.]

[1 second.]

In my mind, two voices overlapped.

[Seal complete. You have been sealed—]

[You will return 24 hours back to the past.]

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Once again, I opened my eyes.

"What should we eat today to get a good reputation for our meal?"

"Well, personally, I'm in the mood for some fish and chips after a long time."

"Ahaha, that's an unexpectedly interesting choice!"

It was a place all too familiar to me.

The communal living quarters.

A space where my comrades, friends, and family gather when they wish, chat when they desire, and eat what they crave, there I was, seated on the sofa, awakening once more.



"....."

I had returned to 24 hours prior.

"What do you think, Master?"

The Heretic Inquisitor, seated across me on another sofa, turned to look my way.

"Fish and chips might be a bit too... Oh? Master, your expression seems unusual."

"Huh?"

Following the Heretic Inquisitor's words, the Black Dragon Witch, Countess, Viper, and Paladin, all who shared and promised to continue sharing their time with me, were gazing at me.

"That is indeed an odd expression."

"Indeed. It's as if you're a tuna who realized too late that it

bit into a plastic bag instead of prey."

"Hey, what kind of expression is that...?"

"Nisha, this is all because you suggested such a peculiar dish as fish and chips. I firmly believe it would be better to just have fries separately."

"Ah, fries sound good. Let's go with fries. It's been quite a while. There were days when I used to survive on burgers for all three meals."

"Hmm. That's a story from a very long time ago!"

I smiled.

"Ahaha...."

Really.

It doesn't feel like I'm going to lose.

"Bambolina."

"Yes, Master?"

"Could you bring me an alarm clock, please?"

The Heretic Inquisitor pulled out a smartphone and activated the alarm clock app. Handing the phone over to me, the Heretic Inquisitor tilted his head in confusion.

"I shall, but why do you suddenly need an alarm?"

"Um, not exactly an alarm but I need a stopwatch... Let's see."

I pressed the timer.

The clock, previously displaying 00:00:00, immediately started racing.

I nodded with a smile.

"Yes, that should do it. Now, let's see how long it takes."

"...? I don't understand what's happening, but if Master needs it, please, feel free to use it!"

"Thank you."

I leaned back into the sofa.

My friends looked at me as if I was odd, but since I wasn't typically any less odd on other days, they soon returned to their chit-chat. The night snack was decided a day early to be fries. Viper, along with Silvia, headed to the kitchen to fry some potatoes.

One minute.

A comfortable time passed.

Three minutes.

Paladin and the Countess started a verbal spat that was more

like a display of affection.

Six minutes.

The Black Dragon Witch slapped the back of their heads with a slipper, telling them to stop, despite wearing sportswear and slippers – in fact, the Black Dragon Witch was missing one slipper.

Seven minutes.

Eight minutes.

Nine minutes.

And when the phone screen displayed 00:09:21----

"Th-this is not allowed here!"

The outside became noisy.

One of the Four Demon Lords who was on guard duty outside the quarters raised his voice urgently. Thud, thud. The sound of more than one person's footsteps, no, the footsteps of dozens, traveled through the corridor to this living room.

The Black Dragon Witch and the Heretic Inquisitor immediately stood up. Despite being in sportswear and slippers, with the Black Dragon Witch even missing one slipper, both wore expressions full of vigilance. They stared down the corridor beyond the living room door, from where the approaching footsteps came.

"This is a place where the top brass of our tower gather. It would be troubling if you were to behave like this..."

"Shut up. You're noisy."

Boom!

The living room door was blown off its hinges.

Thinking it was an attacker, my friends were about to rush in, but they froze when they saw the person who appeared where the door had been. They stared at the intruder, eyes wide with shock.

"Hmm."

But the intruder didn't care about the gazes of the homeowners at all. Leaving behind dozens of knights, the intruder slowly turned their head, scanning the living room.

Our eyes met.

The moment our gazes locked, I couldn't help but give a bitter smile.

"It took 9 minutes and 43 seconds, Raviel."

"You took 13 minutes and 27 seconds. It's proven that I'm considerably faster than you, Gong-Ja."

Raviel smiled.

Her red eyes slightly narrowed.

"So, which son of a bitch do we have to beat up?"

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# Chapter 375: Blue Blood (3)

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"Hold on. What in the world is going on?"

Black Dragon Witch asked in confusion. Raviel's visit had already stirred up the lodging.

For the friends who were enjoying a peaceful evening after work, it was like a bolt out of the blue.

"Did something big happen in the empire? Something like a rebellion or a surprise attack. Is that why you're here all of a sudden...."

"Both a rebellion and a surprise attack occurred, on top of which there was also poisoning, Black Dragon Master."

"What!? Really!?"

"And fortunately, all three issues have been resolved recently. I'm here for a different matter now."

Raviel sat down on the sofa naturally and looked at me.

As if to say, explain yourself.

Although she didn't show it outwardly, I could tell from the sound of her heart and her breathing that Raviel was quite unsettled.

"Even if you say it's for a different matter, you probably don't know the details either. But the one who wants to ask 'what in the world is going on' is me. Gong-Ja, I wonder why you made [that request] when you would hesitate to lose your life even once more if mine were to be taken a thousand times. I can't help but be curious."

Before long, not only Raviel but all my colleagues were looking at me. Raviel demanded an explanation, and my colleagues wanted one.

"Hmm."

I took a deep breath.

The strategy meeting had begun.

"Yes, Raviel... If it was a matter that could be resolved by me fading away a thousand times, I would never have asked such a favor from you."

"Then..."

"I would have never been able to meet you again."

The gazes of those sitting in the common living area pricked my face.

"24 hours from now, I was on the verge of being sealed away permanently."

Silence fell.

The speed of people's reactions varied. Of course, Raviel was the first to understand. Holding her fan, she leaned on her

chin and murmured, "....so it was that kind of thing."

"Hmm."

Surprisingly, or perhaps not, the next person to grasp the meaning of my words was Paladin, Patricia.

Patricia crossed her arms and looked sharply in this direction.

"Indeed. An enemy has appeared wielding the most effective tactic against Gong-Ja. Does '24 hours later' mean you've just returned from a day's regression?"

"Yes."

"If someone can guess your abilities to some extent and if they're powerful and formidable enough, it's an inevitable obstacle you'd eventually face. Don't worry, Gong-Ja."

As Patricia and I conversed, the other colleagues began to guess the situation after a delay. The Countess nodded with an "aha," and the Black Dragon Witch sighed, "Ah..."

Having revealed to the gathered colleagues that I could regress, they quickly grasped the situation. Only Viper looked around blankly.

"Hey, what? What are you talking about? Why are you all making faces as if you understand? I don't get it at all."

"It's simple, Liǎofàn. Gong-Ja cannot be killed, and the more he dies, the stronger he becomes. So, the only strategy is to seal him away, regardless of the means."

Patricia explained as if it were nothing.

"Isolate him so no one can help him, seal him so he can't take his own life, and paralyze him for an eternity."

"Ah... Oh. Yeah. I get it, but how did you grasp the situation so quickly after hearing about Gong-Ja?"

"Well, it's because that strategy was included in the plans I had devised to eliminate Gong-Ja. It's a tactic I personally concocted, so how could I not know?"

"Uh... ..Eh? What?"

"Never mind. It's become irrelevant now."

Patricia shook her head once and looked at me.

"So, Gong-Ja. Who is it? Who tried to seal you away? Sealing you is easier said than done and extremely difficult to achieve. Is there such a formidable enemy?"

I nodded.

"Yeah. It's a person known as the Constellation Killer."

The explanation of who the Constellation Killer was went on for some time.

"....."

"....."

Throughout my explanation, my colleagues' expressions grew serious. Even the worst fashion combination of gym clothes and three-striped slippers couldn't hide their

seriousness, well, not entirely anyway.

Because my removal would mean the collapse of the entire World of the Lone Child.

It might sound arrogant, but realistically, my existence is far too important for the World of the Lone Child. I'm too central to everything.

First, the 5 great guilds have settled their past grievances and cooperated with me at their center.

Second, the Aegim Empire worships the [Goddess of Protection] as a deity, and the [Goddess of Protection] calls me the Hero and follows me. Thanks to this authority, I can interfere in the Aegim Empire.

Third, it's the same with Raviel's empire. In fact, thanks to the political marriage between Raviel and me, both worlds are communicating smoothly, aren't they?

Fourth, the other world where Uburka was born is even less worth mentioning.

I am a pillar of the World of the Lone Child.

The harmony among the numerous other races and other worlds hangs solely on my life.

It cannot fall, nor can it disappear.

"...What a peculiar fate."

Raviel broke the heavy silence.

"The Constellation Killer we're talking about now is an ancient ancestor of mine. Our family was originally commoners but rose to the core of power overnight by receiving the favor of a hero who saved the nation. The Constellation Killer left our family the Prayer Sword before departing."

The Prayer Sword.

The very sword that Raviel used to stab her heart while facing the mirror.



"Using the Prayer Sword, I became a Constellation. Because I became a Constellation, my world was recorded in the Revelations. Because it was recorded, Gong-Ja, I was able to meet you."

"Yes, Raviel... I always feel that fate is mysterious."

And thanks to the director, Kim Yul became the catalyst for the orphanage's creation, and because of the director, I became who I am now. Isn't this a strange and mysterious cause and effect?

"Yeah. I get the bizarre fate part."

Anastasia, who had been frowning the whole time, finally spoke.

"So what's the plan now?"

"Obviously, we plan to pay it back."

With that single statement, our night was gone.

We gathered around the table in the living room, and the deities needed for the operation were summoned. The Countess even brought out [The Cate that Bites Gold Coins]. To seek advice against a foe that was a natural enemy of Constellations, it was best to hear from the mouths of the Constellations themselves.

"Constellation Killer, huh... Well, to be frank, it's tough."

In response to the question of how to exclude Constellation Killer, the tri-colored cat flicked its tail.

"The Constellation Killer has officially cleared up to the 90th floor as a hunter, and hunters who have cleared up to the 90th floor are basically granted their own sanctuary."

"I know. Like sanctuaries such as the Great Library. We just need to invade that sanctuary, don't we?"

"Meow. Yes, but..."

The cats made a complicated expression. They exchanged glances and cautiously observed my reaction.

"That's where the problem arises, Wailing Heaven. So far, not a single hunter or even a Constellation has set foot in the Constellation Killer's sanctuary. No, there are hardly any Constellations who have even the slightest information about the Constellation Killer's sanctuary."

"Why is that?"

"Because the essence of the Constellation Killer's sanctuary is [concealment]."

Concealment.

"Meow, more precisely, it's closer to [ignorance]. As you know, Wailing Heaven, the Constellation Killer throws away his memories more easily than a tissue paper from a giveaway. Even the Constellation Killer himself doesn't know about the Constellation Killer. What kind of life he lived, what kind of person he is, why he has to go around killing Constellations. No one knows, and probably the Constellation Killer himself doesn't know much either."

"....."

"Therefore, [ignorance] is the essence of the Constellation Killer. Meow. We don't know where he is. Even if he's right in

front of us, we don't know who he is. Even if we have his location right in front of us, we probably can't go there."

I sighed.

No one knows that child, just like when Kim Yul sat at the classroom window seat, unchanged.

"Snake."

I looked down at the snake wrapped around my wrist.

"Ssss?"

"Do you know the coordinates of where the Constellation Killer's sanctuary is located?"

The thin snake flicked its tongue.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth boasts that there is no sanctuary whose coordinates it does not know!]

The cats seated at the table perked up their ears.

"Ahhh, certainly. If it's Hisimet Cretsu, coordinates should be obtainable. Ignorance is not knowing the truth, and a secret is hiding the truth. Both share the common point of the truth being ignored, meow. And Hisimet Cretsu is a Constellation that exposes the truth. ...Or so it goes."

[The Cat that Bites Gold Coins look at you anew.]

"If you have Hisimet Cretsu, almost no world is inaccessible. We can buy anything. Meow. You've really collected the best Constellations. Total cheats."

"Knowing the coordinates is enough to go?"

I ignored the cats' sighs and asked.

The thin snake, which had been confidently flicking its tongue, slightly bowed its head.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth denies that.]

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth compares it to not being able to infiltrate a military facility in front of you, even if you know it's there.]

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth confesses that it only knows that something exists there, not how to get there.]

Of course.

The Constellation Killer didn't hide the secret; he erased the memories that could become secrets.

While the snake can sense "there was something there," it can't expose "what is there."

'But.'

I turned my head.

'Even what the Constellation Killer abandoned and lost is by my side.'

Across the table.

There sat the people that gathered here in response to the summon.

Among them, I called the name of the man who had to be the key to this operation.

"Kim Yul."

"....."

"Perhaps you have the authority to enter Constellation Killer's sanctuary."

Kim Yul, the [origin] of the Constellation Killer, silently looked at me.

Yes.

It's unknown how tight a security system the Constellation Killer's sanctuary has. Even if we knew, there's no guarantee

we could break through.

However, it's too clear who would automatically be allowed by that security.

"Our plan is simple. Hisimet Cretsu will reveal the coordinates, and you, Kim Yul, will cross over to those coordinates. Please establish a foothold for us there. We, including myself, will immediately rush over."

"Understood, My Lord."

As Kim Yul nodded, [The Cat that Bites Gold Coins] urgently spoke up.

"W-Wait a moment, please. Wailing Heaven. Firstly... I understand he has access, but the Constellation Killer's sanctuary is, after all, of the 90th floor stage!"

"Is that so?"

"Meow! Of course! To access such a place, conditions are needed."



The cat spread its pink jelly-like toes wide.

"First, if one offers their sanctuary to the tower. Like [The One with the Delicious Tail] did for your 20th floor, and I did for the 70th floor, connecting my world."

"Who is The One with the Delicious Tail?"

"Also known as Hamusutra."

"Why is he called that..."

"Is that important right now?! Please focus on the story!"

It feels extremely important. So much so that it seems to be the only important thing at this moment.

Everyone seemed desperate to know, but the cat continued its explanation without caring.

"Second, if one connects their sanctuary, it feels like the 60th floor stage. Usually, subordinate worlds are connected, but

there are cases where one's own world is directly connected. [The One with the Delicious Marrow] is such a case."

"And who is that..."

"Also known as Mutia."

Delicious, is it?

Is Mutia's marrow delicious...

"First is a kind of duty to the tower, while the second is a means of business for accumulating power as a Constellation."

"It seems similar..."

"Well, it actually is similar. Regarding this, you will learn more when you actually reach the 90th floor... But these two methods have a common point in a different sense. They can set their own access rights to the sanctuary."

I nodded.

"What's the other method?"

"Third, the overall manager of the tower. For example, a pillar provides an access route. [The One Who Becomes Delicious Alcohol] was caught by you guys this way."

Hisimet Cretsu let out a screech. The cat looked at Hisimet Cretsu and smacked its lips before continuing.

"Other than that, well, someone of the same class. Wailing Heaven would qualify, but that human wouldn't."

I smirked.

In other words, [Kim Yul has the authority to enter Constellation Killer's sanctuary but not the qualification to enter the 90th floor stage.]

On the other hand, [I have the qualification to enter the 90th floor stage but not the authority to enter the Constellation Killer's sanctuary.]

Each of us lacks one necessary condition for the other.

"It's okay."

But in other words, we can make up for what the other lacks.

And Kim Yul and I are already bound together.

We can call each other our own.

"Kim Yul is my Apostle. My limbs, so to speak. So, go not as [a Hunter] but as [an Apostle of the Constellation Wailing Heaven]."

"Ye-? ...Ahaa! Indeed!"

The tri-colored cat looked back and forth between me and Kim Yul and then opened its mouth.

"If he truly is an Apostle, it's possible! Apostles gain the same rights as the Constellation if the Constellation permits."

Kim Yul regained his memories because of me and was nurtured by me. Now that I've completed my role as a

Constellation, it's not an exaggeration to call Kim Yul my Apostle.

Not just Kim Yul. Ester, Silvia, the Four Demon Lords, and the followers of the Demonic Heaven, those who received life through me, are now all my Apostles.

Therefore, this operation becomes possible.

"Kim Yul will cross over first. As my Apostle and as our vanguard."

Just as [The Ruin-Harvesting Cow] sent Goldencup as its vanguard when invading Raviel's world—

This time, I send Kim Yul as my vanguard to invade the Constellation Killer's sanctuary.

"And as soon as you arrive, please call me. Summon me. Then, I will rush over with my Apostles and followers."

All the pieces were in place.

We know the coordinates because of [The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth]. We can enter the sanctuary because of Kim Yul. I can respond to his call because I am Kim Yul's Constellation. The others can cross with me because they are either my Apostles or followers.

Everything I achieved from climbing from the 10th to the 80th floor makes the current operation possible.

"Meow. As far as we can see, there's no problem!"

[The Cat that Bites Gold Coins] also guaranteed the success of the operation.

So, now all that's left is to execute the plan, but...

"Apostle? Follower?"

The Black Dragon Witch muttered blankly.

"Wait a moment. I wasn't called when Gong-Ja conquered the heavenly floors! I'm neither an Apostle nor a follower or anything!"

"Then you can watch the house from here."

The Countess fanned herself leisurely.

"For reference, of course, I have already obtained the certificate of being Gong-Ja's follower. Being recognized for clearing the heavenly floors is equivalent to becoming Gong-Ja's follower."

"Hmm. The first follower was me."

The Paladin leisurely fanned, not herself but the Countess.

"Thinking about it, Anastasia wasn't called as a judge. Is that so. She doesn't meet the qualifications... It's regrettable."

"Ahah. Sometimes she brags about being the first to befriend Gong-Ja, but true camaraderie is proven in places like this, right?"

"Ahahaha. For starters, I'm definitely Gong-Ja's follower!"

One after another, the Paladin, Viper, and the Heretic Inquisitor spoke.

"....."

As Black Dragon Witch looked around, she suddenly glared at me with eyes burning with some emotion.

And then, as if betrayed by me, she shouted in a voice full of such sentiment.

"I'm converting!"

You were atheist, weren't you?



# **Volume 16 – Chapters 376-400**

# Chapter 376: The Place Called a Sanctuary (1)

---

The Black Dragon Witch's declaration of conversion was no joke.

[You have gained a follower.]

[The Black Dragon Witch becomes your follower.]

[You can now bestow your protection and power upon the Black Dragon Witch.]

Our contract was sealed merely through an exchange of "Are you really going to believe?" "Yes" "Really?" "Yes, really, so hurry up and seal the deal." That was the end of it. There were no other formalities.

Is it always this easy to form such agreements?

"Wow. I never thought it would be like this...."

[The Cat That Bites Gold] looked at us with disbelief in its eyes.

"To form a follower contract without even offering a skill card. That's unbelievable. Something's strange about your sword."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. Above all, Constellations and their followers must trust each other. Followers must believe they won't be stabbed in the back by their Constellation, and Constellations must trust their followers not to betray them. And they usually require a significant connection....."

It seems we are an unusual case.

But to me, this felt normal. Not just the Black Dragon Witch, but Paladin, the Countess, and others had all easily agreed to become followers.

"This isn't normal. Duh. What kind of life have you been

living?"

The tricolor cat made a disgusted face while our preparations were completed.

The raid team gathered in the vast garden of the communal dormitory. A total of 12 members. Among the vassals, Kim Yul, Ester, Uburka, Silvia, and the Four Demon Lords were selected. Among the companions, the Black Dragon Witch, the Heretic Inquisitor, Viper, and the Paladin participated.

Including me, that made 13 members.

It was exactly the number to correspond one-to-one with the puppets of the Constellation Killer.

"...With this lineup, we could end most worlds."

Surveying the raid team's imposing presence, Silvia clicked her tongue in amazement.

Frankly speaking, Silvia, the Four Demon Lords, and the Paladin were not skilled enough to confront the Constellation Killer. However, they could buy us some time. While they held

out, I would quickly dispatch the puppets to come to their aid.

"The Constellation Killer is a foe capable of decimating average worlds, after all. It can't be helped. If only he didn't resort to overwhelming us with numbers, I would have faced him in a fair one-on-one battle."

"By the way, Master. If what Ester told me is correct, you overwhelmed the Demon King with numbers when you defeated it...."

"Is everyone ready? Hey, Silvia, the maid, everyone else is ready to dive into battle, why are you the only one dawdling? Get ready."

"Damn. This is so disgusting I might just quit my position as a maid someday."

Silvia grumbled and stepped back.

I turned my gaze and looked down at the snake wrapped around my wrist.

"Hisimet Cretsu."

"Sssss."

"Pinpoint the location of the Constellation Killer's sanctuary."

The snake nodded its head then slithered off my wrist. As I felt its slimy touch wrap around my hand, I walked toward Kim Yul.

And then I grabbed Kim Yul's right hand.

[You temporarily transfer the ownership of The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth to another.]

Ssssss.

The snake slithered from my fingertips to Kim Yul's fingers.

".....Hmm."

Perhaps unfamiliar with the touch of the snake's scales, Kim Yul slightly furrowed his brow.

"It feels strange. My chest feels a bit tight. Is this what it's like to be surrounded by a Constellation's presence?"

"Ah, yes. It's like a feather's weight is added to your breath."

"That's right. ...Master, have you always been burdened with this?"

"You get used to it surprisingly quickly."

Kim Yul just stared at me intently without saying anything else. Silence ensued. Only the snake wrapped around his wrist kept hissing softly.

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth manifests its authority.]

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth searches for the sanctuary of the Constellation Killer.]

[Searching.]

I remained silent. Could the snake really find the

Constellation Killer's sanctuary? It confidently assured it could, but was it truly possible?

Time enough for a droplet of candle wax to melt and fall passed.

[Search complete.]

[The Eyes Dwelling in the Labyrinth has pinpointed the sanctuary of the Constellation Killer.]

'Good.'

I exhaled the breath I had been holding. But it was too soon to relax. A troop aiming to conquer a fortress had only just discovered the location of the fortress.

"Don't worry, Kim Gong-Ja."

Kim Yul broke the silence.

"The enemy won't be expecting our surprise attack. This



operation will definitely succeed."

"...Yes, but the Constellation Killer is a hunter who prepares for all possibilities. Even if he hasn't anticipated this, he probably has a manual prepared for when his sanctuary is invaded."

"There probably is. However, he definitely hasn't prepared for [an invasion by himself]."

Kim Yul pulled something out of his pocket.

A hair tie. Not the yellow rubber band mockingly given by those vile beings, but the hair tie I had gifted him when I accepted him as a vassal.

"The Constellation Killer will definitely hesitate for a moment. All we need is that momentary lapse. If you need a second, I will buy you that second."

Kim Yul tied his hair with the band. Thousands of strands of hair were gathered into a single braid. As if to signify his resolve, Kim Yul murmured softly.

"Transfer."

Flash!

White light enveloped Kim Yul's entire body. As he was swallowed by the light and disappeared, I began counting in my mind.

My lips barely moved.

'1 second.'

At this moment, Kim Yul would have arrived at the sanctuary of the Constellation Killer.

'2 seconds.'

The Constellation Killer would have noticed the intruder from outside and immediately launched an interception.

If it were an ordinary Constellation or hunter, they would first panic at the fact that their sanctuary, which had never

allowed an outsider, was breached. But not the Constellation Killer. He would move according to the pre-entered manual.

'3 seconds.'

But the identity of the intruder was someone no manual could ever prepare for. Himself.

At this point, the Constellation Killer would momentarily halt the interception to confirm if the intruder really was an identical person to himself.

Therefore.

'4 seconds.'

Kim Yul could keep his promise to me.

[Your Apostle calls out to you desperately.]

A voice echoed in my mind.

I pushed my aura to its limit and extended my sense of time. Regardless of how my own time flowed, the voice coming from the 1st floor, isolated from all stages, flowed solemnly.

[Your Apostle wishes for you to be where he is.]

[Will you descend?]

Despite this being a message I encountered for the first time, I didn't hesitate. To inform the waiting raid team of my sortie, I deliberately opened my mouth and shouted.

"Yes!"

A dark shadow covered the top of my foot.

Under normal circumstances, I would have merely perceived it as "black light enveloping me." However, in this vastly extended time, I was able to look closely at the "black light."

It resembled human hands.

Arms rose from the shadows. Fingers caught on my toes. Palms grabbed my ankles. Numerous arms, painted black like noise, crawled up.

'.....'

Although there were countless hands, for some reason, I could distinguish each one of them. They were differentiated. These were the hands, the arms, of those who had been killed by me— the hands and arms materialized from the traumas I had glimpsed.

Among them was Kim Yul's hand.

I reached out and grabbed his plea.

[You respond to your Apostle's call.]

Countless palms crawled up and covered my entire body.

[Descending.]

And so, I was transferred, buried in the black hands.

'6 seconds.'

The next moment, what greeted me was a scene that felt familiar if one could say so.

It was a junkyard.

Outdated scrap metal and plastic containers that had emptied their contents were merely waiting to be picked up by someone. No one picked them up, so the trash formed a tomb. All the way to the horizon.

Summoned from the high skies, I looked down at the junkyard that stretched to the end of the world and fell rapidly.

[You have entered the sanctuary of the Constellation Killer.]

The sunset was dazzling.

The sunset bypassed me and illuminated the junkyard on the ground.

'7 seconds.'

Like the ancient mounds left in a city of ruins, the trash was piled up into mounds. At the top of those giant tombs, like an orange partially peeled and left behind, plastic PET bottles hung with their labels flapping loosely.

The labels of the PET bottles, originally blue, had faded to a grayish hue. The metals had their skin peeled off, revealing the raw insides.

In that place where all colors declined and all metals degenerated, there were those who swung their silver swords with silver hair fluttering.

They all looked the same.

'8 seconds.'

But they were not the same at all.

Twelve puppet bodies were rushing towards one human. They were in the middle of rushing when they simultaneously sensed my presence and all at once raised their heads. From high above, falling down, my gaze met with 12 pairs of eyes.

I drew my holy sword.

'9 seconds.'

And I murmured within my mouth.

[The Heaven that Gathers Wails summons its Apostles and followers.]

[Several Apostles respond to your call.]

[Several followers respond to your call.]

Dark shadows formed around me, still descending from the sky.

[The Apostles of The Heaven that Gathers Wails manifest.]



[The followers of The Heaven that Gathers Wails have been summoned.]

There were eleven shadows.

We fell fiercely, like fragments of a meteor split into many pieces. The strong wind brushed my cheeks.

Initially buried in dark shadows, my companions, exposed to the wind, shed the blackness. Their true faces were revealed. Some blinked in wonder, some furrowed their brows against the strong headwind, and others gripped their sword hilts, looking down at the ground.

"—Teleport!"

And the Black Dragon Witch unhesitatingly used her ability.

Employing her instantaneous teleportation skill, the Black Dragon Witch collected each of the scattered, falling companions one by one. She was also a hunter skilled in aura. The Black Dragon Witch didn't waste even a few seconds to link all eleven members of the raid team from hand to hand.

"Kim Gong-Ja!"

The Black Dragon Witch reached out to me last.

"Grab on!"

Why hesitate?

I grasped the Black Dragon Witch's bare hand.

'15 seconds.'

The next moment, we were on the ground.

The Constellation Killer had taken a defensive stance against our arrival.

But he had only been granted a mere 6 seconds.

Initially, he spread a net to attack Kim Yul alone, then

changed formation to intercept me, and finally, had to adjust again for 13 intruders.

'16 seconds.'

Thrice. Unexpected situations consecutively hit him three times.

Three times, the Constellation Killer was deprived of breathing time by us.

'17 seconds.'

And we were not so weak as to fail to hunt someone who showed an opening three times.

Shwaaaaaah!

My sword was the first to slash through a puppet. It was the one closest to Kim Yul. A strike, a second strike, a third strike, three directions of sword waves smashed the puppet's limbs.

"Ughhhh!"

Next to swing his weapon was Uburka. He swung his axe and simultaneously chopped off both legs of another puppet.

Under normal circumstances, the Constellation Killer could have fought Uburka on equal footing, but the Black Dragon Witch's teleportation was a surprise. The Constellation Killer couldn't assume a proper stance and fell.

The battle that started 13:13 instantly turned to 13:11.

"So it is."

One of the Constellation Killer's puppets muttered.

"Wailing Heaven, were you a prophet?"

The balance of the battle sharply tilted.

The remaining 11 puppets were forced to scatter and face us individually. Uburka and Kim Yul joined forces to cut down

another puppet.

13:10.

"Did you foresee my plan to seal you and preemptively invade this place?"

"No. I'm not a prophet. I'm a returnee."

Kim Yul, Uburka, and Silvia joined forces to rush at a new puppet. By this time, the puppets had barely regained their composure. Battles erupted all over. The Black Dragon Witch's sharp voice and Paladin's shout tore through the sunset.

"A returnee? Impossible. I anticipated you were a time manipulator and prepared nearly perfect countermeasures."

"It would have been perfect if I were alone."

I charged at the Constellation Killer.

Seeing me rapidly approach, the Constellation Killer bit his

lip for a brief moment.

What calculations were going through his mind now? How quickly was he reviewing the numbers?

I couldn't know what was in his mind.

But the voice that the Constellation Killer let out was clearly audible.

"I abandon the memories of the past 29 days."

# Chapter 377: The Place Called a Sanctuary (2)

---

-Why do you keep erasing your memories?

Leafanta Aegim turned his head toward the source of the voice. A woman was looking at him intently, her chin propped on her hand.

Her name was Ivansia, wasn't it?

-To prevent change.

-To prevent change...?

-Have you ever seen someone who resolved to live for over a thousand years?

Leafanta Aegim flipped through his notebook to read about the woman. There wasn't much written.

「Originally a maid tending to a garden, she was elevated above the nobility.」

「She likes my face.」

「She bore my child.」

Leafanta Aegim's gaze lingered on the last line for a moment. A child.

Even now, the woman had a newborn baby on her lap. The baby reached out with a "Ah," and the woman teased it with a finger.

-No. A hero like you is rare.

-Special determination is needed to live a thousand years. Everything changes. Portraits drawn to remember someone fade, and swords forged to kill someone rust. A thousand years is enough time for everything you wished to preserve or destroy to change.



That was a passage Leafanta Aegim had written in his notebook. Every time he lost his memories, he would read this passage. And each time, he would slowly nod and accept it.

-I am weak.

-.....

-I don't have the confidence to endure a thousand years. There's no basis for me to believe I could. So, I discard time. Even a thousand years become merely a moment once discarded. If the fear of betrayal looms, simply eliminate the very time in which betrayal could occur.

The wind blew, carrying the scent of spring.

Spring wind differed from winter's, being slightly more humid, and that moisture wrapped softly around the tip of the nose. On the woman's lap, the baby waved its hands, trying to catch the wind.

Time dissolved away.

-That's my way.

-That's...

-You must think of me as a fool.

The woman opened her mouth. No, she attempted to. By standing up, Leafanta Aegim brushed aside the woman's attempt to intrude on his time.

-Change is the privilege of humans. While I desired to remain human by having a child and leaving a lineage, I also wanted to never change by discarding memories. I sought to be human yet refused to be human. A contradiction indeed.

The woman opened her mouth again, but Leafanta Aegim turned his back even quicker.

-But it doesn't matter.

-.....

Leafanta Aegim couldn't see it as he had turned away, but at that moment, the woman trembled slightly for an instant. From the tone in which he muttered, 'But it doesn't matter,' the woman felt something entirely unfamiliar for the first

time.

-After all, everyone lies about being human. As long as such people live in this world, I will always be more human than they are.

The woman didn't know, nor could Leafanta Aegim himself know, that this was akin to the last vestige left by an entity named Kim Yul.

Watching Leafanta Aegim's receding back, the woman barely managed to open her lips.

-Are you leaving like this?

-Yes. Wasn't the promise to stay until the baby could walk?

-Why won't you allow anyone to stay by your side?

-Because I don't need them.

Leafanta Aegim glanced back briefly.

-Maybe there was a time when I needed someone else. If that were the case, I can only say this to you— it's too late.

-.....

-I know you used me to become a noble. That doesn't matter either. Just make sure you use your power for those who are still not too late.

That became the lasting motto of the Ivansia Duchy.

It was unthinkable for the woman to have any love or compassion for the empire's citizens. She merely found a way to satisfy both her tastes and her lust for power. Yet, why did Leafanta Aegim's words remain as a motto?

-I will erase all memories of Ivansia.

With those words, Leafanta Aegim walked out of the garden.

-Transfer.

The wind blew.

Where spring had arrived, he was no longer there.

---

"I abandon the memories of the past 29 days."

A flash of pure white light attempted to pierce through me in an instant.

I countered with my holy sword. While countering, I wondered where the puppet bodies had gathered 29 days' worth of memories. One might have fought with the Sword Saint, but where were the other 12?

They must have been here. In this junkyard. Wasting time meant only for discarding.

"Over here!"

The Black Dragon Witch shouted. Just before the flash emitted by the Constellation Killer and my sword were about to collide, the Black Dragon Witch's mirrors intervened, blocking between us.

"If you want to kill Kim Gong-Ja, you need my permission first! He's a pricey one!"

Crash, clang, shatter!

Three mirrors shattered upon receiving the flash. However, from the fourth mirror onwards, the flash was obliquely reflected. By the fifth, sixth, the flash was increasingly deflected with each reflection— finally, it turned back towards the Constellation Killer.

"...!"

The strike, though immensely weakened compared to when the Constellation Killer had launched it, was still not something to ignore with a sword. Seizing the moment when the Constellation Killer had to block his own attack, I plunged towards him without hesitation.

"If you had gathered memories for a year instead of a month, we might have been defeated."

The puppet couldn't withstand the combined attack of Anastasia and me. The holy sword slashed across the puppet's shoulder.

13:9.

The difference in numbers between us and the enemy widened again.

"But you couldn't bear to spend even a month, could you?"

Kim Yul and Uburka, leading a separate unit, actively utilized the advantage in numbers. They aided the Paladin who was struggling in battle. Whenever any of the puppets attempted to discard time, Kim Yul and Uburka jointly confronted them.

"Because life starts after more than a month."

Explosions sounded from all directions.

"The longer you live, the more you need to gather as much time as possible to face an unknown formidable enemy like me. But the longer you live, the more the time you don't erase accumulates, and the more anxious you become."

I rushed towards the next puppet. The puppet didn't just stand there as I charged. Boom! The puppet's flash exploded

like a meteor shower.

I stepped into a small gap that opened. As I veered left, the meteor shower skewed leftward.

Boom!

Where the flashes landed, trash was torn apart.

A PET bottle with its waist crushed soared into the air.

Snack bags were ripped into fragments, fluttering around.

Piercing through the trash, which could no longer hold or confine anything, I reached right in front of the puppet.

"Because you didn't want to risk not wanting to discard."

"The memories of the past 29 days...."



"I have a rough idea why you ended up as 13 puppets."

The puppet attempted to erase its memories, but this time my sword was slightly faster. Unlike when I was ambushed yesterday, or rather, tomorrow, there were no puppets clinging to my limbs; instead, my companions stood all around.

13:8.

"You are a hunter who cleared up to the 90th floor, but to ascend to the 90th floor, you had to break through the heavens starting from the 80th."

I turned to search for my next prey.

"To break through the heavens, you need a judge. You need others to become your followers. But not only do you refuse to have followers, but you also outright reject the notion of others being connected to you."

Flash...

A red beam surged a short distance away. The crimson beam, resembling a spurt of blood, pierced through the mounds of

trash and split the setting sky. Glancing over for a moment, I saw Ester breathing heavily, gripping the sword hilt tightly.

In front of Ester, a puppet fell limp.

13:7.

"That's why you needed puppets."

Ahahahat!

The Heretic Inquisitor's laughter echoed through the junkyard. His laughter, unlike any trash, was so cheerful that it seemed rather eerie.

The Heretic Inquisitor formed signs with his fingers, and six types of divine miracles combined into a storm. Wrapped in miracles, the Black Dragon Witch pierced the heart of a puppet with her right hand.

13:6.

"You must have relied on puppets every time you ascended through the heavens. No, you had no choice but to rely on puppets. Not only do you not trust others, but you also dread the thought of others trusting you. Only the existence of puppets was something you could barely tolerate."

Oohraaaa! Chachachach!

Viper's spirited shout filled the air. The Four Demon Lords caught a puppet, and Viper dove into the gap. Carrying a small bit of happiness that humans, as people, could enjoy in their daily lives, the master of Celestial Martial Clan struck down with his sword.

13:5.

"You always want to remain human until the end,"

13:4.

"But you never trust anyone."

13:3.

"You don't believe in the connection between any two people. That's why I said it. If I had been alone, you would have won."

13:2.

"I don't think you're wrong. The ones at fault would be those damn bastards. The aimless wanderers and beasts that incessantly roam this world. But..."

13:1.

"Don't think everyone is just like you."

I aimed my sword.

"Don't think only your blood is blood, Constellation Killer."

The last remaining Constellation Killer knelt, his chin raised by the tip of my sword.

"I, too, have earned my current self through shedding my

own blood."

"....."

The plastic bottle crushed under the Constellation Killer's knee made a wheezing sound as they crumpled. He gasped for breath, looking up at me. Then, my companions standing behind me.

".....Constellations."

A thin voice leaked from the Constellation Killer's lungs.

"They already empower the strong, making them stronger."

Everyone present knew.

The Constellation Killer was starting to leave his last words.

Perhaps it was a warning, or maybe a curse, fragments of words spilled from his bloodstained lips.

"Only those who have something left to offer turn to Constellations for power. Be it money, secrets, connections, or souls. Those who still have something, in the end, continue their lives enveloped in the starlight of Constellations."

There was no desperation in the Constellation Killer's voice. His expression was not earnest. It was merely fading away, like the sunset lingering in the junkyard.

Losing its blood-red color bit by bit.

".....There are those who have nothing left to give. Those who add day to day in a world where no response comes, whether they raise their voices or hold their breath. For them alone..."

Only for them.

"It's an insult to live enveloped by Constellations."

Why?

The Constellation Killer looked up at me expressionlessly.

"If everyone can not reach heaven, then at least everyone should start from hell."

"....."

"You must think I'm foolish. But it doesn't matt....."

"No."

It wasn't me who answered "No."

A man, identical to the Constellation Killer, pushed me back by the shoulder and stepped forward to face the Constellation Killer.

Kim Yul looked down at the Constellation Killer.

"Kim Gong-Ja doesn't consider you foolish. He thinks he has no right to do so. I'm the one who considers you foolish."

"And at the same time, it's also you."

The Constellation Killer's lips twitched.

What he realized from seeing Kim Yul, identical to himself was beyond conjecture. The Constellation Killer had no way of knowing why a human identical to him was here, whether he truly was the same person, and if so, why he was hostile.

Therefore, the Constellation Killer's counter-question was more instinctual than logical.

"Aren't you afraid?"

The Constellation Killer simply asked.

He looked up alternately at my face and Kim Yul's, asking in an infinitely small voice.

"What are you trying to do? You..."

"What exactly?"

It was only after a long while that Kim Yul nodded.



".....I'm scared."

And he raised his sword.

"But... it doesn't matter."

The sunset was cut.

The sword sliced across the sunset, severing a life slightly redder than the evening glow.

[The Constellation Killer has been extinguished.]

That marked the end of the hunter once most feared among the stars.

# Chapter 378: The Place Called a Sanctuary (3)

---

[The Constellation Killer has been extinguished.]

Thud.

Lost on his path, the Constellation Killer buried himself in the junkyard's floor. His silver hair fluttered as if spreading on the surface of water.

It was as if looking at a pile of cut threads from a puppet.

[There is no Constellation in this world.]

A serene voice echoed through the world.

[The first condition for world destruction has been satisfied.]

[There is no Apostle in this world.]

[The second condition for world destruction has been satisfied.]

[There are no followers in this world.]

[The third condition for world destruction has been satisfied.]

Somewhere, the sound of a beast's roar rumbled.

[Warning.]

[All conditions have been satisfied.]

Initially, the beast's roar echoed only from the outskirts of the world, but soon, it rapidly converged from all directions. The ground shook, and the heaps of trash that soared to the horizon trembled.

Rumble!

Trash tumbled down from the top of the heaps.

It wasn't the roar of a beast.

It was the sound of this place collapsing and sinking.

[The world is heading towards destruction.]

The sunset was torn apart.

The sky turned into a pane of glass and shattered upon becoming glass. The pieces of glass, split right before shattering, fell with the sunset imprinted on them.

Boom!

A quarter-sized piece of the sky fell onto a distant trash heap. The heap spewed out countless plastic bottles as it collapsed. The glass shard also shattered, spraying billions of glass fragments. Each piece still bore the imprint of the sunset,

making them appear red.

Thus, the junkyard seemed to sprinkle droplets of blood into the air.

".....Beautiful."

It wasn't hard to understand the comment inadvertently muttered by Paladin.

With cuts all over her body from battling the puppets, Paladin looked up at the broken sky, clutching a wound on her forearm.

"It's as if the world is blessing its own end. Such destruction wouldn't be so bad. If this is the last scene to be seen....."

"What are you doing holding a critique session!"

The Black Dragon Witch shouted.

"Run for it, you idiot! Unless you want to be covered in glass

shards and die!"

"But Anastasia, look. To run away from such a spectacle, as a human, I simply cannot....."

"Stop talking nonsense! Nisha made me promise! If I don't bring you back safely, know that my life will be miserable!"

The Black Dragon Witch forcefully grabbed Paladin's wrist.

"Kim Gong-Ja, I'll consider this a debt for your help this time. I'm going to drag this fool back to Babylon, so do as you please!"

"Ah, such a pity. I really do pity. Imagine, if I must die, I'd want my cause of death to be impaled by the sunset. If I could just stay here a bit longer....."

"Teleport!!"

White light enveloped the two. The Paladin, filled with regret and reluctance to leave, soon vanished into the light.

"Um! Then I'll take my leave as well, Master!"

"Father, I will withdraw first."

Pop! Flash!

The other comrades and retainers quickly escaped from the collapsing world.

In the next moment, only Kim Yul and I remained.

"....."

Silently, we watched the world crumble into red.

Suddenly realizing we were the last two left in this world, I felt an urge to linger here a bit longer, despite knowing we should escape. Was it the Paladin's eccentricity rubbing off on me, now that we were reduced to the minimum unit that a world could be?

"Why was it a junkyard?"

Kim Yul's voice came from beside me.

I didn't turn my head. We simply looked up at the redness of the world together.

Some relationships require eye contact to communicate, while others are content with merely sharing the same air.

"Why here of all places?"

"....."

"I don't have good memories of home. I lost my indoor shoes on a wednesday and had to wear my outdoor shoes to school until Saturday. After school on Saturday, I searched the junkyard near my home to see if anyone had thrown away any indoor shoes."

In this world left with just the two of us, Kim Yul's tone of voice was... slightly different.

Perhaps it hadn't changed but momentarily returned to its original state.



"I found one shoe but couldn't find the other. I couldn't go to school wearing just one shoe. I gave up after searching all weekend, but on Monday morning, I found the other shoe placed there. My father found it overnight."

"I see."

"Yeah, but the pair didn't match. They were different sizes. I don't think my father was worried or cared for me to have stayed up all night. He probably felt accused by his son wandering the junkyard all weekend."

Kim Yul murmured.

"That's the best memory I have of my father."

Kim Yul moved his hand. That's when I turned to look at him. Kim Yul was putting the tie that had been tied in his hair back into his pocket.

"If the Constellation Killer erased all memories related to being Kim Yul, why did he choose this landscape for his sanctuary? How could he have chosen it? It's beyond me."

As the tie was removed, Kim Yul's tone returned to normal in that brief moment.

"Maybe it's imprinted on the soul, even if it's forgotten from the mind. Sounds like nonsense."

"But it adorned a corner of the tower with this landscape. Including you and me, thirteen people have seen it."

".....Yeah."

And then, I thought I saw Kim Yul smile very faintly.

"After that day, a corner of our house always had several pairs of unused indoor shoes piled up. When I think about it, it doesn't seem like such a bad memory."

Kim Yul nudged me with his elbow.

"I'll go ahead, Master. This is no longer my home."

With the word "transfer," Kim Yul was enveloped in a swirl

of light.

And so, I was left alone in the world.

The horizon had completely crumbled. The glass that had been stripped from the sky collided with the ground and shattered, scattering plastic and metal fragments into the air. Darkness enveloped the world from its edges.

Lastly, I looked down at the remains of the puppets.

"....."

After capturing the last view of the thirteen severed puppets, I let my voice, the last to be recorded in this world, flow.

"Transfer."

[You are being transferred to the 81st floor.]

And thus, the world closed its eyes.

Embracing the pitch-black darkness.

---

Upon returning to the 81st floor, what greeted me was the somewhat lethargic voice of a mage.

"Good work, Wailing Heaven. Even for you, I thought this time you might face defeat, but annoyingly, you've killed the Constellation Killer."

[The Staff of Time Immemorial] stood there, leaning on a broken staff.

In the stage still filled with nothing but darkness, soon to be decorated as my sanctuary, the mage seemed like a white orchid in bloom.

"You were too busy fighting, weren't you?"

"Too busy? If Raviel had hesitated even slightly, I would have been eternally displayed here that day."

"That's true. Just so you know, all the Constellations residing in the tower are in an uproar because of you. The news of the

Constellation Killer's death was just announced."

I shrugged.

"It's not the first or second time I've caused a commotion. The Constellations should be getting used to my existence by now."

"Annoying..... Do you only act so annoyingly in front of me, or is it just my imagination?"

"By the way, I have something I'd like to consult about."

The mage sighed.

"Well, the loser must willingly accept humiliation. What's your consultation about? Is it related to the sanctuary?"

"Yes. It's about one of my skills, [Ghoul Reincarnation]."

I opened my palm.

"Skill card, open."

Whoosh.

Golden sparks overflowed from the palm of my hand, forming the shape of a card.

+

[Ghoul Reincarnation]

Rank: SSS

Effect: You summon those you've personally killed. The deceased do not inherit their abilities from life. However, if you wish, they can inherit their memories and appearances from when they were alive. If you do not wish it, they will only be summoned as monsters.

+

The mage looked at my card and nodded.

"Right. That's your trademark skill, the one you've used and relied on the most. Now you're consulting me about it?"

"Yes. Especially about this part... [If you do not wish it, they will only be summoned as monsters]."

"What about it?"

"Can I decide what kind of monster they are summoned as?"

The mage blinked.

"That's..... um, let me think."

She pondered for a moment, then glanced at me.

"I don't know why you asked this, but normally when you summon a ghoul as a monster, it takes the form of a skeleton. It's obviously to balance things out. If the same monster could be summoned as a true dragon, it would be disastrous. So, you being able to decide the type of monster..."

"Oh, that part is not a problem."

I waved my hand dismissively.

"I'm thinking of summoning them in an even weaker form than a skeleton."

".....Weaker than a skeleton?"

The mage frowned, unable to imagine my intentions.

"If that's really the case, there's no problem, but why? What are you trying to do? If it's a monster weaker than a skeleton, only slimes come to mind. And how does that relate to building your sanctuary?"

"You'll see."

I smiled.

"Let's start by defining a monster. How about [a life form that lacks reason]? Would that suffice?"



"It doesn't really matter, but... don't use this for some prank. Remember that the Tower Master has already shown you favor regarding your skills once. Don't forget that."

"Of course."

"Alright. I'll temporarily modify the skill for you."

The mage tapped the floor with the tip of her staff.

[The authority of the skill 'Ghoul Reincarnation (SSS+)' is being modified.]

[Note: This modification is temporary.]

Despite losing to me and having her staff broken, it seems she still has the unilateral power to handle such matters.

I half-closed my eyes.

Feeling a sense of calmness, as if washing my face, I brought my hands together.

"....."

I focused on the 13 puppets, the remains of the Constellation Killer, which had just been abandoned and shattered in the world.

The more precisely I recalled the puppets, the darker the ground beneath my feet became. It was a shadow.

Just like when I invaded the sanctuary of the Constellation Killer, the same black-painted arms were climbing up my legs.

The difference this time might be that there were 13 pairs of arms.

'Come up a little more.'

I let the arms climb.

Whether they heeded my thoughts or it was the instinct of the shadows, the arms sluggishly climbed up my body. I concentrated all my nerves on guiding those arms to one place.

The shadowy arms grasped my pelvis, climbed my elbows, traveled my wrists, and finally gathered in my palm.

When all 13 pairs of shadows gathered in my palm,

".....Ghoul Reincarnation."

I made a wish.

[Activating skill.]

Squirm,

From the shadows at my feet to the long arms extending to me, they were gradually sucked into my palm. They converged. The pitch-black mass swirled, gathering at one point, slowly taking shape.

[The Staff of Time Immemorial], watching what I was doing, opened her lips in wonder. She might have been curious about what kind of monster I was summoning, but what reflected in her eyes was something entirely unexpected.

".....A flower?"

It was a Silver Bell Flower.

The Silver Bell Flower in my palm was withered. It was dried and twisted. It stretched its neck long, with 13 withered bells hanging on its stem.

"Yes."

I carefully placed the withered Silver Bell Flower down. Squelch. The soil of the 81st floor, covered in mud-like darkness, softly accepted the bellflower.

"This is the Constellation Killer."

"A monster is defined as [a life form that lacks reason], so there's no need to summon only beasts."

I planted the flower with 13 bells in this world. Transplanted from a world that had just perished to this, still shrouded in darkness.

"From now on, I will either resurrect the ghouls in human form or merely transplant them as flowers."

I turned to look at the mage.

"Thus, this world will bloom with flowers that couldn't bloom elsewhere, flowers withered and died in other worlds. Only one sprig has been planted now, but soon hundreds, thousands, millions of flowers will rot here."

"....."

"A garden of withered flowers."

I smiled.

"That will be my sanctuary."

Perhaps the mage wasn't the only one listening to my vow.

[Your skill is being renamed.]

The Tower Master always watched over me, and this time too, she extended her hand as if blessing me. White light wrapped around my skill card.

When the light subsided, the final destination of my skill was drawn there.

+

[Withered Flower Reincarnation]

Rank: SSS+

Effect: You summon those you've personally killed. The deceased do not inherit their abilities from life. However, if you wish, they can inherit their memories and appearances from when they were alive. If you do not wish so, they are simply summoned as flowers.

+

Someday...

This place will be where a million flowers dream of  
reincarnation.

# Chapter 379: The Gardener of the Withered Flowers (1)

---

So, now let's plant flowers in the world.

"Okay... Let's get to work."

After stroking the Silver Bell Flowers of the Constellation Killer, I stretched mightily.

From now on, I would have to travel around quite busily. In this world, where nothing yet exists, almost akin to a void, a lot would be needed to bloom a single flower.

-What do you plan to do?

The Guardian Spirit inquired.



Thinking about it, the Guardian Spirit had been quiet lately. Even when I was almost sealed by the Constellation Killer, and even when I ultimately counterattacked and defeated the Constellation Killer, the Guardian Spirit said nothing. It just watched from a few steps away.

If you ask whether I felt let down by this, not really.

I had a hunch about why the Guardian Spirit didn't interfere. Even without any conversation, I could understand the Guardian Spirit's heart. Unlike when I was climbing the 10th floor, I am now strong. I have reached a realm barely half a step behind the Guardian Spirit.

'This is as far as my teachings go.'

'The rest is for you to figure out on your own.'

Had I been defeated by the Constellation Killer and trapped in eternal seal, that would have been the end. It would mean that my journey towards the pinnacle of the tower would have ultimately ended there.

Advice is unnecessary between rivals who are on equal footing.

"That's right..."

I took off my coat and rolled up my sleeves.

"First, we need the sun."

-The sun?

"Yes. There needs to be light. It's quite dark here, isn't it? Even if only withered flowers are expected to bloom here, it would be too sad for the flowers if it's just darkness."

The Guardian Spirit looked at me as if it were looking at a madman.

-How do you plan to create the sun? Just so you know, it might be possible to create something resembling the sun with a tightly packed orb of Aura, but maintaining it continuously would be difficult.

"Well, we'll figure something out somehow."

There's plenty of time.

"And I have a feeling I might be able to get it from a specialist."

---

"No can do, no can do. Absolutely not."

Unfortunately, upon descending to Babylon and consulting with a specialist, what returned to me was a pinkish cat vigorously shaking its head in front of me.

"Is it impossible?"

"Meow. Even though we decided to bark, we should at least have some conscience, right? With your budget, 'the sun' is a bit, actually, quite a stretch."

[The Cat that Bites Gold Coins] looked at me like a real estate agent looking at someone asking if they could rent a new apartment within a budget of 50 million won. It hurt because it was so realistic.

"Woof, I can offer you a long-lasting light bulb..."

"Ah, that's not cool. Even though it's a garden. It needs to be natural light, not artificial."

"Hmm... How about a phoenix then? If you hang a cage from the ceiling and put a phoenix in it, it might somewhat create an atmosphere like the sun."

"Would that be natural light?"

"Wouldn't it be similar? It's all about how you perceive it, and the world is essentially a series of appropriate compromises."

Hmm.

I was momentarily tempted by the cat's words, but no matter how much I thought about it, the image of a phoenix hung above the garden crying 'Kee-ah Kee-ah' seemed somewhat foolish.

'But.'

The cat's offhand remark that the world is essentially a series of compromises inspired me.

"That's right. There's no need to bring the sun just to get some light. In fact, the sun might be too dazzling for the withered flowers."

"Yes, yes, that's exactly the kind of self-justification a Constellation should have! Well then, let me explain in detail about the current price of a phoenix, but ever since Taotie went extinct, the price of creatures with fire attributes has dropped quite a bit..."

"Thanks for the consultation. Goodbye."

"Meow?"

I bought a pair of work gloves, a sack, and various equipment and returned to the 81st floor.

".....You look like you're about to go dig up potatoes or something?"

[The Staff of Time Immemorial] gave me a look that seemed to regard me as a lunatic upon seeing me equipped with work gloves and carrying a sack.

Huh. Did people make a new law in my absence that dictates they must look at me like that?

"I heard you talking about needing the sun and light earlier. You're not going to stuff the sun into that sack, are you?"

"Something like that."

"What?"

"More importantly, could I stop by the Constellation Killer's sanctuary for a moment?"

[The Staff of Time Immemorial] blinked.

"What are you talking about? The sanctuary of the Constellation Killer has already been destroyed. You saw it with your own eyes just yesterday."

"Yes. But the voice of the tower said the world would end, not disappear. From what I know, the Tower Master doesn't completely erase a world, even if the Constellation, Apostles, and all the believers have vanished and the world has ended..... It just stops in the state of destruction somewhere."

Could you let me stop by there for a moment?"

[The Staff of Time Immemorial] pressed her forehead.

"Wailing Heaven... You really are a strange person. What do you hope to pick up from a place that's completely finished? Trash? Or the corpses of massacre dolls? I'd understand if you asked for a legendary item. What could you possibly find in a place where only trash remains?"

"Ha... Just wait a moment."

The mage glared into the dark void.

[The Staff of Time Immemorial requests entry to an already ceased sanctuary.]

[Approved.]

[You may enter the Constellation Killer's sanctuary.]

The mage nodded, albeit reluctantly.

"Permission granted. The Tower Master seems curious about what you're doing. Gaining her favor isn't always easy; you're quite talented."

"Just live kindly, that's all."

"Funny. Living like you would not only cost you your life but also rot your soul."

What's wrong with my soul?

"A person planning to decorate their sanctuary with withered flowers must be out of their mind. Imagine someone planted flowers on their apartment balcony, and they all turned out to be withered. Would that be normal?"

Is that so?

Hearing that made it seem a bit strange.

Perhaps there was a reason why everyone ranging from Guardian Spirit to the others looked at me as if seeing a madman, but I didn't change my plans.



Teleportation.

[You have entered the Constellation Killer's sanctuary.]

Thus, I set foot in the world I had destroyed yesterday.

The landscape hadn't changed.

The wind was bitter, and time had stopped. The setting sun had vanished, and the red of the shattered glass sky had broken into countless pieces.

In the void, trash crumbling and shattered glass-skies were preserved like still frames.

"Here you are, as you requested."

This time, [The Staff of Time Immemorial] followed me. She had stubbornly refused to show herself when other companions were around, but now that I was alone, she readily appeared.

"What do you plan to take from here? I must ask once again."

"The sky."

[The Staff of Time Immemorial] furrowed her brows.

"Ha? The sky...?"

"Yes. I will take the sky with me."

I began to rummage through the mountains of trash in the frozen world.

What I was looking for was glass. Originally, it was the sky marked by the sunset, but now shattered, leaving only fragments.

The world had been destroyed, but the glass still retained the red color it had been dyed at that very moment.

I carefully picked up each piece.

The very small shards of glass were hard to use. I looked for pieces at least as large as the upper half of a human body. I carefully placed them in the sack, and within the dark sack, the glass shone red and yellow.

[You have been transferred to the 81st floor.]

I returned to the 81st floor, the sack filled to the brim with sunset.

This place was still empty, except for the Silver Bell Flowers.

In a space filled only with darkness, I ascended through the air as if stepping on stairs using [Aerial Movement Technique]. It didn't take long before I reached the pitch-black ceiling.

"Good."

I took out a piece of glass from the sack and carefully made a small hole in it with my fingernail. The hole made by Aura was impeccably clean.

I threaded the hole with the string I had prepared in advance. [The Cat who Bites Gold], who I had commissioned

instead of buying a Phoenix, had assured me this string would never break. I guess I could trust it.

"Tying it like this and hanging it from the ceiling... Done."

Swing—

The glass of today's sunset hung in the darkness.

It was as if a candle had been lit in the middle of a basement without a single light, shining faintly but distinctly in red and yellow, illuminating the remnants of a sunset.

"It's still too dim, but it'll be fine soon."

"....."

I continued to collect fragments of the sunset, traveling back and forth between the Constellation Killer's sanctuary and the 81st floor.

[The Staff of Time Immemorial] silently observed my

actions, no longer grumbling, but strangely silent with lips tightly sealed.

[You have entered the Constellation Killer's sanctuary.]

[You have been transferred to the 81st floor.]

[You have entered the Constellation Killer's sanctuary.]

[You have been transferred to the 81st floor.]

[You have.....]

How much time had passed?

Strings dangled from the ceiling.

At the end of each hanging string swayed a sunset. Ranging from glass shards as large as a person to pieces as small as a palm. But all of them retained the sunset light of a world that had perished, shining quietly.

Despite the varying lengths of the strings and the different sizes of the glass,

"Looking up from below, it's just like a grapevine."

I was satisfied.

The 81st floor was no longer dark, but if you ask about it being bright, it wasn't. The once brilliant sunsets had lost their grandeur, merely fading.

Faded sunsets.

That's why I liked it.

With such light, even the withered flowers would not find it burdensome and would gladly accept it.

"...Right."

Looking up at the hanging glass sunsets in the sky, [The Staff of Time Immemorial] murmured,

"So this is the light of the world you create."

And so there was light.

I was probably the only Constellation who gathered such unsightly light to decorate the sanctuary. My believers were lost flowers' corpses, and my sun was a trace of a world that could no longer shine upon anyone.

Trash.

Ruins.

A place where life doesn't bloom, but the remnants of life linger, existing rather than truly being.

"Yes, it's not too bad, is it?"

"....."

[The Staff of Time Immemorial] did not respond. I hadn't really expected an answer, so I just shrugged.

I brought a PET bottle from the Constellation Killer's sanctuary for the last time. Among the heaps of garbage, it was one of the few intact plastic bottles.

"Hmm. It's been quite a while since I've made one of these."

I sat cross-legged and held the scissors.

Snip.

The scissors cut through the waist of the PET bottle crisply. It split cleanly in half. As I shaped it, memories flooded back.

"I used to make these quite often when I was at the orphanage..."

What I was making was a flower pot.

A vessel for holding flowers.

Flower pots are surprisingly expensive when you try to buy them. So, at the orphanage, we used to cut PET bottles and



turn them into flower pots. They're pretty when made, you see.

"I'll fill this with soil..."

I pondered quite a bit over which soil to use for the flower pot.

In the end, I chose soil from the world where Kim Yul had lived, the world where Kim Hwang Tae was struggling through his studies.

I went to the landfill where Kim Yul's house had been, dug a hole, and brought back the dark, withered soil.

"Phew."

After compacting the soil into the flower pot, I carefully planted the Silver Bell Flowers. Thankfully, the Silver Bell Flowers were safely transplanted into the flower pot.

The red light flowing from the glass in the sky slid across the transparent surface of the plastic flower pot, brightly shining.

"Okay."

Thus, I hung the light in this world and planted the first flower.

After placing the flower pot with the Silver Bell Flowers in the center of my sanctuary, I turned to look at [The Staff of Time Immemorial].

Smiling broadly at the still silent mage.

"In this way, I'll create the sky here, carve out waterways, and plant more flowers, lots of them. It might not be an exciting sanctuary to visit, but, um, I think I'll come to love it here."

"Shall we move on to the next? Mage."

[Light has come to your world.]

[The 81st floor has been cleared!]

[Land has come to your world.]

[The 82nd floor has been cleared!]

It's time to ascend to the 83rd floor.

# Chapter 380: The Gardener of the Withered Flowers (2)

---

The plastic flower pot, filled with black soil, was bathed in rusted sunlight. Inside, the Silver Bell Flowers quietly slept, their roots immersed.

As I gazed at it, [The Staff of Time Immemorial] spoke up.

"Having shaped the sky and crafted the land, it seems it's time to create the sea."

"Exactly."

"Yes, the order of creation... Wait. What kind of response was that?"

"You'll see."

Though [The Staff of Time Immemorial] raised an eyebrow, I proceeded without further reply and summoned Ester.

[The Heaven that Gathers Wail' summons its Apostle.]

[Your Apostle responds to your call.]

[The Apostle of The Heaven that Gathers Wails manifests.]

The woman who once was hailed as the Saintess of the Weak and now served as my family's advisor appeared. Her voice spread across the world even before her feet touched the ground.

"Lord, what brings you to call upon me this time?"

Ester's voice was vibrant, still riding the adrenaline from a recent battle.

I raised a hand to calm her and said, "Ease your spirit, advisor. This isn't a call to arms."

"Oh, is that so?... I regretted not playing a more significant role in the last battle..."

"Have you become a bit of a brawler lately?"

"The Chamberlain is akin to an online game, influencing those around to become more aggressive. I am but one unfortunate victim of this."

Isn't that an insult to online games?

While it's debated whether online games increase aggression, it's a repeatedly proven fact that Silvia does. Unlike online games, which can relieve stress, Silvia only tests one's patience...

"Having a fighting spirit is good, but save it. There will always be battles to fight, and it won't be too late to draw your sword then."

"Yes, Lord... um. So, why have you summoned me?"

Ester blinked hesitantly, her violet eyes finally reflecting not me but the place where we stood.

"Um, this place is...?"

"The world I'm creating."

I continued.

"The place our family will call home."

"I see. This is our Nazarick."

"What's Nazarick?"

"A location from an old novel of your world recommended by Viper."

That gentleman, is he planning to collapse our family from the inside...?

"I see. So, you plan to fortify this place. Excellent. Let's place a [Gardener] in each garden. The gardeners, each wielding powerful skills and items, will possess absolute power within their domain, surpassing even you, Lord, within..."

"I'll need to talk with Liǎofàn later. Um, Ester. I didn't summon you to discuss security systems."

"What is it, then?"

"Ester, can you bring rain?"

The Demon King of Autumn Rain.

Once hailed as the Saintess of the Weak, now serving as my family's advisor, and previously a girl who submerged a world under a crimson flood, blinked.

"Rain, you say?"

"Yeah."

I recalled a skill card of Ester's that Guardian Spirit had once read to me.



## [Resentment Flows Like Rain]

Rank: S-

Effect: You do not see. It becomes invisible. People believe that if something is not visible before their eyes, it does not exist. 'They are blind.' Yes, 'they are ignorant.'

Then, show them.

Show them vividly how many lives have died in their ignorance. As much as the innocent blood that flowed in this world, the sky will willingly pour down red rain.

\*However, only the blood you have witnessed yourself will become rain.

+

"Bring rain to this garden."

I requested.

---

It resembled a prayer.

Ester closed her eyes and bowed her head. Platinum-blond hair cascaded down, covering her neck and chest, pooling over her clasped hands.

Her lips parted.

"Ah."

They closed briefly, then opened again.

"Ah."

Again.

"Ah—"

It was akin to ruminating.

When something unbelievable happens, when one witnesses the unbelievable, the action of chewing over it multiple times to digest and accept it internally. Thus, each time her lips opened, the sound emanating seemed to overflow from deep within her heart rather than her vocal cords.

A scene she had seen countless times in her trauma.

"---, ---, -----."

And so, the scene I first witnessed upon entering the world of the Aegim Empire unfolded before me.

Crimson rain fell upon my garden.

"....."

"....."

It was a deluge.

The rain, falling heavily across the garden, quickly

enveloped it. Droplets clinging to the hanging sunsets scattered chaotically. Where the crimson rain met the red fragments, oddly enough, dark blue rainbows bloomed.

I quietly observed the droplets seeping into the plastic flower pot.

"Intense."

"Yes."

Responding to [The Staff of Time Immemorial]'s comment, I nodded.

"It's like a squall."

"....."

"The rain was initially received as a squall."

I quoted from a book I had read long ago.

"An ordinary rain, countless before. As fierce as it was, it would soon cease. They thought it just another shower to discuss under umbrellas with neighbors or to play a game of chess indoors until it passed."

These were quotes from various books.

If a person is a book, then I've lived a reader's life. Though not a Librarian, I had many books to quote from.

"But it wasn't so."

"....."

"It wasn't like that."

[The Staff of Time Immemorial] inhaled deeply, as if holding a broken staff in her mouth.

The image reminded me of a smoker calming their nerves with a beloved pipe, and the effect seemed similar, as the magician spoke in a cool tone.

"It happens everywhere."

"....."

"Underestimating the resentment of others. Failing to consider that the hurt party might not be a cat but a tiger. Being negligent and off-guard until the leash is torn or the innards rot. It's a lesson every empire learns, a path no mighty can avoid... Why are you smiling?"

"Just because."

As I spoke, I took another PET bottle, cutting it in half.

"Even beings as immense as pillars have lives hardened in their hearts."

"Are you saying I'm putting on airs?"

"Are you not?"

"...I suppose my past deeds were quite detestable."

[The Staff of Time Immemorial], who had served as a judge in the underworld for an incalculable time, took the staff from her mouth and then replaced it.

The rain pouring now felt colder than the blood running through my body, nearly freezing, and the mage's disgust manifested as white puffs of breath.

"Yeah, but regardless of my intentions, isn't it the truth? The Aegim Empire fell because it was complacent in its strength."

"Yeah."

I nodded and then shook my head.

"No."

The autumn rain, naturally soaking the entire land, accumulated. It didn't take long for the rising water level to seep inside my shoes.

Each raindrop had its own weight, and as some overflowed from the plastic flower pot, naturally creating variations in strength. The once-flat ground began to rise evenly at first, but

then started to undulate with the force of the water hitting its surface.

It was the sea of this world.

"And additionally, they forgot two facts."

Standing with my feet soaked in a sea of tears, I spoke.

"That someone is crying."

Then added.

"That someone is crying for someone else."

I addressed [The Staff of Time Immemorial].

"Just as the Tower Master does."

[The Staff of Time Immemorial] hesitated.



Heat gathered in the broken staff. Like an archmage, she quickly grasped the crux of my words.

"Are you saying what the Tower Master does is commonplace?"

"Isn't that why you were drawn to the Tower Master?"

"Yeah."

Even in a world ruled by a merciless being, where despair reigns, someone will cry, and someone will cry for someone else.

"It's something that must not be forgotten."

The Aegim Empire was established by Leafanta Aegim. The empire's transformation has always been in a landfill, where no one was invited, weeping with a sword for others, not for oneself.

Someone is crying. Someone is crying for someone else.

The fall of the Aegim Empire was simply because it forgot such sustenance.

"-----."

Within the empire's founder's blooming flower pot, the tears of the Demon King who caused its downfall overflowed.

The overflowing autumn rain mixed with the sea, leaving dark crimson traces on the translucent flower pot's exterior. Despite its recent emergence, the sea performed its duty as a sea. It silently accepted everything that overflowed in the world.

And it gave.

I bent down, scooped up seawater with a newly made plastic flower pot, and declared with open hands.

"Withered Flower Reincarnation."

[Activating skill.]

Inside the swaying flower pot, like water from a well bucket, a tiny lotus bloomed.

The frayed lotus, like curtains in an old ruined mansion never walked through, had no weight. The lotus petals, tattered and torn, surrendered themselves quietly to the waves created by alternating heavy and light raindrops.

"...This flower."

[The Staff of Time Immemorial] quickly recognized whom the lotus represented.

I nodded and pointed to the flower pot containing the Silver Bell Flowers.

"If this world needs a sky and land, it was solely for that child's sake."

"Similarly, if this world needs a sea, it's because this child needs it."

I placed the flower pot on the water's surface, which had risen to my ankles. It was the first boat to float on this world's

sea.

The flower pot, like the lotus it contained, seemed weightless, entrusting its body to the movement of the waves. It climbed the hills created by the waves, then smoothly slid down, repeating the process.

Appearing precarious, as if it might capsize at any moment, it gradually found its rhythm, beginning its own voyage.

It drifted somewhere, eventually fading from sight.

---

[The sea has come to your world.]

[The 83rd floor has been cleared!]

And so, I continued to cultivate my sanctuary.

"Withered Flower Reincarnation."

[Activating skill.]

"Withered Flower Reincarnation."

[Activating skill.]

First, I bloomed flowers. I transplanted them one by one into prepared flower pots.

Then, I summoned my vassals and assigned them tasks.

"Ugor. Daddy, are you asking me to punch the ground now?"

"Exactly that."

"I'll do it, but... what's the point?"

"This flower prefers higher grounds."

Holding the tattered Cloud Chrysanthemum, I explained. My family's Chief Warrior looked at the flower blooming from the plastic flower pot filled with soil wrapped in white plastic and snorted dismissively.

"Got it. It's always hard to understand what daddy wants. Ugor, step back."

"Thank you."

"Krum!"

Uburka swung his fist. Bang...!! The previously flat ground and the undulating sea above it exploded vertically.

After the towering water column re-wetted the world with rain and then subsided, the floor of my sanctuary was no longer flat.

[A mountain range has come to your world.]

[The 84th floor has been cleared!]

It was done in such a manner.

[A spring has come to your world.]

For a flower that cherished the spring breeze and another weary from the perpetual winter, I brought spring.

[A summer has come to your world.]

For a flower that considered the boiling heat its homeland and another that wished to see the sea with its family on a summer day, I created summer.

[A fall has come to your world.]

For a certain flower.

[A winter has come to your world.]

Just for a certain flower.

[Congratulations! Seasons have come to your world!]

[The 85th floor has been cleared!]

[In your world...]

I filled my world with things each and every flower needed.

"Bloom."

I bloomed flowers.

"Cherish, feel at ease, and rest deeply in what you've dearly missed."

I planted flowers.

"As long as you wish, as much as you desire."

Forever, if they desired.

But.

"When that time comes."



When the spoiled petals heal.

When the holes in the leaves close by themselves, when strength returns to the broken stems.

When they wish to bloom once again, entirely by their own will.

"Then, you will leave the flower pot."

Thus, I tended to the garden.

# Chapter 381: The Gardener of the Withered Flowers (3)

---

A garden is different from a forest. A flower garden is not like a meadow.

In the withered buds, seeds don't grow, and there are no bees to carry pollen, so every flower in this garden was planted by hand, one by one.

"The garden is now fully furnished."

[The Staff of Time Immemorial] sat cross-legged atop a hill, sucking on her staff.

"It's like building a house: the foundation is laid, the structure is up, and the walls and insulation are all done. Plus, built-in furniture, lights, and air conditioning are all installed."

"Do mages use air conditioning?"

"Why wouldn't a world with magic have air conditioning? Why do you think mages are so temperamental? It's all because they don't have air conditioning."

"There must be a Constellation in charge of air conditioning then."

"Want me to introduce you?"

It's hard to tell where the joke ends and the seriousness begins. That's so characteristic of a mage.

"So, when is the housewarming?"

"Housewarming?"

"Yeah. Or a funeral? Which do you prefer?"

The mage again made such a mage-like remark.

With nothing but swordsmanship and martial arts in my background, I could only look at such a mage with a questioning gaze.

[The Staff of Time Immemorial] sighed and removed the staff from her lips.

"Constellations at this stage usually split into two groups."

"That sounds dangerous."

"First, there are Constellations who show their sanctuary to their loved ones, planning a happy future. Second, there are those who gather their followers to spout long speeches about future visions."

"Constellations aren't much different, I see..."

The first is like a homeowner showing off a new house, and the second is like a CEO unveiling a new corporate building.

[The Staff of Time Immemorial] silently stared at me. Hmm. That look could mean, 'You're a Constellation making such lame jokes yourself.'

Continuing with that gaze, [The Staff of Time Immemorial] said.

"You'd belong to the former, wouldn't you?"

"Do I seem like that?"

"Yeah. Aren't you going to show it off to your spouse? [This is our home, Raviel. Our place of rest together. This sea was made by making our advisor cry, and these tall mountains are the marks of our child wreaking havoc at home...] Something like that."

Indeed.

"Why do you say that? You know very well I wouldn't do that."

"Oh, is that so? Why not?"

"Because then naturally it would lead to [Speaking of this flower, imagine. In a place not here, in a time not now, during a minor ice age, there was a group of sailors in despair...] Something along those lines."

[The Staff of Time Immemorial] shrugged with the staff in her mouth.

Feigning ignorance. Typical of a mage. Knowing full well, yet still making such remarks. I saw right through the act, yet waved the head of Hisimet Cretsu tied to my wrist.

"I once said to this basilisk."

-Humans are not dolls to be displayed in your glass garden.

-Nobody lives to be displayed by someone else, and nobody has the right to display another.

"Having said that, how could I do the same?"

Hisimet Cretsu hissed softly as its head drooped.

I withdrew my wrist and concluded.

"I didn't plant these flowers to display them to someone."

[The Staff of Time Immemorial] once again detached the staff from her lips.

"Even if that someone is Raviel?"

"Even if it's Raviel."

No.

"Especially because it's Raviel."

I'm sure it would be enjoyable.

To hold Raviel's hand and explain this world I created. To talk about the ideas and considerations that went into making this place.

To explain once more what kind of person I am to Raviel, and for Raviel to acknowledge that once more. To be acknowledged from the bottom of my heart that I am such a person would undoubtedly be a sweet sensation.

Would she admire it? 'Truly, you are my consort.' Would she empathize? 'To have a kind soul as my partner, I am indeed fortunate.' Would she join me? 'Yes, wounded flowers. I too, along with them, will care for you.'

How happy that would be.

That's why I won't do it.

It's something that shouldn't be done.

"I will not invite Raviel to my sanctuary."

Forever.

[The Staff of Time Immemorial] put the staff back in its mouth.

"Isn't that a bit too much? Wailing Heaven, you even overcame a pillar like me. Why not trust yourself a little more? It might not be as scary as you think."



"Because I'm scared."

I continued candidly yet firmly.

"Sure, I'm strong. Undoubtedly, there are only a few stronger than me in the entire tower."

"But, Raviel is my [exception]."

No matter how much I resolve not to, how long will it last?

If I invite Raviel here, if I walk with Raviel through this place, I might, even unconsciously, treat the flowers I planted here as rare exhibits.

That's truly, truly terrifying.

"Shouldn't you resist such temptations as part of your duty? True faith manifests in times of trial."

"If it were something I could handle, it would be a trial. Undertaking such a task when it's impossible is foolish."

"Hmm."

[The Staff of Time Immemorial] clicked her tongue.

[It's not working], I interpreted from her expression and looked at her with incredulity.

"Mage, you really are a true wizard."

"Oh, is that a compliment?"

"The Constellation Killer said there shouldn't be exceptions in the life of a god. The Tower Master said if one becomes a Constellation and has to bear eternity, one should ponder several times before locking their skill set."

I scratched the back of my head and continued:

"Then, this conclusion becomes possible. Although I'm still inexperienced in climbing the tower, wouldn't there be more Constellations fallen from grace due to not keeping their word than those who were physically overpowered? Attempting to lay a trap of downfall with such cunning temptation. True wizard acknowledged."

"Yeah, it's a compliment then."

"It wasn't much of a cunning temptation, to be honest. It was too blatant. What are you trying to do?"

I looked straight at [The Staff of Time Immemorial].

"You said if I give up climbing the tower or fail along the way, you'd get your pillar position back. Is that why? Do you want to try a comeback even like this?"

[The Staff of Time Immemorial] also looked straight at me.

"What if it's true?"

"Then, despite being a pillar, you'd become a petty person unable to escape your desires. And knowing that such a petty person was a pillar, we'd know the level of other pillars and, consequently, the level of the tower supported by such pillars, but you wouldn't want that, would you."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because you were a pillar of the tower."

I stated.

"You should have that much dignity."

[The Staff of Time Immemorial] wiped her staff on her sleeve and smiled faintly.

"In the end, it's a compliment. Being praised by the person who ousted me isn't so bad."

"Why are you doing this?"

"I wish for you to reach the 100th floor."

[The Staff of Time Immemorial] declared.

"I hope the Sword Emperor's wish is fulfilled, that you officially become a pillar, and that the other pillars do not obstruct you."

"So why...?"

"To prevent you from tripping over a stone like a fool."

It was a statement loaded with implications.

[The Staff of Time Immemorial] flicked her sleeve and added.

"Especially such a clearly visible stone, even if it glitters like gold, you should avoid it."

Otherwise, you might not even make it to the 100th floor, it seemed to say almost audibly.

I remained silent for a while. In this place where there are variations in the ground and the rustle of the waves, where there's a difference in the air temperature, the only things that remained still were the flowers. I quietly listened to the sound of the wind caressing the red surface of the water and wetting the petals.

I spoke.

"Why do you wish for me to reach the 100th floor?"

"There are three reasons for that."

[The Staff of Time Immemorial] took a half of the broken staff into her mouth, as if nibbling on a halved Pepero.

"The first reason is easy to understand. If the person who defeated me doesn't even make it to the 100th floor and loses, um, wouldn't that be a bit embarrassing? Imagine the gossip among the pillars and Constellations. Returning to work in such a situation, um, wouldn't that feel like being ostracized by the Magic Tower's branch manager every day?"

"Should I ask if pillars also gossip among themselves, or if the Magic Tower has something like being ostracized..."

"You're the one who said Constellations are all the same. What's different about pillars or mages?"

[The Staff of Time Immemorial] pulled one staff out of her mouth.

The saliva-drenched tip of the staff pointed at the flowers I

had planted.

"The second reason is for these children."

"....."

"It would be better for these children, and therefore for everyone, if you remain a pillar rather than me."

[The Staff of Time Immemorial]'s demeanor always had an air of a mage about it.

Deception. Secrets. Subtext.

Even in a casually thrown word, there was bone, at least a fishbone, but the words just now were gentle. Like fish flesh carefully deboned for a baby, they were safe to swallow without chewing.

And I, when I don't know what to say, just speak bluntly.

"You tried in your own way."

"Is that supposed to be consolation? It makes me want to brew some barley tea and pour it into your nostrils."

"Well then. ...What's the third reason?"

"For the Tower Master."

That statement was also utterly gentle.

With a tender face and soft voice, the mage said,

"I couldn't do it. It would be impossible for the current pillars as well."

The same reason the princess hinted at me.

The reason why she had her eyes on me from the beginning, the mage spoke gently.

"So, someone else has to do it."



"Whether it's you, the Sword Emperor, or someone entirely different. Someone who's not a pillar, but preferably you."

The mage's lips closed and then opened again.

"I wish you would---"

Bring peace to the Tower Master, it seemed to say.

The voice of [The Staff of Time Immemorial] lightly settled in the garden of frayed flowers.

---

I held a housewarming.

I called my vassals. I didn't call Raviel.

There's nothing more to say about the latter. The conversation with [The Staff of Time Immemorial] says it all. This garden belongs to the flowers, and this flower garden does not entertain visitors.

"In the future, it may receive [Mourners]."

I stated.

"Some of these children might have families or loved ones. If these children wish to reunite with them, then we should facilitate that reunion."

"Indeed. So, mourners?"

After raising the water level with another cry, Ester, drying her eyes with the handkerchief Silvia handed her, continued.

"A kind of cemetery... No, a rehabilitation hospital might be more apt. Rather than mourners, perhaps visitors would be more appropriate."

"Ah, that makes sense."

"However, to receive visitors, doctors, nurses, and community service workers are needed."

Ester blew her nose into Silvia's handkerchief as she went on.

"I will naturally take on the role of Head Nurse... or [Gardener]. As I mentioned earlier, gardeners will wield absolute power within their protected gardens, surpassing even the Lord..."

"Silvia, just so you know, she's blaming you for becoming like this."

"That's absurd!"

Silvia, barely managing to hold the handkerchief with her thumb and index finger, showed a look of utter disgust.

"No way no way no way no way. Really, really, rea---lly absurd! Advisor, really! You were already! Somewhat! Strange!"

"Maid, do you want to be hit?"

"This is exactly what I mean! Advisor. Aren't you supposed to be a person of counsel, resorting to physical solutions for

everything?"

"All wars are extensions of political solutions. And everything that happens in this world is physical. So... do you understand what I'm saying?"

"You're asking for a beating!"

"Mass and velocity are key. The direction is somewhat flawed."

For a moment, there was a standoff where Silvia brandished a hammer and Ester swung a greatsword at each other's heads.

Uburka munched on his salt-vanilla popcorn, as white as his skin, and said.

"Ugor. Daddy, aren't you going to stop them?"

"My son, before asking your father, shouldn't you learn to do things on your own?"

"Father, what do you think I've been doing while you were gone? Ugor. Now that the house has been left to you, it's time for you to experience the hardships I've endured."

"My family was already in ruins before the housewarming even started."

I lamented deeply.

Ah, but I didn't really stop Silvia and Ester from fighting. Kids grow up by fighting.

Letting them be, I looked at the others present.

"Director, Mr. Kim Yul."

I said.

"Would you take care of this garden?"

# Chapter 382: The Gardener of the Withered Flowers (4)

---

"Would you take care of this garden?"

The first to react to my words were neither the director nor Mr. Kim Yul, but Ester, who had just parried Silvia's hammer. She exclaimed in shock.

"Lord, that's impossible!"

I looked at Ester. My family's advisor immediately offered his counsel.

"Firstly, Kim Yul has prior commitments. The Holed-Up Head Librarian didn't wish for Kim Yul to be a librarian, did he? Recently, Kim Yul has been absent frequently, which has already caused dissatisfaction from the Holed-Up Head

Librarian. Moving Kim Yul's residence completely would send the wrong signal to him."

At these words, Silvia was taken aback.

"What the hell? Since when do you sound like an advisor?"

"That's because I am an advisor. You're the Head Maid, so you do the cleaning, cooking, and tea brewing."

"If cleaning the household is the maid's job, then cleaning you up should be my top priority..."

"The first thing you should clean is yourself. Shall I swallow you up?"

Before they could start measuring their killing intent against each other again, I quickly spoke.

"The advisor's words are worth considering. Someone I know well once said that if a Constellation harbors poison, all sorts of strange things can happen."

The Guardian Spirit snorted from behind, arms crossed. Ester, unable to see him, sighed and rested her chin on her hand.

"Yes, strictly speaking, the Holed-Up Head Librarian is no longer a Constellation, but..."

"He's still one of those who require caution and care. Even if it's not just for preventing dangers, I have a responsibility to him. You're right."

I nodded.

"Let's address that immediately. What's the next issue?"

"...Wouldn't it be a bit too burdensome for your elder, Lord?"

The tone was cautious.

Even the director, who had been listening silently, agreed with this.



"Can I handle it?"

With a voice tinged with suppressed emotion, the director spoke.

"Gong-Ja, I am weak. I can't use martial arts skills like Aura or Ki, and I can't use magic either. The only sword I know how to handle is a kitchen knife."

"And you weren't even that good with it."

I remarked.

The director smiled faintly, then continued in a slightly lighter tone.

"Right. Blades have always been difficult for me to handle. The flat side of a spoon was about the only thing I could manage without much trouble."

"The rice you mixed and the apples you peeled were delicious."

"Thank you... but the skills required to protect your house aren't those, are they?"

The director's voice grew heavy again.

It wasn't hard to see that the heavy stone pressing down on him was a profound sense of powerlessness.

'The director has seen how violence happens.'

The very first flower that was planted in this world was a friend that the director couldn't protect.

Moreover, as the master of this world, I was once a child that the director had to protect. There were many who targeted me. Even if we don't mention the Constellations, Pillars, or hunters from other worlds, a significant number of media outlets on the 1st floor were banding together to beat me down.

As Anastasia and I had discussed, this was necessary. If there's one thing I agree with the Tower Master on, it's that there are many people in the world who need a target to point their fingers at.

The Tower Master chose to become such a target out of his own will and necessity.

But the saints, the Pillars, would feel heartache seeing such a Tower Master.

A similar thing must be happening to the director. Even if you think you should live with the responsibility for yourself, can a parent's heart be so easily settled, reading critical articles about their child every morning?

I decided to start with what needed to be said first.

"Director, I'm fine."

The director's expression relaxed a bit.

I continued.

"And it's okay if you can't use a sword. What I expect from you isn't violence."

On the contrary.

I hoped the director would always keep his distance from it.

"I'll make sure you never have to hold a sword."

I put that into action.

First, I looked at Kim Yul.

"Mr. Kim Yul."

Kim Yul was also looking at me. Ever since he cut himself, the world reflected in his eyes seemed clearer.

I spoke to the world reflected in his eyes.

"Would you be able to protect the director and this garden?"

"I'll do my best."

Kim Yul responded immediately.

Looking down at the snowdrop flower he had been, and beyond that to the friend who stood across from it, Kim Yul declared.

"I'll protect what needs to be protected."

"Yeah."

I accepted his words... and drew the Holy Sword.

'Shiny.'

Since acquiring it in the Aegim Empire, I had never let go of the Goddess's Holy Sword, which had always been in my hand. I drove it into the center of the garden.

Light erupted.

[The Goddess of Protection manifests!]

The Goddess of Protection, Hwiya, revealed herself.

Wings made of light unfurled. The rusty sunsets seemed to whirl in the wind, dyeing the entire garden a crimson hue.

"Hwiya."

Though the flower was withered, it was still a flower. Though the red light dominated, the world originally full of blooming flowers lacked no color from beginning to end.

The only thing it lacked was brightness. All the petals were faded, drained of color, or thinly spread. Light filled such a place. Petals coated in pure white brilliance became distinct one by one. The flowers existed in this world not through twinkling, but through flickering.

"Yes, Hero."

"I want to entrust you with the care of this garden too. It would be great if you could assist Mr. Kim Yul."

Referring to the person she had once summoned and wielded, I continued.

"Would that be alright?"

The Goddess of Protection, Hwiya, looked at her old partner, who had torn her into five pieces and sealed her away. As when Leafanta Aegim was first mentioned, there was no resentment in her gaze.

"Sure."

But there was worry and concern.

Her gaze, holding both emotions, swept over Kim Yul and then settled on me.

"Would that be alright with you?"

I smiled bitterly.

"It's regrettable."

"That's right, you'll need to find a new sword. Have you considered which one...?"

"There is, but it's not just about the sword."

I bowed my head.

"Thank you for being with me all this time."

Hwiya smiled. Her smile was bright and pure.

"Why such grand words? It's not like we're parting forever."

"Well, that's true, but..."

"Then it's alright. I am, after all, a guardian."

The Goddess of Protection said, spreading her wings like a true goddess.

"I will protect your home."

Hwiya slowly turned to Kim Yul. The light from her



gradually closing wings was no longer illuminating the entire world but was now focused solely on Kim Yul.

"I ask for your kindness once again, old Hero."

Like a stage actor facing the spotlight for the first time, Kim Yul faltered. A complex expression rippled across his face before settling.

"I should be the one saying that."

Just as the director and Kim Yul had a long story to tell, Kim Yul and Hwiya would also share a lengthy tale. Hwiya and the director could have their long conversations as well.

But that could happen at any time, not necessarily in this moment.

I turned to Ester.

"Advisor, I want to entrust you with the security of this place as well."

Ester, who had been looking at Hwiya and Kim Yul with a complex expression, hesitated and then looked at me.

"Me?"

"Why? Didn't you want to be a gardener? If it's in a garden you're protecting, then you'll be more powerful than—"

"Upon reflection, that seems like a rather embarrassing idea."

Thus, the world's light novel readership decreased by one. Ester, shaking her head like a Pomeranian shedding water from its fur, hesitated.

"I am... in many ways different from these two."

"That's exactly why."

"I suppose from your perspective, Lord. But please consider mine as well."

A former Demon King who brought down the empire established by Leafanta Aegim and destroyed the world guarded by the Goddess of Protection was desperate. Not even a cat resisting a bath could struggle more.

"I'm asking you."

".....Uh."

Ester hesitated, sighed, and shrugged her shoulders. Eventually, she let her arms fall.

".....If you commanded me, I might feel more at ease."

"I'm asking you."

"Understood... Yes. Gardener. Upon further thought, it doesn't seem too embarrassing... I have a village to take care of, so I'll be taking a lot of holidays, but well, an advisor should be at the family's main residence anyway... in any case."

Ester took a deep breath and then bowed slightly towards Hwiya and Kim Yul.

"Please take good care of me."

"Welcome."

Hwiya greeted her with flapping wings. Truly a dazzling goddess.

Perhaps it was because Leafanta Aegim had spared Hwiya's life, not just out of gratitude for old times. Kim Yul, too, nodded in welcome to Ester.

Their welcoming gestures seemed to make Ester even more uncomfortable. Like a snake placed on a snowy field, she twisted and turned before finding a target.

"Come join us."

Silvia, who had been watching Ester with a villainess-like smile, was taken aback.

"Eek. Me too? To be in this... this place that feels like it's going to drain my SAN (Sanity) points in real-time based on how long I stay?"

"If the Chamberlain isn't guarding the family's mansion, where else should she be?"

"Uh... I have a crucial mission to brew tea for the Silver Lily Duchess..."

"Shall I ask for your opinion? Brewing tea for her or cleaning this garden. Which do you think the Silver Lily Duchess would prefer more? To put it more plainly, which feels more like you're being screwed over?"

"Damn it..."

Silvia sighed.

Ester, with the greatsword resting on her shoulder, lifted her chin.

"But you were named after a flower, weren't you? Then shouldn't you belong in a garden?"

Silvia made a grunt. Then she grumbled back.

".....That's an old story."

"Even more fitting since it's decayed. Come on."

"Damn it....."

In the end, Silvia surrendered. She trudged over to stand beside Ester, looking just like one of the flowers that had sprouted in this world.

Okay.

With that settled, I turned back to the director.

"As you can see, others will be wielding the swords."

"....."

"Everyone here is in need of help."

It wasn't just about the flowers.

Excluding Hwiya, Kim Yul, Ester, Silvia, and others who would come from the King of Death's family were all in need of help. Shadows deepen with the depth of wounds, and only those wounded by the world can deeply engrave the doctrines of shadows within themselves.

"I hope you can help."

I spoke as the Vice-lord of the Demonic Heaven.

"Because that's something the director can do well."

The director's silence was brief.

His response, too, was like that of a friend, brief and to the point.

"I'll do my best."

With that, everything was in place.

[Deputies will be appointed to your world.]

Quietly, the declaration rang out.

[The 89th floor has been cleared!]

This place,

Where the rusty sunset is draped over the red sea.

Where petals, exhausted from enticing bees,

and leaves, never possessing such tricks,

droop and fall asleep.

The land guarded by the Goddess of Protection and the  
Demon King of Autumn Rain.

A garden tended by my mentor and his friend.



The resting place for my family to take root.

[From now on, the withered Flower Garden will become a sacred space that gathers wails from the heavens.]

[May fortune be with you all.]

And, the path to the 90th floor was laid out in my world.

---

As always, there's an epilogue to this story.

"No, no, no, no! This is too much, isn't it!"

The Holed-Up Head Librarian flapped his sleeves like a butterfly flapping its wings.

"I object! Firmly object! If Kim Yul leaves, who will take care of the books? I'm going too! I must!"

"Oh my! The Librarian is flapping about!"

"Out of the way! I'm going to be the first to take a shot this time!"

Beside the Holed-Up Head Librarian, the Assistant Writer from the 50th floor and the Librarian's stalkers were causing a commotion. What a mess.

As if adding a Shiba Inu to that mess, the manager of the cafe, the Medicine King, yelled out.

"Ah, if you're going to make a fuss, go outside! There's a limit to disrupting business!"

"Sorryyy..."

"Always these young ones. Eh. How come they're just like me when I was young..."

"But I've said it many times. There's not a single person here younger than you. When will you finally get that into your head?"

As the Librarian's stalkers faced off against the Medicine King and started growling at each other, it was yet another

day's usual affair here.

The Holed-Up Head Librarian pushed his stalkers aside and looked at me. His eyes were filled with sorrow.

"Look at this. See the miserable state you've put me in."

"Strictly speaking, it's a mess you made for yourself."

Hamusutra was one of the few who could address me so informally. One would think he wouldn't be pleased to be treated similarly to Yoo Soo-Ha by me, but Hamusutra seemed somewhat appeased as he averted his gaze and grumbled.

"Hmm. Well, yes, but even so, taking Kim Yul away is too much, isn't it...?"

"Don't worry."

I stirred Hamusutra's frappuccino and handed it to him.

"Strictly speaking, you don't want to employ Kim Yul as a

librarian. You just want to be with Kim Yul."

"Well, yes, but... uh... um? Ah, indeed. Then I could be one of the gardeners in that garden—"

"No, that won't work."

If I wouldn't let Raviel into my sanctuary for fear of the flowers becoming mere exhibits, there's no way I'd let this voyeur in.

"Then...?"

"I'm planning to link a path to my sanctuary in this library."

I briefly explained the structure I had in mind. As a high-ranking Constellation who had played around with floors in the Tower, the Librarian quickly understood.

"So... you mean to use this place as a sort of cafeteria?"

"More like a lounge."

Basically, it was like fitting out a building.

In that architectural plan, my sanctuary would be the garden set up on the rooftop. The 20th floor, where I originally resided, the paradise where Ester lived, and the 22nd floor where my teacher's grave was located, would become the floors leading up to that rooftop.

A tower within the tower.

Thus, this planetarium, where the Holed-Up Head Librarian resided, would serve as a lounge where gardeners and visitors could rest and recuperate.

"Hmm... in that case, I could see his face at least once a day."

"Right. Not bad, is it?"

"If I said I had no complaints, it would be a lie, but... I understand."

The Holed-Up Head Librarian glanced at Yoo Soo-Ha, who was wrapped around my neck, with a somewhat jealous look, then sighed.

Sipping the frappuccino I had handed him, Hamusutra had been silent until now but suddenly asked.

"Why exactly are you climbing the tower?"

It was a sudden question.

"To be honest, I've been curious since I heard you had reached the 80th floor."

"....."

"Kim Gong-Ja, you have proven everything you needed to. As a complete Constellation, you've corrected almost all the injustices in your tower to your liking."

The Holed-Up Head Librarian leaned his chin on his palms and gazed at me intently.

"Do you know what a Constellation in such a position usually does?"

"They stop challenging the tower?"

"Exactly. From this point on, they focus solely on gathering followers safely, increasing their divine power, and collecting items. If they see another world that seems easy to plunder, they might even join a raid."

The Holed-Up Head Librarian stirred his frappuccino with a straw.

"Then, when they feel there's no more content to explore or they're tired of living in rented spaces, they start building their own sanctuary. Climbing from the 81st floor to the 90th floor to create a sanctuary."

"Indeed."

"That's the difference between a top-tier Constellation and a regular one. Just that. Nothing more... but it's not like you can't live without your own house, right?"

The sounds of the Librarian's followers arguing with the Medicine King continued. Hamusutra glanced at them, then looked back at me.

"You could've spent the next 20 million years dressed in sweatpants, dipping fries in a shake, sucking your fingers afterward, and no one would've said a word, but you deliberately chose to challenge yourself. And I heard that because of that, you nearly died, or worse, ended up in a situation worse than death. Was it worth taking such a risk?"

Perhaps it was a natural question.

The Holed-Up Head Librarian looked deep into my eyes and asked.

"For the sake of becoming a Pillar?"

"Who did you hear that from...?"

"I still have a few connections left in the world, so I hear things, albeit annoyingly... Anyway, what about it? Or is it..."

Was it for the Tower Master? Even the Holed-Up Head Librarian seemed to keep those words within.

I said.



"In your opinion, wouldn't a me not climbing the tower be unlike me?"

"From a character-selling perspective, of course, it's better for you to climb the tower, but fans' feelings and reality are different."

He spoke calmly, then, ah, pressed his palms against his cheeks.

"Hmm. Of course, if you say here, [For you... For my fan, to make you happy, I decided to climb the tower...!] then I'd be overjoyed and faint right away—"

"I made a promise to someone."

The Holed-Up Head Librarian paused.

I told him.

"To climb the tower."

"....."

"If you've been paying close attention to my book, you'll know who I made that promise with."

I stood up.

The Holed-Up Head Librarian stared blankly at me, then his eyes widened suddenly. His gaze was directed at a man who, though invisible to him, was undoubtedly by my side.

"Indeed."

He murmured as if sighing.

"Indeed, so that was it."

That's right.

"Let's go."

With only the duct-tape-wrapped dagger at my waist, the man who had taught me swordsmanship since those days accepted my words.

"Let's move on."

The next step would be the 90th floor.

Only 10 floors left to the very top.

And only 9 floors left until the realm where the Sword Emperor had met his despair.

# Chapter 383: Nine Keys (1)

---

Snip.

As if it were just any other day, hairdressing scissors crossed through the air.

"So, you're really planning to head straight for the 100th floor?"

"That's right."

I spoke, reflected in the large window.

Over my shoulder, the director sighed as he held the scissors.

"You could rest a bit longer before ascending."

"Hamusutra said the same thing. Or is it that Hamusutra is echoing you?"

"Either way, it's sound advice. Spending time together, it's natural to influence each other."

Hamusutra, Kim Yul, and the director had spent time together in the planetarium. Time being a two-way street meant influencing each other was inevitable, even for someone as significant as Hamusutra.

And so did I and the Guardian Spirit.

"Yes, I'm going up right away."

Guardian Spirit waited quietly beside me as I got my hair cut.

"Alright."

The director then focused more on his scissoring without further words.

Scissors.

"Now you truly have become a director."

The director frowned.

"If you're about to add, [Since you've become the manager of the garden, you're a director now,] I'd rather you didn't. I don't want to find out that the child I once cared for has become a grown man in such a manner."

"I just wanted to contribute to preventing global warming."

"This isn't Earth, you know."

Even as banter continued, the director kept cutting my hair... and then said,

"150 years ago, a journalist asked a mountaineer a question."

-Why do you want to climb Everest?

"It's not hard to guess why the journalist asked that question. It was similar to when journalists rushed to ask Marcus Callenbury why he was entering the tower a few years before."

-Why forsake safety when you can live comfortably as you are?

-Is there something promised to you in exchange for reaching the top?

-What drives you to challenge yourself?

-I'm just curious. Explain it to me.

"The mountaineer simply said this."

-Because it's there.

"Ah, that phrase. I've heard it before."

"Yes. When I was your age, it was a well-known saying. It

spawned many parodies. About gaming because it's there, or ordering chicken because it's there. Various lame jokes were popular back then."

"The Earth must have been quite warm then."

"It was around the time when global warming was starting to take off."

The director's scissors snipped away a stray lock of hair.

As my hair was trimmed, the fallen strands scattered in the wind.

"Bringing up this story now, are you trying to ask me why I'm aiming for the 100th floor?"

"No, Gong-Ja. I don't really want to ask that."

As always, with a slightly grim expression, the director quietly spoke.



And then he added,

"Because you have the luxury to."

That was somewhat unexpected.

"Me?"

"You have a splendid home, don't you?"

As the director said, this place was indeed my home.

Not the sanctuary, the [Garden of Withered Flowers], but the mansion where I originally lived.

20th floor.

In terms of connection by stairs, it was one floor below the Garden of Withered Flowers, but in terms of connection to the Tower, it was 60 floors below.

"And you also have such a beautiful garden."

There was a reason for choosing to cut my hair in the non-sanctuary house.

I intended not to leave even a single grain of soil or a drop of water in the garden that wasn't needed by the flowers. Thus, my trimmed hair intermingled with dandelion seeds in the yard of my house, not the garden.

"Having a home means you have a fortress to protect yourself and your family. Having a flower garden means you have the luxury to fully care for and consider not just your family but others as well."

"....."

"Someone like you, with such luxury, must have a good reason to challenge yourself. You have the means."

"Luxury, you say."

"Only those with the luxury to spare can prepare for something new. Only those with the luxury to accept

themselves can accept others. Only those who have everything in place can challenge something new. I have no doubts about someone capable of doing more."

Snip.

"Rather, I have doubts about those who can't challenge themselves."

Snip.

"Why did that person wander in the desert? Why did that child starve? Why."

Why indeed.

"So I don't wonder why Marcus Callenbury or Shawn McCallister dropped everything to enter. Similarly, I don't wonder why the Heaven that Gathers Wails aims for the 100th floor. I just,"

With a heavy sigh, the director continued.

"Can't help but wonder why Kim Gong-Ja, at the age of twenty, entered the Tower."

Hmm.

I twisted my head this way and that, checking the shape of my hair.

"Because the Tower is here... how about that?"

"That mountaineer ultimately failed to summit."

Snip.

A chill ran down my spine as the cold blade of the scissors grazed my skin.

"He stepped out of his tent into a blizzard for a moment and vanished without a trace. Not even his body was found, and his friends and family had to hold a funeral with an empty coffin. It wasn't until almost a hundred years later that his body was discovered."

"That's... new to me."

"People's words tend to spread wider and last longer than the people themselves."

Snip.

"Gong-Ja."

The director spoke in a soft voice.

"Why did you enter the Tower?"

The director, reflected in the mirror, looked straight at me.

"Was it really just because the Tower is here?"

---

At the crossroads where my sanctuary and the 90th floor met, the Staff of Time Immemorial greeted me.

"Welcome, King of Death. You're dressed refreshingly."

"Yeah."

"Your expression isn't as refreshing, though. What's wrong?"

If even this mage, who defaulted to a grumpy face since his defeat, said so, I must be quite obvious.

I wiped my forehead and said,

"No, just reminiscing about the past."

"Sounds like something an old man would say. You're at an age where you have nothing but days ahead, yet you speak like this?"

The Staff of Time Immemorial spoke, holding the staff in its mouth.

"No, should I say you have nothing but days left to die? Which do you think is correct?"

"If possible, I'd like to hear that only happy days are left for me."

"That's a nice thought, but the one who should tell you that isn't me."

True that.

"Let's go."

The Staff of Time Immemorial snorted and started walking ahead, leading the way.

I followed. We ascended the staircase that seemed like an umbilical cord connecting the floors.

As always, the fox was wrapped around my neck like a scarf, and the serpent bracelet clung to my wrist. And by my side floated the Sword Emperor.

The only place that felt empty was my waist, where the Holy Sword usually hung.

'Sword Emperor.'

-What?

The Sword Emperor responded immediately.

I asked both out loud and in my heart.

"What lies beyond this?"

The Staff of Time Immemorial didn't look back. The Sword Emperor didn't glance at me either.

But both answered simultaneously.

"The Tower Master was an artist."

-I'm a fighter.

Step.



"The Tower Master's life showed that she was a warlord, a politician, a noble, but equally a gladiator, an actor, an architect."

-You've seen me so far, haven't you? Pondering and measuring isn't my style. Sometimes my taste clashes with the world's, but eventually, my taste becomes the world's.

"She especially loved fugues."

-This tower is the same, Gong-Ja.

"In composing, melodies and rhythms are connected to create a piece, ensuring the start and end are connected, enjoying the different starting points converging at the same endpoint."

-If those nasty beings playing with memories tried their tricks while I climbed the Tower, their heads would've been crushed by me. Just like you did. You have to admit it, right?

Then.

Both spoke as if in unison.

"So."

-So.

"What lies beyond is an extension of what has been."

-Nothing new lies beyond.

The world began to blur.

As if mixing dozens of colors of Play-Doh, the distant ground below melted away first. The sky followed. It melted. The speckled sky eventually turned into countless grains of sand and poured down like a waterfall.

"Perhaps you could reach the 100th floor."

-I hear Grey Spider reached up to the 94th floor, right?

No.

It wasn't a waterfall.

"Anyone who has climbed from the 1st to the 90th floor could reach it."

-For her, starting from the 50th floor, it must have been hard to climb any higher.

It was a gigantic hourglass.

It resembled Mutia's sanctuary I once saw. An expansive desert spread far and wide. The distorted sky, like a mirage under the scorching sun, was due to the incredibly thick glass. In the center, a slow sand waterfall flowed, much like blood seeping from a serpent's heart.

I stood in the middle of the hourglass.

A familiar voice greeted me.

"Welcome, King of Death! Or should I say, the person who should now be called Wailing Heaven!"

I looked at the figure with a dumbfounded expression.

"Princess?"

"Yes! It's me! Long time no see!"

The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages greeted me with bouncy jumps. She was as lively as ever.

"It doesn't feel like it's been that long... Ah. Did you come to guide me?"

"Yes! Exactly."

The princess grinned, spun around on the spot, letting her hair fly, and then waved at the Staff of Time Immemorial.

"I've taken over from here, auntie. You've worked hard."

"Alright, alright. This old woman will take her leave."

"Yeah, yeah. Help out Miya if you're free."

"That kid doesn't like others meddling in her work."

"Auntie... that's exactly why you should help."

"Really now....."

The Staff of Time Immemorial retreated with a look of disgust but also a strangely satisfying smile. It seemed she had found the perfect stress relief.

Hmm.

"Advisor Gu Won-Ha sure has it tough..."

"Advisors are meant to suffer. Doesn't Wailing Heaven's advisor also suffer?"

"Maybe, but I think I've suffered more because of her."

"That's exactly it. Liu Bei must have thought of exploiting Zhuge Liang to the fullest when he had the chance."

Casually making a statement that would split fans of Shu into two, the Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages, with a chirp, pulled something out.

\*E/N: Liu Bei was a Chinese warlord in the late [Eastern Han dynasty](#) who later became the founding [emperor](#) of [Shu Han](#), one of the [Three Kingdoms](#) of China.

Zhuge Liang, courtesy name Kongming, was a Chinese statesman and military strategist. He was chancellor and later regent of the state of Shu Han during the Three Kingdoms period.

It was a small slate.

"That is....."

"Yes."

The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages grabbed both sides of the slate and lifted it with all her might.

"Wailing Heaven, I'll tell you what you need to do from now on."

The slate had nine holes in the middle.

"Collect the nine keys!"

The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages declared.

# Chapter 384: Nine Keys (2)

---

Collect the nine keys.

Tilting my head at that declaration, I inquired,

"What keys are we talking about?"

"Hmm! Let me explain."

With a flick of her finger, the Princess conjured an image on the cascading sand waterfall, as if it were embroidered with platinum threads. The image resembled a cross-section of an anthill or a tree with countless sprawling roots.

"This is....."

"Yes! Wailing Heaven. It's a cross-section of your tower.



Looks quite different from this angle, doesn't it?"

Indeed, it was a side-on sectional view of the tower's map by layers.

Even during my days as a newbie Hunter, maps of the early floors circulated among hunters, and recently, the Black Dragon Guild and the Temple had collaborated on mapping efforts, so I recognized it easily.

The Princess, grinning, took up a baton.

"Let's skip the 'Basement 1st floor' where you were summoned before, and the 'Ground floor' where your homeland is located, and start from here."

Her baton tapped the tower's 1st floor drawn on the flowing sand.

"The 1st floor is the 'Refuge'."

Refuge.

"A forward base, a hub, a shelter, etc. Many terms could apply, but 'Refuge' fits best. A place that gives respite to those fleeing from something, a breakwater that ensures they are no longer harassed by what they've escaped from. That's the role of the 1st floor."

The baton then smoothly sliced across the 1st floor and moved sideways.

The tower's city of Babylon.

The baton lightly pressed on the depiction of the great river that flows through Babylon.

"Here, water flows. Rain falls. The water contains... um, well, some nutrients. Though colorless and odorless, it sustains life."

"....."

"But for those who feel merely surviving isn't quite living,"

The baton's tip ascended against the sand, pointing to the tower's 2nd floor.

"They can choose to become 'Warriors'."

The Princess's baton swept across the 2nd floor.

"Fruit from trees, timber, stone and ore from rocks, herbs and vegetables from plants. Defeating monsters like wolves and goblins yields meat, hides, items, and gold."

"Yes, I know."

"Right. You've walked this path yourself, but then again,"

The Princess tilted her head.

"Was all this really necessary?"

A sudden question indeed, but in a way, a very old one.

"Why not just give everything? Fruit, timber, ore, herbs, meat. Wouldn't it have been simpler to just provide everything on demand?"

"....."

"What do you think, Wailing Heaven?"

I pondered.

Not that it wasn't a valid question; what the Princess just mentioned was something many had wondered about in the tower's early pioneering days. It was one reason why cults related to the tower never ceased, as Bambolina had said.

"I suppose it's due to a lack of resources."

"Hmm."

"To meet the basic needs of so many people indefinitely... that would require vast resources. So, out of necessity....."

As I got to that point, I realized something.

Sighing as if to signal my realization, I said to the Princess,

"Indeed."

"Hmm?"

"Is it intentional?"

At my question, the Princess smiled slightly.

Pressing my forehead, I confessed,

"I might not fully understand yet, not being a complete Pillar, but if I had to answer..."

The Princess's smile deepened, as if to say, try answering as a tower Administrator-to-be.

"The Tower Master wants to be seen as the root of all evil. By deliberately placing threats like monsters and inciting trials, the Tower Master appears to refuse unlimited salvation, despite being capable, thus attracting criticism....."

No.

Wait. That's too ideological. There must be a more tangible reason.

"Having a visible enemy helps unite those who've fled to the tower, perhaps? ...Hmm. That doesn't quite fit either. Then..."

The Princess watched me with her hands behind her back, willing to wait as long as needed.

After much thought, I spoke frankly.

"I'm not sure, Princess. Why is it?"

"If."

The Princess began.

"Before your world became as hot as it is now. When the director who raised you was just your age, if the Guardian Spirit had been born in your country, what would have happened?"

I glanced at Guardian Spirit, who was snorting with his arms crossed. The answer came naturally.

"Ah... a lunatic?"

"And?"

"And, um... a bully? A gym owner? A fighter, perhaps?"

"Right."

The Princess nodded.

"He might have gone abroad to become a mercenary, but ultimately, that's about it. No more, no less."

"....."

"But Wailing Heaven, what if the Sword Emperor had been born in the ancient era?"

I glanced at the Sword Emperor.

And my answer flowed just as naturally.

"He would have been a hero."

"Not a king?"

"What king? That guy making laws and governing? People might have idolized him into forming a nation, but after the Sword Emperor's death, it would've fragmented. Maybe even during his lifetime."

"Hehe, exactly."

The Princess laughed. Standing with her hands behind her back, she kicked at a mound of sand, innocently.

"But wouldn't that be a more fulfilling life from the Sword Emperor's perspective than living as a fighter?"

"...Perhaps."



"In a world, an era where the age of warriors and heroes has ended, where sword-wielding heroes have given way to gun-toting armies, how would someone like the Sword Emperor be treated?"

An obstacle.

A maverick.

A madman.

A social misfit.

"The Sword Emperor himself wouldn't care."

Indeed.

"If someone pitied him, he'd look at them as if they were mad."

Likely.

"But would that truly be a fair world for the Sword Emperor?"

Yet somehow, it felt slightly heartbreaking.

"Every society must discard something to grow. Every civilization stands on countless discarded possibilities."

"So..."

"The Tower Master wanted to create a place that wasn't left behind by any era, at least a place with that potential."

Once more, the baton skimmed over the 2nd and 3rd floors.

"An era of warriors and heroes. A world where one's life is affirmed through the act of cutting."

The baton reached the 10th floor in its upstream journey.

"An era of priests and priestesses. A world where those cut off find solace."

The baton paused once at the 11th floor.

"Thus, if the 1st to 10th floors represent the 'Golden Age,' then the 11th to 20th floors correspond to the 'Silver Age.'"

"Silver..."

"You met the Aegim Empire here, right? In other towers, the 11th to 20th floors also encounter 'other worlds.'"

Other worlds.

"Completely alien entities. Places utterly disconnected from you from start to finish. ...Although, since it's still below the 50th floor, you face 'worlds that have already perished' rather than 'complete otherworlds.'"

The baton resumed its movement.

"An era of travelers. Exploring the ruins of fallen kingdoms, contemplating the lives of those people."

12th, 13th, 14th floors...

"An era of generals. An era of merchants. An era of soldiers..."

Ascending against the sand waterfall, the baton finally reached the 20th floor.

"Now, we enter the 'Iron Age.'"

"In our tower, it was the Grand Library."

"Yep. Hamusutra was akin to Zhuge Liang. Mother said he became more flavorful the more he was used."

Though it seemed rather pitiful, recalling Hamusutra's face magically dispelled any sympathy.

"What about other towers?"

"It's often Hamusutra as well. Next are Mutia and Mahos. Ah. Occasionally, Babbit takes charge, and once, even the fox

around your neck did."

"I was tempted to object to Babbit's involvement, but 'heh, a fox, you say,' I'll opt for a nonchalant response."

"Yep, yep. And I'll choose not to respond."

The Princess kept her word, moving on to explanation.

"In the Golden Age, they learn the cost of their own survival. In the Silver Age, they learn how to interact with others. In the Iron Age, they finally meet the king of their own world."

"King..."

The voice of Anastasia, who had once asked if I was ready to be our king, briefly crossed my mind.

"So, from there, only the high-rankers can participate in the conquest."

"Right. If you wish to proclaim yourself the king of a world,

you must first represent that world."

"In that sense, the Sword Emperor also became a kind of king."

-Kid. You just called me 'Sword Emperor' again. Does that 'Emperor' sound like a mere 'subject' to you?

Guardian Spirit interjected. And I responded even before his words fully registered in my brain.

"Do you know the Hanja for 'mad dog,' Emperor? I didn't either until I looked it up once."

-You managed to find a Hanja that's likely to display as ■, just like your head, in Unicode characters.

"So it would be written as Sword■. Sounds like fodder for speculation."

-I really want to beat you until you turn into actual mochi...

I awkwardly scratched the back of my head.

The Princess waited until our banter ended, then continued,

"And in the 30th floor range... the 'Bronze Age.' Here, you all..."

"End up with children."

The Princess smiled faintly.

"Yeah. Though most towers interpreted it simply as gaining a 'Below.'"

I bowed my head, reminded of the Grey Spider.

But I seemed to grasp the structure.

"In the Golden Age, focusing on oneself. In the Silver Age, on others. In the Iron Age, on what's above. In the Bronze Age, on what's below."

"Right. And then there's the 40th floor. The Stone Age."

The Stone Age.

"Here, you all become 'the ones being evaluated.' I don't need to explain further, do I?"

"Yeah. I've already skimmed through it once when voting last time."

"Right. This way, the 1st to 49th floors form one cycle. So, the next cycle repeats one layer deeper. Mother loved music."

As the Staff of Time Immemorial had said, the Princess's baton, swishing, pointed to the 50th floor.

"However, from this cycle onward, a more aggressive meaning is added. The 50th floor functions not just as a refuge but a full-fledged 'Base,' a 'Forward Operating Base,' and from the 60th floor on, you start clashing with other worlds in earnest."

"The 70th floor was the underworld... Indeed. That too, in some sense, is 'Above.'"



"Yep. You probably know by now what the 80th floor and above entail."

"Yes."

I nodded.

"I understand... and now I see why cleared floors remain in place, accessible to others. To ensure no era disappears."

"Exactly."

"Your explanation is fascinating, but I still haven't heard about the most crucial thing."

I looked straight at the Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages and said,

"So, what exactly are the nine keys you told me to gather?"

"All the hints are in what I've said so far!"

The Tower Master's daughter beamed, spinning around.

"Wailing Heaven, reflect on the worlds you've passed through. Examine them. Look at the traces you've left while climbing the tower, the path you've lived until now."

Eyes resembling the Tower Master's, yet distinct in their violet hue, gazed at me.

"The keys to the 100th floor lie right there."

"Indeed."

And then I finally understood.

"From the 90th to the 99th floor, it's not about ascending..."

"Yeah."

The Princess Who Strolls Through Mirages snapped her fingers. The sand waterfall parting in the middle of the 90th floor revealed a staircase.

But this staircase was not leading upwards.

"It's time to start [descending]."

# Chapter 385: The Garden of Time (1)

---

The curtain of sand parted left and right, revealing stairs on which I began to descend slowly.

Thud, thud.

The material of the stairs was unknown, but they sturdily supported me. With each step I took, the sound of me being propelled back resonated through the air.

The place where I had conversed with Princess was on the 90th floor.

Naturally, below that was the 89th floor, which was my sanctuary.

"....."

A Garden of Withered Flowers. I set foot in that place.

Servants of the King of Death family, assigned as gardeners, were wandering around. All were dressed sharply in uniforms designed by the exclusive tailor of the Ivansia Duchy, woven meticulously by the mermaids of the Aegim Empire. In their hands were gardening tools such as shears, shovels, and watering cans.

‘Eek.’

Upon seeing Silvia approaching with garden shears, I hastily hid behind a rock.

-King of Death, what are you doing?

Princess asked, looking at me as if she had seen something curious.

I scratched the back of my head, feeling awkward.

-It’s nothing. Just thinking how embarrassing it would be to come down so soon after getting all dressed up and even having my hair cut... Oh. I stopped mid-sentence and shut my

mouth.

-Oh... Hm? The state of my voice...?

What came out of my mouth was a mere whisper, as if only my lips moved, or the kind of sound you'd imagine in your head, barely audible, as if it wasn't there at all.

-Uh....

It wasn't just that.

Stepping back a bit, I realized that I couldn't hear my own footsteps.

-Huh?

Even after stamping my feet a couple of times, it was the same.

Until just a moment ago, the floor returned the sound of my weight with a thud, thud, but now there was no sound at all.

-Heh.

I then did a standing jump on the spot.

Neither the sound of the jump nor the thud when landing could be heard.

It wasn't just sound; not a single grain of sand or a leaf moved.

-Could it be?

-Yes. That's exactly it.

Princess grinned widely. Only then did I realize that her voice and movements also had no effect on the surroundings.

And so, I understood.

-Are Princess and I in the same state as the Sword Emperor?

-Yes! Exactly.

Princess nodded. Feeling intrigued, I twisted my body this way and that, then looked at Silvia approaching me.

-And that means....

“Sigh.”

Silvia sighed right in front of my nose.

“It's been roughly 2 hours since the Lord went up.”

Just as expected.

Silvia was completely unaware of my presence!

“It's driving me crazy. Really, what's with the rush to go up as if there's something to gain from it.”



Sitting on the ground, Silvia grumbled as she jabbed the soil with her planting spade.

Someone responded to Silvia's words.

“Ugor, Head Maid. What if someone hears and thinks you're talking behind their back?”

Uburka, dressed as a gardener, came walking with a large bucket on his bald head and spoke up.

Silvia shrugged her shoulders.

“Ha. There’s absolutely no one listening aside from you. After all, I've made sure of that much, so I can afford to talk behind their back.”

“Are you so sure about that?”

“Absolutely. I’ve been a Lady twice at Sormewin Academy, even managed to get one over on the Duchess of Ivansia. And what does that tell you? That I'm as sharp as they come.”

Silvia boasted with an air of arrogance.

‘I’m right here listening to you, though.’

It was a moment as pitiful as Silvia herself, but it also meant my stealth ability was functioning perfectly.

‘Anyway, this is interesting.’

I circled around Silvia and Uburka.

I walked around, stood on my hands and walked, hopped around, and even danced the Cossack dance.

The Guardian Spirit made a face as if it was embarrassed for the first time.

-Zombie... Why are you drooling like a yellow dog in front of a charcoal-grilled rib bone?

-I appreciate your observation. When I was learning Aura, you did the very same thing. I felt exactly the same way you're

feeling now.

-Is that so, you little... I didn't realize. Now that I know, I'm deeply reflecting on it, but that's beside the point. Just because I did it, doesn't mean you should do the same. It's always the younger generation and disciples who have the opportunity to break the cycle of evil.

-I wanted to break the chain of evil too... But I wasn't strong enough. A monster living deep within me, a snake coiled around my heart, kept whispering to me... [Do the same. Are you just going to take it? Do it now. This is your chance to pay it back...] I kept succumbing to the devil inside me. In other words, that's my incompetence and inability, so to speak....

-You win.

-Victory achieved.

Even as we exchanged such banter, Uburka and Silvia showed no signs of noticing us.

At this point, even I started to feel a bit awkward.

-Princess, Sword Emperor. So, what should we do now?  
Where is the key?

-Hmm, why not take a look around the places that come to mind?

Princess suggested with a grin.

Hmm.

‘Hearing that with such a face makes me a bit uneasy....’

I suppressed my unease.

Leaving Uburka and Silvia, who were still chatting away, I started walking.

-Where are you going, Wailing Heaven?

-Oh, well... You said to check out the places that come to mind, right? That's what I'm doing.

-You're so active! Yep, yep. That's good. Very good.

Although that was also a disconcerting comment, I continued walking, holding back my feelings.

First, I thought of visiting the director.

---

When I arrived, the director was just giving instructions to Kim Yul.

“Mr. Kim Yul, Please gather the gardeners.”

“Alright.”

Following the director's orders, Kim Yul summoned the gardeners. Ester was the first to rush over, and the Goddess of Protection flew down with a flap of her wings. Silvia and Uburka, who had been lazing around in a corner, had no choice but to come and stand before the director.

The director spoke.

“Hello. I've taken charge of managing this garden.”

The director began speaking in his characteristic calm voice.

“I am quite inexperienced.”

"....."

“Just calling you all here like this, no, even thinking of holding a regular meeting... Some of you may find it displeasing. In those moments, just think, ah, he's an old man... No, not even old compared to you all. Just think of me as someone lacking and pity me, I would appreciate it.”

The gathered people showed little reaction to his words. More accurately, it wasn't the kind of reaction that was outwardly visible.

Just like me.

-Director....

I murmured with a lump in my throat.

Of course, the director didn't notice me. He just continued talking to the people in front of him.

“As you may know, Gong-Ja has ascended to the next floor today.”

"....."

“I’m barely a rookie, not even worthy of being called a hunter. If you put me on the 2nd floor, I probably wouldn’t make it back alive. So, I don’t know what the 90th floor is like. Does anyone here know?”

At that question, someone raised their hand.

It was Ester.

“I know a very little about the 99th floor. I can't speak in detail due to the contract with the tower....”

“Is it dangerous?”

“...Yes, extremely.”

Ester replied.

The director took off his glasses and pressed his nose bridge with his thumb and forefinger before speaking.

“Can you return?”

“If the Lord decides to come back, he could do so immediately.”

Ester replied and then slightly bowed her head.

“However, in that case, as a general rule, you can’t attempt it again. That’s why most of the distinguished Constellations are stuck without ascending to the 100th floor.”

“I see....”



The director sighed lightly.

“It’s somewhat relieving to know that he can come back if he chooses.”

“Yes, I think so too.”

“But, that boy will definitely not return.”

The director's sigh grew heavier.

Ester, the Goddess of Protection, and even Uburka sighed in a similar manner... What's with this united front of the King of Death family?

“He was quite a stubborn child since he was young.”

The director said.

Silvia perked up her ears.

“What was he like?”

“Chamberlain, I sense something ominous from your curiosity.”

“No, no, advisor. Aren’t you seeing me in too negative a light? I’m hurt. I’m just curious about what kind of person our family’s head is. And you, advisor, don’t you also look very curious?”

“I, as a advisor, wish to know more about the Lord.”

These vassals....

“I’m also curious. Ugor. What was daddy like as a child? Or did he even have a childhood?”

This son....

“Everyone seems curious about Gong-Ja. Naturally, they would be.”

The director smiled wryly and put on his glasses.

Most of the family members, probably, or rather, definitely, were eager to delve into my dark history, their eyes gleaming brightly as they looked at the director. However, the director proved that he wasn't a specialist in child care for nothing over the decades.

“Let's continue this story at the next assembly.”

“Ah.”

Just when their curiosity was piqued, the vassals made a sound of disappointment as the story was cut off.

“Take your time. Please wait patiently.”

The director said with a smile.

“We'll be seeing each other's faces here for a long time.”

With that, the assembly ended. Watching the gardeners

disperse with regretful faces, I raised my hand to wipe my forehead.

-I need to get out of here quickly... preferably today.

-Hmm. Even so, you don't want your dark history to be exposed right in front of you, huh?

-Yes, yes. So... uh, the key?

I looked around, but nothing caught my eye.

I even checked the director's pocket just in case, but it was the same.

-...There's nothing here?

-Seems like it's not here.

Princess said with a bright smile, which also triggered a sense of unease.

Then, the Sword Emperor's voice rang out.

-Zombie.

-Yes?

I turned towards the Sword Emperor.

And I saw him looking at me with a pitiful expression.

-Cheer up.

Uh....

-Sword Emperor, what does that expression mean?

-What do you think?

-It's shitty....

-Yeah....

-Hey, wait a minute. Get angrier or something... What's with that expression? Are you upset because I played a prank earlier? If that's the case... no, really, why that face! You should at least mock me, what's with this...

The Sword Emperor remained silent.

He just looked at me with a face that seemed to pity something.

‘This unease is creeping up on me like the smell of manure from a dungheap....’

Ugh.

I clapped my hands together with a smack and, after calming my breathing, began to walk.

-Anyway, it's not around the director, that much is clear. Hmm. Then it must be there.

My sanctuary is a world of its own, but since some parts were newly created, it wasn't too vast. I thought that if I searched the areas that came to mind one by one, I would find the key or whatever it was....

To put it bluntly, I was mistaken.

---

My sanctuary, the Garden of Withered Flowers.

Sitting crouched on the seashore where the red waves rolled in, I spoke with a weary face.

-I was wrong.

I wasn't sure if my face really looked weary. After all, my reflection didn't appear on the surface of the sea.

And it wasn't just because the sea in my sanctuary was red. I had also set up a greenhouse for flowers that needed warmth, but my figure didn't reflect in the glass of that greenhouse either.

-Keuh. You're quick to notice, zombie.

The Sword Emperor sat down next to me, flicking his fingernails.

-To realize that in just about [a week].

That's right.

Since I entered this place, the 89th floor, or rather, what should be called the 91st floor, a whole week had already passed!

-Why isn't there a single clue anywhere!?

I exclaimed with the fury of spitting fire... Did I exclaim? Damn it. In this place where I couldn't even use my real voice, even that felt ambiguous.

It was like my very existence was becoming ambiguous, akin to the expression that a seal or a Shiba Inu usually has!

-I thought there would be something next to the director. Or maybe near the Heavenly Demon's flower, the first Silver Bell flower I planted, the surroundings would start sparkling or something. But this is... Do you know how I feel right now?



-[It's like being dropped in a test map where event processing hasn't been done.]

Princess said as she jumped next to me.

-That's how some climbers put it.

-Who is that climber?

-Mahos.

The very Warhorse of the Eternal Plains.

-That person talks like that....

-Mm. Since Wailing Heaven doesn't like treating the inside of the tower like a game, you might get angry at that analogy....

-Yes, no, no. I get the feeling. Sword Emperor, you know too, right?

-Of course, I know, zombie. How could I not?

The Sword Emperor lay back, supporting his head with his interlocked fingers.

Above, the sky tinged red by the broken sunset had square clouds drifting by.

-I've been going through that hell for 140 years.

# Chapter 386: The Garden of Time (2)

---

140 years.

I had heard of a similar span of time before.

-You once mentioned enduring 130 years alone during a debate with your master... Was it about this?

-Ah, exactly that.

Such a carefree voice it was.

It felt as though a breeze was leaking from my heart as I listened.

-My goodness. So, Sword Emperor, you...

[Ah, no. Suddenly, the thought that I too could fail at around the 99th floor crossed my mind.]

A conversation I had with the Sword Emperor in the Heaven of Truth flashed through my mind.

[Sword Emperor, but even someone like you died at the 99th floor.]

He had reacted peculiarly to those words.

[Hmm. Well, death...]

I remembered him repeating that.

And the subsequent exchange that followed.

[What's on the 99th floor?]

At that time, the Sword Emperor hadn't given a straightforward answer.

On the surface, he said, 'I just don't want to tell you,' but there had to be more to it than that.

[Can't you tell me now?]

To that question, the Sword Emperor had responded:

-Let's take a walk.

I blinked.

Before I knew it, the Sword Emperor had risen from his seat and was looking at me with the same expression as before.

-Uh....

-Follow me, kid.

And the Sword Emperor started 'walking' just like before.

"....."

Since entering this stage, which should be called the 91st floor, my body had lost its weight. The world no longer tried to hold me, and no matter how hard I stomped, no sound of footsteps echoed.

It felt as though I had been isolated from the world.

Thus, over this week, I gradually stopped performing the act of [walking]. Floating around aimlessly, just as the Guardian Spirit usually did, was more comfortable.

-Mahos mentioned it seemed like you're experiencing TCL.

The Gong-Jass said.

-I'm not exactly sure what TCL means, but I have a rough idea.

With gravity not applicable in this place, all physical forces lost their meaning. If I wanted, I could even pass through floors or walls.

Thus, I realized how difficult the act that the Sword Emperor was performing, this 'natural walking,' truly was. I had felt it was a tremendous skill in the Heaven of Truth, but now that I was in the same situation, I fully understood.

-What are you doing? Aren't you coming?

The Sword Emperor glanced at me casually, as if merely looking back during a leisurely walk.

I suddenly realized this was an important moment.

-Just a moment, please.

Instead of aimlessly floating, I said that and gathered my thoughts.

First, I placed my soles on the ground. There was still no sensation of contact, but I tried my best to [stand up] naturally.

-Hmm.

The Sword Emperor patiently waited. He neither urged me on nor offered advice.

Yet, I immediately realized that what I had done was not standing but something bizarre.

-Just a bit longer.

-Take your time.

-Yeah.

I pondered in earnest.

‘How do you stand up?’

Even to me, it sounded like a ridiculous thought.

But then, a stronger conviction seized me.



‘This is important.’

This moment was significant.

‘To stand... first, put your soles on the ground. Then the ground supports you... But now, there’s no ground to support me. So, if that’s the case...’

A sensation of fluffy masses floating around my head.

A problem that seemed graspable yet remained elusive ensnared me.

I took a deep breath... Did I breathe?

‘Of course, that too was just the semblance of breathing.’

I focused my mind.

‘Right now, I am virtually a ghost. Naturally, there’s no [air] for me to inhale. And if that’s the case...’

At that moment, immediately following that thought, another question arose.

‘Wait. If there’s no [air], how can I [hear] anything?’

I realized it was very strange.

In sci-fi movies, a common point of critique is the loud explosions in the vacuum of space.

‘Strange.’

When speaking with the Guardian Spirit or the Gong-Jass, who are on the same level as me, it felt similar to imagining sounds. However, voices of people like Silvia or the director sounded just like normal voices....

‘Sound is transmitted through the vibration of air... But right now, there’s nothing like air to affect me. So, I shouldn’t be able to hear anything. That means...’

Upon realizing this, silence enveloped me.

-.....

It was a silence akin to being in space, or perhaps, even more ancient, a time before time and space existed, where nothing held meaning.

-Hmm.

The Sword Emperor, now with arms crossed instead of behind his back, faintly smiled.

However, that smile was merely a fleeting thought in my mind, not disturbing the silence I was experiencing.

I was utterly captivated by this pristine moment.

‘Pristine.’

Then, I realized that, too, was odd.

‘It can’t be white, for the same reason, it can’t be black.’

This wasn't about the abstract notion that silence can't be colored.

It was more specific and fundamental.

'How am I [seeing] this scenery right now?'

Color is a wavelength of light.

Just as sound requires air to propagate and any sound needs air to spread, to [see] something, [light] must exist beforehand.

'But I'm unaffected by anything right now. Not by gravity or by any reaction force. No physical forces affect me.'

Is light special, an exception?

Impossible. Although light might be categorized as a special attribute in games, it's just one aspect of physical phenomena.

As someone who wielded a Holy Sword named Shiny, I was well aware of this fact.

‘Then, like how I shouldn’t be able to hear anything, I shouldn’t be able to see anything either....’

Upon feeling this, light vanished.

-.....

Complete darkness. A pure absence of light engulfed me.

When I was born, Earth was an incredibly radiant star.

Cities were everywhere. Just a short walk from one city led you directly to another. Although the population had peaked and was slowly decreasing, the number of buildings was on the rise. It was as if the cities, leaving the people behind, were frantically breeding among themselves.

Each of the increased number of buildings overflowed with light. Even after people left, the light remained like a debt. While the eerie ghost towns, the dark ruins, should have made more sense, somehow that logic didn’t apply.

Some called it a singularity. But many more knew it was merely the limitless proliferation of cancer cells.

[The night sky used to be much darker than it is now.]

The director had said, but as a child, I couldn't imagine such a landscape. Throughout my life, the night sky was always shrouded in a murky haze, shimmering in purple.

[This star is sick with fever.]

So, the first darkness I saw was not in the night but in the water.

And even more so, in the hearts of people.

-It used to be like that.

I murmured without realizing.

-This is darkness.

True darkness was not black. It was merely devoid of anything.

Blankness.

Emptiness.

Thus, it could feel blindingly white or unfathomably black, but it was certainly neither.

Nothingness. I gazed at a world yet unfilled.

-It's beautiful.

-Yes, Gong-Ja.

The Sword Emperor's response was felt from somewhere.

-What's filled can only be emptied, making it beautiful. Similarly, what's empty can only be filled, making it lovely.

I turned towards the direction from which I felt his response.

-Fool. Do you realize the ridiculous thing you're doing?

-Indeed.

I groaned.

-I don't have a head right now.

-Right. But turning your head? That's not bad, but doing it unconsciously makes it no different from before you saw this darkness.

The Sword Emperor spoke, with his robe fluttering— no, that couldn't be sound— saying...

-Move knowingly. That's the only way to move correctly. Be aware and feel. That's how you can truly understand.

I nodded.

No.



First, I created [myself].

-I... Kim Gong-Ja.

Physically about twenty-five years old.

The time I actually had to endure... roughly 10,000, no, about 10,000.

‘No, that’s not it.’

[Approximately], [roughly], [about], none of those would do.

Precisely.

-.....

I thought about myself... imagined myself.

From birth to this moment, Kim Gong-Ja from the

beginning to now, recalling without addition or subtraction.

-.....

A task that made my consciousness fade.

It was not an easy task.

[The voices from the tower... not automatically generated by the system, but could it be... manually done?]

[Yes. Manual work.]

But it was not impossible.

[Gong-Ja, even if events occur simultaneously for you, for me, it's just work that can be tackled one by one... Inefficiency arises only when time and space are limited... The concept of inefficiency does not exist.]

‘Advisor Gu Won-Ha.’

I thought about the character I once inhabited and the tasks she handled. Compared to that, recalling my own life was trivial.

‘Sand... Fox.’

Even the moments when the fox tampered with my memories were now a reference.

Not only that.

‘Netherworld.’

The space I reached upon death resembled this place.

‘Sanctuary.’

The experience of filling an empty world when I first built my sanctuary was quite useful in many ways.

And above all.

‘Master.’

The season that was too white and this darkness had something in common.

Embraced by darkness, I recalled myself... imagined... created... thought... and then.

Eventually, I opened my eyes.

-.....,.....,.....

I breathed.

The temperature, contours, direction, pitch, volume of my breath, all of it was perceptible.

In every detail.

Feeling the breath I exhaled, my neck, yes, I had a neck right now— shivered.

-Ah, ah... Um....

Saliva flowed from my lips.

I realized I lacked the vocabulary to describe this sensation.

It was simply a lack of experience. Despite dying so often, living countless lives in place of others, I couldn't adequately describe this sensation.

I couldn't intuit the state of my own body.

Not because it wasn't perceptible, but because it was too vividly felt.

-Sensation is supposed to distinguish between oneself and the outside, but overly vivid sensations blur that boundary.

Once.

Somewhere.

-Remember well.

The Sword Emperor's voice reached me.

-That is what it means to [see].

Thump.

With the sound of my heartbeat, the darkness faded.

Light burst forth— the dam broke— the boundaries of the world, seared by the scorching light from afar, collapsed. And just like that, the darkness faded.

-Yes.

Thus, I found myself back in my sanctuary, the Garden of Withered Flowers, the place corresponding to the 80th to 89th floors, which is also the 91st floor.

The Sword Emperor, still with his arms crossed, welcomed me.

-Let's take a walk.

As if suggesting the

same thing he had just a moment ago, or rather, certainly, it was something that had just happened.

-Yeah.

Shaking my still dazed head, I nodded.

-Let's walk.

Slowly, I extended my foot towards the ground, towards the Sword Emperor's side.

Thud.

I stepped.

Thud.

I started walking with the Sword Emperor.

Thud!



# Chapter 387: The Garden of Time (3)

---

Having left the Garden of Withered Flowers, the Sword Emperor slowly meandered.

Beneath the gradually setting sun, among those who lay like flowers in their eternal slumber, the Sword Emperor spoke.

-Nicely done.

Instead of retorting with some nonsensical preamble, I responded.

-Thank you.

Instead of asking why I was being so agreeable, wondering if I'd eaten something odd, the Sword Emperor said.

-Even the soil here seems dead, which is nice.

-.....

-On the day I awakened my ki, I placed a grain of soil on my palm and observed it closely. When I concentrated my senses of sight and hearing, I realized soil is a rather noisy entity. On that tiny grain, inside it, many beings were bustling and competing.

The Sword Emperor crouched and gently caressed the rotten soil with the tips of his fingers.

Though his touch merely grazed the surface of the earth, a gust of wind scattered the grains of soil, creating a scene as if the ground was tenderly caressed by the Sword Emperor's hand.

-I saw and heard more that day than I ever had before.

-.....

-But the soil here is exceptionally quiet. And perhaps that silence is precisely what the flowers here need.

The Sword Emperor straightened his back and turned to look at me.

-Even before I experienced that true silence, I was amazed that you had already created such a place.

This time, I refrained from speaking back.

I merely nodded silently once.

-Thank you.

-Right.

For a moment, we continued our walk in silence.

The area we strolled through was known as the [Summer Section]. As Ester, with her hands clasped, prepared to summon rain in this place where the air was tepid like breath under a blanket, I remarked.

-This too, is wonderful.

-Yeah.

I nodded in agreement.

Passing by the weeping Ester, the Sword Emperor said:

-Gong-Ja.

-Yes.

-Did I ever tell you that if you can't reach the 99th floor, one day, Marcus the gramps might ascend in your stead?

Of course, I remembered his words.

-Do you also recall what I added to that?

Naturally, I remembered.

-That saying "instead" is ridiculous. Sir Sword Saint isn't my

substitute.

The Sword Emperor nodded.

-Despite that, I added that I believed you would understand what I meant by it.

Indeed.

-So.

The Sword Emperor asked.

-What do you think I meant by saying that?

-It's something I've thought about numerous times.

Thus, my answer came easily.

-Was it simply encouragement, telling me to cheer up

because you believe in me? Or was it a consideration, suggesting that it's okay for me to rest if things get tough because Sword Saint Marcus will handle it better?

-Neither, I presume.

Walking side by side with the Sword Emperor, I looked at him.

Before I knew it, my steps had become as natural as the words flowing from my mouth.

-Because I also remember what you added next.

『Honestly, you can fail.』

『.....』

『Faith is the belief that both parties will give their best. And the best is not determined by the other, but by oneself. Thus, a trusting relationship means each decides on their best and accepts the other's decision. That's all there is to it. That's all.』

-The important point isn't the permission to fail.

-It's the part where you explained what [faith] means right after saying you believe in me.

Therefore,

I was able to respond.

-[Either is fine.] ...That must have been the meaning.

-Whether I overcome this trial, or become an eternal prisoner of the desert in failure. Whether Sir Sword Saint ascends the 99th floor bearing my will, or he too meets an unexpected disaster and becomes a visitor never to return. You meant that it truly didn't matter which it was.

The Sword Emperor did not halt his steps. Much like in the Heaven of Truth, his pace quickened instead.

However, unlike those times when I had to grit my teeth and run to catch up, I could now follow by his side and continue my words.

-And it's not because you don't believe in me. Nor is it because you lack faith in the Sword Saint.

Thus, I continued.

-You believe in me.

And just as much, you believe in some old man who abandoned everything he had achieved to enter the tower.

-You believe in Sir Sword Saint.

And just as much, in a young man who fled to the tower in his youth and lived in seclusion in an alleyway on the first floor.

-You believe in the Grey Spider.

And just as much, in the resistance trampled by the Magic Tower.

-You believe in the Assistant Writer.



And just as much, surprisingly, in a petty villain who harassed the resistance, complained about the Mage Tower, and sought to satisfy his lust for power, even believing in a child like Charumu.

-You often say you're great. Sometimes, you boast so much I feel like hitting you. But there's a difference between your arrogance and that of the Flame Emperor.

It wasn't just about the Sword Emperor being truly great and the Flame Emperor not.

Even the Flame Emperor before regression was certainly a remarkable person. Whether it was the Sword Emperor, the Flame Emperor, or even myself, if we said we could do something, we would do it; if we said we would undertake something, we accomplished it.

But there was a crucial difference.

-The Flame Emperor believed [only he was special].

-That only he could do it. That he was unique. That only he could achieve it, and therefore, others couldn't possibly do the same... That was the driving force behind the Flame Emperor.

I looked at the Sword Emperor.

-But you, Sir Sword Emperor. If anything, you believe [you too are special].

In other words.

-You could do it. You had the potential to be special. There was no reason others couldn't do what you were capable of.

Thus.

-In a way, you believe in [everyone in this world].

So, that's why you said it back then.

-If not me, then the Sword Saint. If even the Sword Saint fails, then Anastasia or the Grey Spider. If they can't do it, then someone currently unknown to us will eventually reach the 99th floor. You believe that.

-Everyone has potential.

By the time we passed Ester, some time had elapsed. We had been swiftly walking through this garden ever since.

Over the fields.

Over the mountains.

Above the sea.

-Those who will make it, will make it. Those who won't, won't. People never change... That's something one might say only when their life has been too short and their perspective too narrow.

Thus, in the distance, we faced the land where the red rain fell.

-If it doesn't make sense to say, [That person could do it, but you can't], then naturally, the opposite, [I could do it, but others can't], is equally nonsensical.

Indeed. We had seemingly traversed the entire world together.

-That's a fair attitude.

The raindrops pierced through us and drummed on the ground.

-After all, haven't you always been like that as you looked at the crimson— the requiem for nameless deaths.

For the first time, truly able to [see] in the deepest sense, the scenery that unfolded was startlingly vivid. Rather than falling from above, the rain seemed to rise from below, gradually ascending.

-You sometimes reminisce about the days spent in that small room, saying,

『How did I end up here?』

-Others, upon seeing you during your times of collecting newspaper clippings about Yoo Soo-Ha, would click their tongues and say,

『What kind of idiot is this?』

『Nothing good will come out of someone like that.』

『I should never end up like that.』

-Yet...

As if walking through the rain was like stepping into water, where the positions of air and water seemed reversed, and red bubbles endlessly burst around us

-Here you are now.

My heart throbbed.

-People change. Given even the smallest opportunity, they transform. Isn't that what you've been proving over and over, day after day?

It was like the time I received praise from the director for the first time as a child.

-Was that all there was to it? Even the Grey Spider, who lived

unchanged for a thousand years, changed.

-.....

-Because of you? Of course. But was it something only you could have done?

Certainly, that could not be interpreted purely as a compliment.

Depending on how one took it, there was ample room for a malicious interpretation. It could be seen as the typical elder's reprimand, questioning why you can't be like me, or paradoxically, declaring one's own uniqueness.

However, I knew that wasn't the intent behind the Sword Emperor's words.

-Perhaps that's why the first skill I received upon entering the tower was this.

In the absence of malice, when words bear no hidden motives and serve purely as speech, the Sword Emperor's words conveyed their literal meaning.

-Skill Card Open.

The Sword Emperor raised his hand. From within the tattered robes, a skill card slid out.

On that skill card, it was written:

+

[I Can Become Just Like You]

Rank: F

Effect: You can see all the skills possessed by your opponent.

\*However, an opponent who has been defeated by you can copy one of your skills, making it their own. Opponents who have already been defeated by you once are excluded from this skill's effect. The skill to be copied is chosen at random.

+

I, as if spellbound, raised my hand.

-Skill Card Open.

I pulled out the first skill I had acquired and looked at it.

+

[I Want to Become Just Like You]

Rank: S+

Effect: Automatically activated when killed by an enemy. You copy one of the skills of the enemy that killed you and make it yours. You may not copy from an opponent you've already copied from. The copied skill is selected randomly.

\*However, you will die!

+



The two cards touched.

An F-rank skill and an S+ rank skill. The two skills reflected each other like facing mirrors.

Within the similar worlds separated by the two skills, the Sword Emperor and I... we faced each other and I said.

-Sword Emperor.

-Yes.

-What is your sanctuary like?

I stood in my sanctuary and asked.

-Even the Constellation Killer had a sanctuary. And since you're here on the 99th floor, it means you've created one as well. I am...

I am.

-Curious about what your sanctuary is like.

-Hm.

The Sword Emperor raised his hand.

His robe fluttered, and then...

-Ah.

A world unfolded before my eyes.



In the lightly sunlit forest, the morning glory stretched its neck even longer.

To half its size, with half its head bowed, again to half its size, the morning glory's heroic crown shrank, and as it shrank, dawn turned to morning, morning to midday, midday to evening, from the sunset where the sun dies...

As the sun grew weary,

Into a night that made the dead descend, in the sparsely  
rained wilderness, the sunflower unfolded its buds even wider,  
and ah...

Ah.

In that lightly sunlit, rain-scarce season, those who couldn't  
bloom just withered away, the people's flowers and the flowers'  
people, and the ten million flowers they intended to embrace,  
the ten million flowers they could have embraced, the ten  
million flowers they wanted to embrace.

Morning glories, spinning flowers, frost flowers, peonies,  
roses, globe amaranths...

The world...

A man sitting in a lotus position was there.

'.....'

A man dressed in tattered robes.

Sitting cross-legged, with a sword as tall as himself planted on the ground, amidst a flowerbed blooming with millions of flowers, there he sat. I knew that man— I knew him very well. I had seen him. Witnessed him.

Countless times, yet,

For the first time, I truly saw this non-translucent man.

The Sword Emperor.

The reason I couldn't speak his name was perhaps because I was not truly here.

Yet, despite that, I saw. I was able to see.

Only because he was showing it, I

could understand that much.

The man— the Sword Emperor, without opening his eyes, with his eyes closed, simply quietly opened his lips.

And, 'spoke.'

"Come, Kim Gong-Ja."

For the first time, I heard his voice.

"Here."

On the 99th floor.

"I will be waiting for you."

He was waiting for me.

# Chapter 388: The Time He Waited, The Time He Walked (1)

---

In the beginning, there was that which existed alone.

There was nothing else.

It stood solitary and thus could bear eternity by itself.

But being able to and having to are not the same. Just as it needed nothing else to be itself, it also thought it need not be alone.

For one to become two, it must be split.

It chose to be cleaved. With a great sword forged from its very essence, it divided itself. The lower half, split horizontally, sank to become the earth, while the upper half rose to become the heavens.

To commemorate the birth of the heavens and the earth, people named the moment of the first cleave the ‘Year of the Sword.’

Silvia.

A former Goldencup of the Sormewin Academy, currently the Chamberlain and Gardener of the King of Death's household.

She was oversleeping again today.

“Ugh... Hmm... Did you see... My Lord, no, Kim Gong-Ja... This is, [My True Power]...”

She must be having a pleasant dream.

At a point where she was starting to confuse whether her family name was Evanair or Evanile. Dreams were the only drug this world permitted her.

But of course, the bizarre and nightmarish world crafted by the merciless evil god that had ruined her life in its entirety did not wish for her to indulge in such sweet slumber.

"Silvia."

The voice that awoke the deeply slumbering Silvia belonged to a woman with a gentle demeanor.

Once an Immortal Dragon Emperor, a Goddess of Protection, an Imperial Sword Saint, and a sword known as 'Shiny,' among other disconnected careers amassed rather impressively in various unrelated fields, this woman was called Hwiya.

Now, she spends her time in the King of Death's household, having tea with Ester, her former nemesis who drove the world to ruin, or playing old Smash Bros games with her previous partner, Kim Yul, who helped her lead a life worthy of a title like [The bullied girl in school reincarnates into another world, meets a goddess, forgets her memories, and steadily walks the path of a God Slayer with her overpowering skill]...

Among those activities, one was to wake up the oversleeping Silvia.

"Silvia, it's time to get up."

"Hmm..."



“Silvia.”

“Five more minutes...”

Silvia mumbled as she clutched her goblin doll pillow tightly.

“Just five more minutes... Please, just shut up and wait a bit longer...”

Not getting angry was one of Hwiya's virtues.

She quietly waited for another five minutes before speaking again.

“Silvia, five minutes have passed.”

"Five minutes? That's commendable... If you waited five minutes... then you can wait ten... I believe... in your... [Will to Wait]..."

Being able to be convinced logically was another of Hwiya's virtues.

After another ten minutes, she said,

“Silvia, ten minutes have passed.”

“Nyh...”

“It’s time to wake up.”

“Why...?”

“You have work to do.”

“What if... I don’t want to work...?”

Silvia showed just one hand from under the pillow where her face was buried.

“Think about it... Goddess of Protection... Hwiya... Shiny... whatever. Just think...”

“I am not Shiny.”

“Oh, come on, it’s all the same, you light bulb... Anyway, just think... If I... don’t want to work... if I have such a golden will... what will you do...? Force me to work...?”

Silvia then spread just one finger and wagged it back and forth.

“No, no, no... You wouldn’t do that... not you, Shiny...”

“I told you, I’m not Shiny.”

“Hwiya, you’ll just let me sleep... And then, you will... gladly do my work for me...”

“Hmm... And why is that?”

Could this be yet another of Hwiya’s virtues, calmly responding even to such nonsensical babble?

Or, perhaps, it’s a flaw.

Either way, Silvia answered in a dreamy voice, as if she was half-asleep.

“Because you are... a goddess...”

"....."

“Goddess... please help... If you’re going to look like Verdandi anyway, might as well earn your keep... It’s Silvia... That’s all...”

“Silvia...”

Silvia didn’t respond further. Her hand, previously raised, dropped down.

She had drifted off. Back to the world of dreams. Leaving a goddess waiting for 15 minutes.

"....."

Even after such treatment, Hwiya did not get angry. That

was indeed a virtue, a strength.

Because not getting angry meant [There's no need for her to personally get angry]. Just as Silvia said, Hwiya was a goddess, and there were plenty who would get angry on her behalf.

So many that there might even be a few within Hwiya herself.

“Please, sister...”

“Understood. Leave it to me, sister.”

[The Goddess of Protection transforms into ~Sympathy Form~ of the Goddess of Protection.]

Hwiya's hair and wings turned black.

[The Goddess of Protection's Constellation is being adjusted.]

[The skill set of the Goddess of Protection is being changed.]

The robe Hwiya was wearing tightened around her, transforming from a flowing dress to a plain, dark-colored habit. Even her once platinum-like nails darkened.

A black angel had descended.

If Hwiya looked like she could be sued for trademark infringement by Verdandi, then one of Hwiya's Sword Facets, [The Stance of the Pity Sword], looked like it could receive a copyright infringement notice from the Salvation Army.

Even the personality seemed similar, judging by the way she spoke.

“Pain without injury.”

“Aaaahh!~”

Silvia leapt up like a cat that had just encountered a cucumber. The power of the Pity Sword, the ability to inflict pain, had snapped her awake.

“Ah, what is this! This is abuse of Silvia!”

“Are you awake now?”

“Awake? No. It’s like my sleep got scared off so far away that it’s never coming back. What the hell is this, really? Can’t you treat Silvia a bit more precious!?”

“Shall I give you another?”

“I’ll go wash up and come out.”

Silvia hurried off to the bathroom.

A while later, a refreshed Silvia emerged to find the original version of Hwiya had set the table for breakfast.

Silvia grumbled as she mixed her egg rice bowl thoroughly.

“Do you know? It’s because of such reluctance to get your hands dirty that the Aegim Empire ended up doing that to the advisors. Reflect on it.”

“Ah, indeed. Could that also be related...?”

Hwiya frowned, looking downcast.

Silvia stared at her, then banged her rice bowl with a spoon until it clanged.

“What... are you even talking about? You were sealed by that guy you summoned. And now you're saying [Could that also be related]? What's that about?”

“But still...”

“Stop blaming yourself. I was just ranting because I was annoyed. Gods aren't supposed to be this naive, right?”

Having inhaled the egg rice and guzzled down the sungnyung\*, Silvia finished her meal in a flash. She stretched as she stood up, while Hwiya silently waited by her side, still wearing a somber expression.

\*Sungnyung is a traditional Korean infusion made from boiled scorched rice.

Silvia clicked her tongue and draped her gardener's uniform over her shoulders, then asked,



"By the way, what were you fighting about?"

"Excuse me?"

"Kim Yul, or Kim Yulmu Cha, whatever his name is. There must've been a reason to summon him. You even fought with him for a while, didn't you? What was that all about? I'm curious."

"Ah, well."

Silvia had a habit of oversleeping so often that the Director changed the morning assembly to the evening. Ester was furious, accusing Silvia of inconveniencing the elders, while Kim Yul silently stood by, exerting a non-verbal pressure on her. But Silvia, embodying the spirit of this nation that bows to no unjust authority, stoically endured.

This meant there was still plenty of time until the assembly. Carrying a spade, Silvia and Hwiya, with a bucket full of sunset, walked towards the garden, chatting.

Hwiya answered,

"I fought with another version of myself."

"Good heavens. After all that tea time and camaraderie with the advisors... and now this alter form, when did the Viper virus spread that far..."

"No, no! Really, I mean it! I truly fought with another me."

Hwiya, unusually flustered, waved her hands in denial.

Silvia, skeptical, crossed her arms and said,

"Explain, please."

Perhaps due to her innate kindness, or shocked by the alarming accusation of being infected by the Viper virus, Hwiya willingly explained the fight.

According to Kim Yul, who joined them in the garden, the explanation went like this:

"Hwiya was split into two at that time. There was a bad

Hwiya and a good Hwiya."

"Are you a slime creature?"

Kim Yul, who had recently begun to reclaim his emotions, wasn't as tolerant as Hwiya. He shot a rubber band at Silvia.

Feeling the physical sting, Silvia gritted her teeth.

"Ouch! What are you doing!"

"Head maid. You may insult me, but do not insult my former comrades. That is truly testing my patience."

"Oh, right. Just a thought, but who was it that backstabbed that very same revered old comrade of yours?"

"...Above all, a slime? Either a minor monster or a formidable foe that's hard to kill without magic and fire, such ambiguous titles should be avoided. Clear language leads to a clear mind. Silvia, as the head maid, you're responsible for maintaining the cleanliness of the household. It's something you need to be more aware of."

"You're changing the subject, aren't you?"

Kim Yul cleared his throat and began rifling through his notebook.

"Anyway, there are two types of sanctuaries. There are sanctuaries that are [created] by someone, like this one or the Constellation Killer's, and those that are simply [born]."

"Oh?"

"Cheomsan World... Or Hwiya's world was a [born] sanctuary. Everything there originated from Hwiya's body. The entire mountain range covering the continent was formed from the decaying corpse of a giant dragon."

"Ho?"

"That dragon was also one of Hwiya's true forms. Thus, the long battle with herself ended with only two factions of Hwiya remaining. I was summoned by the weaker, kinder Hwiya to fight against the stronger, evil Hwiya."

Hwiya chimed in with nods and hums, crossing her wings as

if they were arms.

"In a way, it was a process of [rebirth]. The battle that would ultimately decide what Hwiya would become. Just as the Lord cleared the trials of the 70th floor and became a complete constellation, Hwiya went through a similar process."

Kim Yul shared the lengthy tale of how he broke each of the evil Hwiya's wings, one by one, converting their strength into his own, how he transformed Cheomsan World in the process, and how he gathered more people under his and Hwiya's banners.

"It sounds like a story that, if the cruel parts were cut out, would make for a perfect 24-episode animation to be aired in the morning."

Hwiya reminisced with a nostalgic look.

Kim Yul tilted his head.

"Really? I think it sounds like a story that, if made into an SRPG, could sell about 100,000 copies."

Silvia merely showed a look of utter disgust, not bothering to comment on this delusional combo's self-assessment.

Kim Yul asked,

"So, that's the story. Any more questions?"

"So, you did change the subject earlier, right?"

A brief skirmish ensued, with rubber bands flying and the spade slicing through the air.

"Anyway, get to work! It's almost mealtime."

"Yessir. Oh, my fate."

Thus, the three of them delved into tending the garden.

While Hwiya fluttered about, collecting sunsets, and Kim Yul shaped a long rock with his aura-infused hedge trimmers, Silvia knelt, turning the soil and muttering,

"Ah, really... I wish I could fight myself right now. Being unlucky Silvia and having a lucky Silvia knock me down and absorb me... No, wait, that would be annoying in its own way too. If there's going to be absorption, I should be the one doing it. Sucking all the luck out of that Silvia to become the one true lucky being... Hmm."

Silvia stopped mid-sentence, her own soliloquy perhaps too pitiful even for her.

"Ugh."

At the end of Silvia's gaze lay a small marigold.

She had noticed its roots slightly exposed.

"It cried so much yesterday... not like it's some big-eyed frog. Oh. Come to think of it, there was that time I was a frog... Tsk."

Silvia scooped up some soil with her spade and covered the exposed roots, grumbling,

"Lord, come back soon. How long are you going to stay up

there, leaving the flowers like this?"

Of course, there was no response to her grumbling, as Hwiya and Kim Yul were far away.

Regardless, Silvia continued to tenderly cover the marigold's roots while muttering,

"Or are you already there? Given how elusive you are, maybe you're hiding there with your invisibility skill... Oof. If by any chance you're there, please shake that carrot flower over there... Whoa, damn, that scared me!"

Silvia was startled.

A sudden breeze had shaken the carrot flower.

"That really shook me up... Are you there?"

Startled by the unexpected gust, Silvia managed to calm her heart.



"There's no way, now that I think about it."

Silvia scratched the back of her head.

"Damn."

The grumbling continued.

"You made me like this. This, well, it's not bad... not bad, but especially when I see the Crown Prince Kim Hwang-Tae turning from pollock to dried pollock, I think, ah, I'm better off... but still."

Silence.

"I'm not the only one you've made like this."

Silence.

"There are many of us... so."

And then,

"Come back soon. Please."

[Key manifestation complete.]

Somewhere, such a declaration echoed.

[All residents from the 81st to 90th floor remember you.]

[The 91st floor stage has been cleared.]

Such proclamations of the Tower did not reach Silvia.

What Silvia heard was merely this,

"Silvia, let's go have lunch together!"

"Ah, yes."

Responding to Hwiya's call, Silvia got up from her spot.

After giving the well-covered marigold one last look, Silvia stretched her limbs.

"What's for lunch today?"

"Today, we're eating out. Let's go to the Planetarium."

"Ah, okay. Understood. ...Well then."

With a flick of her finger, Silvia activated a power granted to the vassals of the King of Death's household, opening a staircase connected to another layer of the sanctuary.

"Let's go chew on some salad while looking at that annoying hamster's face."

Silvia, Hwiya, and Kim Yul made their way down the staircase, one step at a time.

And following them, someone who had heard the Tower's

declarations also began descending the stairs.

[You are entering the 92nd floor.]

# Chapter 389: The Time He Waited, The Time He Walked (2)

---

Thus, the heavens and the earth faced each other, but neither was content with just their counterpart; they yearned for something beside them as well.

So, the heavens forged a sword, and the earth did likewise. This time, with an adversary present, there was no need for self-sacrifice.

The heavens swung down their sword towards the earth, and the earth raised its blade against the heavens.

Hundreds of clashes ensued.

Winds poured down from the chasms in the sky, and water burst forth from the fissures in the earth.

The fragmented heavens were sealed into various moments like spring, summer, autumn, winter, polar night, midnight sun, new moon, and full moon. The split earth was divided into dozens of continents and hundreds of thousands of islands, each becoming a unique ecosystem preserved in time.

To honor the birth of climate and seas, seasons and life, people named the moment of the second clash the 'Month of the Sword.'

Planetarium.

In a brunch café serving as a mid-way base in the World of the Lone Child, an unexpected commotion was taking place.

"Uhehehe, miss, let's climb the tower together~"

A punk with a Mohican hairstyle roughly grabbed a frail-looking woman's wrist, insisting as his tongue, adorned with a small piercing, flicked incessantly.

"Pl-Please let go..."

The woman, wearing glasses, shrank in fear, but the

Mohican punk was relentless.

"Come on, let's climb the tower~ Don't be satisfied with the floor you're on now, embrace an insatiable desire for improvement and aim for the 100th floor~ Muhehehe~"

"Uh...someone, please help me..."

Like a subordinate facing a boss who unilaterally sets impossible targets, the woman sobbed, calling for help.

But cruelly, it seemed there was no one in this tower willing to assist her.

Was it this injustice that touched a nerve of a girl who was about to quietly have her meal?

"Ah... really. Can't even let me eat in peace."

A girl, who had been enjoying her meal with a spade strapped to her waist, stood up.

It was no secret; the girl was none other than the [Chamberlain of the King of Death Family]. Her power could shroud the heavens and shatter the earth. Once she intervened, the fate of the punk was sealed to be effortlessly vanquished.

However, in the end, the girl did not need to act.

"Stop it, head maid of King of Death."

"Hmm?"

Voices called out to halt the girl.

Justice existed in the world, after all.

"You are..."

"It's our turn to step in."

The ones who stopped the girl were men.



Dressed in white doboks\*, their backs emblazoned with the large character for "Heaven" (天).

\*Dobok (Korean: 도복) is the uniform worn by practitioners of Korean martial arts, such as taekwondo. Do means "way" and bok means "clothing". The dobok came from the Japanese keikogi/dōgi, used in Japanese martial arts, such as judo.

"The beautiful hands of the King of Death's head maid are not meant for disposing of such trivial trash, right?"

The man in the lead spoke, and the girl took her seat.

Then, with a raised eyebrow, she remarked,

"Ah... please go ahead. Right now, I must attend to this fellow named [Seafood Cream Pasta]."

The men in white doboks smiled and crossed their arms in unison.

"Alright then."

"To prevent such petty villains from running rampant."

"That's what we're here for, after all."

The men in doboks stood up and slowly approached.

Only one remained silent, his hood deeply drawn, but they all walked towards the Mohican punk.

Thud, thud.

Their simple white attire belied the weight of their stride, reminiscent of elephants that once roamed the Serengeti when it was still a savanna.

"Hey, that's enough, okay?"

"Eh? What's this? Who are you guys?"

The Mohican punk sneered, baring his teeth.

The man in the lead shook his head as if to say it was unavoidable, revealing his face from the shadows. Seeing the lead man's face, the Mohican punk chuckled.

"What's this? All tough and then just a pretty little kid?"

Indeed.

The man leading in the dobok, upon closer inspection, seemed more a boy than a man.

A Mohican punk and a delicate-looking youth. At first glance, one might worry for the latter in this dire mismatch.

But the youth, with a smile that could steal the hearts of girls in a second, said,

"My name is Gahaeil."

"What?"

"Once the successor of the The Orthodox Path's True

Heavenly Sword Sect, bearing the [Martial Name] of [Sun Piercing Sword], but now, after various circumstances, registered in the Celestial Martial Guild with my current [Alias], Haruto."

Introducing himself as Haruto, the youth snapped his fingers.

"Let's skip the rest of the introductions. —Hunter Card, open."

With a pop, a card-shaped luminescence flickered in the air.

"Huh? A Hunter Card? At your age, your rank would be... Aaahhh! This, this rank is...!?"

The Mohican hunter, who scoffed at the card, screamed in agony.

It was inevitable, a sure thing.

What was there to hide? And even if hidden, where could it be concealed?

The Hunter ranks of the men in doboks were astonishingly, on average, [B-Rank].

And when it came to Haruto, who revealed his card---

"A, A-Rank Hunter...!!"

For context, [Hunters] refer to those who climb the tower, and among them, these individuals belonged to the [Strongest] category. Being highly regarded even within one of the [Five Great Guilds], the Celestial Martial Guild, their prowess was evident.

"I-I didn't realize!"

Like a frog encountering a snake, the Mohican hunter dropped to his knees, bowing his head.

Looking down on the pitiful sight of the petty villain, Haruto, with a face filled with melancholy, said—

"Really, it's too much to bear watching this unfold. Can we please stop this farce???"

"Why stop, junior... It was just getting to a good point..."

Haruto, looking awkward, scratched the back of his head.

The man who had remained silent under his hood suddenly burst out in frustration, throwing off his dobok.

"Enough with this bullshit! Seriously, all of you... Haruto or whatever, just all of you are a pain!"

Discarding his dobok revealed a handsome man with dark, flowing hair.

Haruto was at a loss for words.

"Come on, Yoo Soo-ha, that's a bit harsh, isn't it...?"

"Harsh? What's harsh is the mere existence of you guys!"

"What did we even do...?"

"Do what? Do what, you ask!?"

"Um..."

Haruto could only repeat "Um" and "It's not like that," as if an indoor person was being oppressed by an outdoor enthusiast's club.

So accustomed was the scene that none of the guests or staff at the Planetarium added their spoons to the turmoil. The head maid of the King of Death's household and the other two vassals who had finished their meal beside her had already returned to their own sanctuaries, no longer present there.

Perhaps that was why Yoo Soo-ha vented his frustration, pointing at others.

"What are you all looking at? Do something!"

Where Yoo Soo-ha pointed, an old man and a boy, their hands cupped like tulips under their chins, were enjoying the commotion with glee.

The boy spoke first.

"Did you know? Surströmming might seem like an odd food at first, but as you eat it, you come to understand the intricate flavors."

The old man added,

"Why would I hold back? At my age, I should have some entertainment like watching this."

"That's too much...! That's why you get called a water flea, old man...!"

The bespectacled woman, who had been harassed by the Mohican punk, scolded the old man.

The old man retorted angrily.

"What are you doing? You, who've now claimed the title of Master Alchemist, sitting here pretending to be bullied by such riff-raff!"

The Mohican punk seemed even more shocked by this.



The woman called Master Alchemist pointed at the Mohican punk, protesting her innocence.

"H-How dare you...! Look at him...! He's scary...!"

"Good grief, you're scarier!! Do you know how often your disciple comes to me, begging for leniency? 'The professor is so scary, if I go back she'll torment me again, Professor Shawn, please give me some extra lessons,' he says..."

"What...?"

The Master Alchemist pressed her glasses firmly up her nose.

This brunch café, the Planetarium, was carved from the Great Library of All Knowledge. The Great Library gathered various world fragments under the name 'Apocalypse,' thus the Planetarium was inhaling the air from countless worlds just beyond a thin sheet of paper.

Perhaps that's why, although the atmosphere of a space is usually determined by the actions of those within it, the Planetarium was particularly susceptible to changes.

When the Mohican punk caused a disturbance, it resembled a cheap bar; when the disciples of the Celestial Martial Guild intervened, it took on an inexplicably bizarre ambiance; and when Yoo Soo-ha yelled, it was as fiery as a blaze. However, with the simple gesture of the Master Alchemist, the café welcomed a winter's night.

"Ahaaaa... I see... Yes... What should I do with this ungrateful wretch... I should probably head back for now..."

Feeling a strong sense of duty, the Master Alchemist made her way out of the Planetarium.

The boy looked at the old man indifferently.

"What?"

"Don't you feel sorry for the disciple of Lady Apothecary?"

"Who asked him to take up her cause? He's getting what he deserves."

"Did you know? I'm starting to like your character..."

The old man snorted. Meanwhile, the Mohican hunter sneakily crawled away.

Yoo Soo-ha, having witnessed it all, rubbed his forehead.

"Crazy bunch..."

The former disciples of the Celestial Martial Guild looked at Yoo Soo-ha warily, worried about his reaction.

Yoo Soo-ha, realizing anew the insanity of his seniors, slapped his chest in frustration.

"Ah, really. Gong-Ja, oh you damn Gong-Ja! Do you see? Do you understand? This is the fucking world you've created!"

"It doesn't seem like such a bad world to me..."

"Senior, please, let's get the train of keeping your mouth shut moving... Departing in 3~ 2~ 1~"

"No..."

Haruto clamped his mouth shut. At his reaction, Yoo Soo-ha, once again infuriated, took a deep breath before exhaling sharply.

"We shouldn't have just let him off when he suddenly started doing the Cossack dance... Should have made him dance more. Left him in some desolate void to dance forever..."

[The God Who Dances in Emptiness expresses serious concern and mild regret.]

Such proclamations of the tower did not reach Yoo Soo-ha.

He simply pulled his hood down further and approached the old man, saying,

"Hey, boomer... pack me some food."

"What'll it be?"

"Oh, the usual... You know, the thing that old geezer likes. What's it called, risotto? That."

"As always, no respect... Reminds me of me when I was young. Ah, well."

Despite his grumbling, the old man expertly took the order, fired up the stove, and began cooking, pulling out mineral waters that Evian would envy.

Watching him, Yoo Soo-ha urged his seniors.

"What are you doing! Hurry up and get ready to go. Lunchtime is almost over, you know?"

"But we haven't even finished eating yet..."

"Then take it with you and eat on the way! Always so unreliable, my seniors."

"No..."

Despite their awkward situation, they were still considered high-ranking disciples of Martial Alliance. They skillfully continued their meal, holding bowls and chopsticks in hand.

Yoo Soo-ha looked back at the old man.

"And that... You know, the old geezer. He said to take a vacation and come visit sometime. Bring Sword Saint along too."

"Why?"

"Why, you ask? Probably misses an old man like himself. Go play some Go or something."

"That Great Axe Sage..."

The old man finished cooking while mumbling, but not without a hint of fondness in his expression.

Taking the packaged meal, Yoo Soo-ha addressed his seniors.

"Let's go."

The disciples of the Celestial Martial Guild laughed softly, closing their bowls and chopsticks.

"Yes, junior."

"Let's return to our [Fortress]."

"To the pinnacle of the Orthodox Path, [Heavenly Martial Alliance]---"

Yoo Soo-ha sighed.

"Dear God, please realize the enormity of your sins..."

[Key manifestation complete.]

[All the Apostles you recruited have offered sincere prayers to you.]

And so, once again, the Tower's proclamation echoed from somewhere.

[The 92nd floor stage has been cleared.]

Yoo Soo-ha, as before, did not hear it.

He simply muttered curses and complaints, leading his senior disciples out of the Planetarium.

And following them, someone who had heard the tower's declarations slowly walked on.

[You are entering the 93rd floor.]



# Chapter 390: The Time He Waited, The Time He Walked (3)

---

The great slashes embroidered the world four times in total.

With the third slash, [Humans] were finally born. People named the moment of this third slash the ‘Day of the Sword.’

The fourth slash saw [Humans], who were once a singular entity, diversify into countless [Races], [Nations], [Cities], [Villages], [Tribes], and [Families], eventually giving rise to [Individuals]. This moment of the fourth slash was named the ‘Era of the Sword.’

And time marched on.

To distinguish from the Year of the Sword, the Year of the Axe, the Year of the Spear, the Year of the Bow, and more were established.

Similarly, to differentiate from the Month of the Sword, the Month of the Armor, the Month of the Shield, the Month of the Bracelet, and others were created.

Likewise, countless Days and Eras were established to differentiate from the Day of the Sword and the Era of the Sword, further dividing time into countless Minutes and Seconds.

Some called this meticulous naming of time the fifth slash, but it didn't gain unanimous support. Regardless, the fragmented moments began their own cycles.

Finally, the moment arrived when the Year of the Sword, the Month of the Sword, the Day of the Sword, the Era of the Sword, the Minute of the Sword, and the Second of the Sword interlocked perfectly like gears.

It was also the moment he was forged.

---

Temples are usually the sanctums where gods, defining the providence of their world, reside. Or they become refuge for ousted gods seeking shelter from other more domineering deities.

However, this temple was neither.

This temple was the husk of that god.

Clank!

Ruins.

In the flow of endlessly turning gears, throughout a time so vast it became meaningless to count, the temple, amidst an eternal winter that eventually arrived, was nothing more than a festering scab on the skin, impossible to shed.

Clank

Clank

Clank

Within that husk, the sound of two hard entities colliding echoed.

Clank!

One of them was a small fist.

A fist clenched as if gripping the world, striking down with matching force.

Clank...!

Each time, a shockwave that seemed to cleave the heavens and shake the earth reverberated.

Clank!

The other was a metallic fiend.

At a glance, the metal ingot seemed to be ablaze. It was that red. But upon closer inspection, it wasn't sparks that fell with each punch, but rust. The ingot appeared so vividly red because it was entirely corroded from end to end.

Clank!

The girl wielding the fist had golden hair.

It wasn't the sticky hue of dense honey, rather, her hair was so wispy that if coated with glue and flung into the air, it seemed it would scatter like dandelion seeds.

Clank.....!

Between the swaying golden wheat, reminiscent of a scarecrow left after a storm, stood two broken things.

They were broken horns.

The girl was not human.

She was one of the oldest Dragon Emperors and held one of the broadest territories in the heavens as one of the Constellations.

"Ruin-Harvesting Cow, right?"

Someone called out the girl's divine name.

The girl's fist, which had been pummeling the metal ingot, paused momentarily.

She glanced sideward, letting only her gaze drift. The rustling hair allowed an easy view through the fringes covering her eyes, making it effortless for her to see who had called her.

Her lips twitched slightly.

"Viper?"

"Yeah, you might not know who I am but— Eh!? How'd you know?!"

The man with grey hair, who had been leaning against a temple pillar watching the girl, was taken aback.

Clank!

The Ruin-Harvesting Cow, Mutia, resumed hammering the metal ingot, replying nonchalantly.

"What do you think is required of a god?"

"Uh... Diligence?"

Caught off-guard by the sudden question, Viper responded reflexively.

Mutia paused her punching momentarily, then nodded.

"You know well. It's evidence you've properly played your part as a god."

"Ah, I've had my fair share of struggles... No, that's not the point..."

"A god is essentially a servant."

Clank!

Mutia struck the metal ingot again.

"Thus, a good god is, in essence, a good servant."

"Uh..."

"So, the Tower Master would be considered the best god to everyone."

Clank!

Amidst the metallic sounds, Viper fell silent. The subject of the Tower Master was still something he couldn't grasp.

Mutia continued.

"I might not be as much as the Tower Master, but I am a good god too. And the virtue of a servant is diligence."

Clank!

"In a brief moment of negligence, due to that diligence lapsing, I lost my horns."



Clank!

"Someone from the same world as the one who cut off my horns, and even got hit by him, is you. It's only natural to remember and be prepared."

"Hmm... It's an honor, but at the same time, it's kind of infuriating."

Viper scratched his head, then murmured, "Well, I guess I should accept the role of a rival," and looked at Mutia.

"Aren't you going to ask why I came?"

"You'll explain it anyway, either through words or actions."

"Well, yes, but... you could've also gone, [You came here for this reason, didn't you?] like you guessed my name."

"Why should I show my hand?"

"Even for a good servant...?"

"I said the virtue of a servant is diligence, not some foolish swagger."

Viper clamped his mouth shut. With Mutia also silent, for a while, only the sound of the god's fist striking the metal ingot filled the husk of the god.

Viper hesitated, then spoke.

"Do you know about hammers? They could make this easier..."

As he spoke, Viper thought.

[A hammer? What's that?]

[Ah, this is called a 'hammer'... It makes it easier to strike metal.]

[Amazing, Viper...! How could the World of the Lone Child have such overwhelming techniques and dedication even for something as simple as hammering metal...!]

"Viper. Listening to that is too unpleasant even for me; can you stop?"

"I didn't say anything!?"

"You were thinking it."

"Well... Even if thoughts are my own, you can't just invade privacy like that, even if you're a renowned Constellation... Anyway, there are hammers..."

"This..."

Clank!

"Is my horn."

Clank!

"To forge my horn, it had to be with my fist. Every other metal was too soft."

"Indeed."

Having once lived among people as a god and worked as a blacksmith, Viper rested his chin in his hand.

"Hmm... So that's why it's rusted..."

"My horn can only be rusted by time. Every flame is too cold."

"Indeed."

Viper sighed.

"Time is your domain. So, only you can melt and break your own body."

"That's right."

"It makes sense, but that's all it does."

Viper crossed his arms.

"The one who cut off your horns was Kim Gong-Ja."

Clang.....!

With a sharp sound, the metal struck by the fist let out a massive scream.

It was the death throes, and at the same time, a baby's first cry.

[Congratulations!]

In a tone more vibrant than usual, the tower's proclamation echoed.

[An item of unmeasurable grade!]

[You have created the 13th World-class Artifact!]

This announcement was heard by Mutia, and by Viper as well.

Viper tensed up. Unperturbed, Mutia stood up.

After swinging the newly forged sword a couple of times, she displayed it with a snap, making a sound.

+

[Harvester of Returnees]

Rarity: World-class

Creator: Ruin-Harvesting Cow

Description: A sword of obsession forged from her own horn by the Harvester of Ruins. It is what you might call a ‘time-traveling homing missile.’ In other words, a ‘Returnee-Killing Missile’... Terrifying, right? Anyone killed by this sword and who returns (time-travels back) brings the sword along with them. So, what does that mean? They die again as soon as they return... And if they return again? They die again immediately. All hope is lost for anyone killed by this sword...

That's what it signifies.

+

Viper swallowed dryly.

"The reason I came here is because of a certain prophecy."

Mutia kept her gaze on the sword, silent.

Viper continued.

"Not a fake prophet, but a real prophet has appeared in our tower."

"....."

"The prophecy said, Mutia, that you would become a formidable enemy of Kim Gong-Ja."

While speaking, Viper activated his skill.

"Unrivaled Under the Heavens is activated."

His SS-grade skill, [Unrivaled Under the Heavens], shows the opponent's expected moves, allowing him to anticipate and counter their next actions.

Simple but powerful. It's like knowing what your opponent will play in rock-paper-scissors and then making your move.

Of course, even the simplest fight is more complex than rock-paper-scissors, almost like adding rock-paper-scissors to a subtract-one rule. However, or rather for that very reason, if wielded by someone who knows how to use it, the true value of this skill is immeasurable.

And of course, Viper was one who knew how to wield it well.

That's when it happened.

"Shut up..."



Mutia muttered disdainfully.

Taking those words to be directed at him, Viper bit his lip and prepared to adopt a full battle stance.

It was a misunderstanding. Mutia's words were not aimed at Viper.

Her eyes weren't even on Viper.

"Speak only what needs to be said, like a salvation consultant."

"Hmm...?"

Viper looked puzzled, but Mutia didn't respond.

Her attention was fixed on the item description.

Shortly after, the item description squirmed and changed.

+

Description: But that's too stiff, isn't it? As the person in charge of item messages, I dream, along with my sister who handles skill messages, of being more human-like, more approachable representatives. (Strong sense of duty) To become a more proactive tower, I'll do my best!!! (Sincere ambition)

+

Mutia pressed her forehead.

"Crazy, really. As if they weren't already from the line of the Maiden."

"Eh? Maiden? If you're talking about the Mirage Maiden, that's my line..."

Viper puffed out his chest as he spoke.

Only then did Mutia glance at Viper, sighed in a manner similar to before, raised her hand, and swung it down.

Crash.....!

With a loud bang, the sword [Harvester of Returnees] that Mutia had just forged split in two.

"What in the madness!?"

The tower's item manager was astonished.

"You've just destroyed a world-class item of immeasurable grade...!?"

Viper too looked dumbfounded.

"What are you doing....."

"That wasn't what I intended to make in the first place."

Brushing off her hands, Mutia continued.

"Your mention of him mixed in malicious thoughts. That's what created it."

"....."

"Something that has already been made. Using it as it is made might be amusing, but I am the representative of time. I cannot accept coincidences caused by me."

Thus, Mutia began to reforge her own horn, now reverted to an ingot, once again.

Clang, clang! The sound resounded starkly within the temple.

Viper watched in silence for a while.

"What were you trying to make?"

"Not a weapon."

Clang!

"Something not meant to be swung at the living."

Clang!

"Something you were boasting about being unaware of."

Clang!

"A blacksmith's hammer is what I am making."

Viper was silent for a moment before asking,

"What will it be used for?"

"Anything."

Clang!

"To create a tool for someone to use, not to use someone as a tool, just for once."

Clang!

"That way, at least, it will be closer to him who broke my horn than that trash item from before—"

Clang!

Viper took note of her answer and pondered deeply.

[Unrivalled Under the Heavens has been deactivated.]

Then, Viper asked,

"Need help?"

"Hmm?"

"Yeah. I've done some blacksmithing... You said only your fist works, but just in case, right?"

Viper rolled up his sleeves and grinned.

"After all, this fist almost pierced through his heart."

Mutia frowned.

It wasn't for long. She snorted, turned away, and said,

".....Do as you like."

So Viper did just that.

Clang!

Clang!

As different sounds filled the air, time passed.

Crash.....!

A shockwave burst forth.

Like a crack forming in an egg, fissures appeared, and from within, a sharp, clear luminescence exploded.

And then.

[Congratulations!]

The temple began to crumble.

As if a husk long shed was only now accepting its fate to collapse.

[An item of unmeasurable grade!]

Crack.

Crack!



The roof caved in, and the pillars supporting the temple buckled. Initially, the pillars swelled as if suffering from indigestion, and then, with a rumble, they crumbled, spewing dust.

The shockwave had brought down the temple from the inside.

[You are the first to create something beyond a World-class Artifact—]

That day, at that moment, it is said that everyone who set foot in the tower heard that proclamation.

[Key manifestation complete.]

But.

[The Constellations linked to you have changed their way of life because of you, and as a result, they can no longer exist in the same way as before.]

The fact that another proclamation of the tower, audible only to one, also resounded, was not known.

[The 93rd floor stage has been cleared!]

The one who heard the tower's proclamation looked down upon the ruins, at the man with an eyepatch joyfully holding up a blacksmith's hammer and the girl with broken horns.

Then, turning around, they began to walk slowly.

[You are entering the 94th floor.]

# Chapter 391: The Time He Waited, The Time He Walked (4)

---

From the moment he was forged, he was a solitary blade.

[Oh! It's done!]

[It's finally forged!]

Many people do not remember the first moment the world gnawed at them. It is only after time has nurtured the body, and the body has made the mind resilient, that meaningful cognition arises and creates memories. But for him, the length of his existence was synonymous with his memories.

[At last, it has been created!]

[It has been tempered!]

[The Grand Magic is complete!]

[It is what we have finally forged!]

Those surrounding the completely formed person called out thus.

[The Primal Blade!]

He looked around at the people.

[Oh!]

[Primal Blade!]

The people gathered before him seemed empty. Their emaciated fingers testified that everything they had grasped in their lives had slipped away like sand.

Those fingers, quivering like countless seaweeds in the deep sea, clutched at his sleeves.

[Our]

The destitute spoke.

[Sorrow]

[Pain]

They said.

[Disappointment] [Despair]

They voiced.

[Agony] [Suffocation] [Hunger] [Thirst]

They articulated.

[Recognize us!]

[Take responsibility for us!]

Thus, the destitute cried out in unison.

[Save us!]

He looked intently at them, then turned his head away.

The people who gathered behind him seemed frail. Their trembling legs revealed the hardship of the paths they had walked thus far, and the fear of the paths yet to come.

One by one, their legs folded like logs, kneeling at his feet.

[Our]

The weak spoke.

[Future]

[Fear]

They voiced.

[Hope] [Longing]

They declared.

[Waiting] [Regret] [Fear] [Wish]

They articulated.

[Feel for us!]

[Bear our burdens!]

[Take responsibility for us!]

Thus, the weak cried out in unison.

[Lead us!]

There were many such people.

Since the Primal Strike, no light had ever penetrated this place. Inside a cave where only darkness festered and rotted, countless people had gathered. Wherever he turned his head, there was such a crowd. They beseeched, implored, pleaded, and begged him.

From the moment he was forged, he was a solitary blade, signifying that he was ready for the targets and reasons he had to swing for.

In other words, he was the protagonist of this world.

[This world exists solely for you.]

The one who governed the Grand Magic stated.

[All other humans are but phantoms. Straw men. Empty cans.]



The one who made such declarations did not seem destitute or weak. They did not resemble a phantom, a straw man, or an empty can.

Yet, the orchestrator continued unwaveringly.

[If there is any reason for the existence of others in this world, it is solely to be shattered by you.]

[To prove that you are right.]

Pointing at the destitute.

[To be saved by you.]

Pointing at the weak.

[To be protected by you.]

Pointing at himself and then at others.

[To be surpassed by you.]

Somehow, he could sense the truth in those words.

‘Is that so.’

He understood.

‘In this vast world, am I the only one who is special?’

Am I...

alone?

Dusk had settled.

The shadows left by the sun were gradually devoured. This corrosion occurred sporadically, and the dark spots claimed their places like constellations in the sky. Though everything would turn dark eventually, for now, they only spread their roots on the twilight. Beside them, a spider was dying. Next to the convulsing spider, a slender, trembling finger hovered.

It was the hand of a pale and thin woman. Following the green veins on the back of her hand up her slender wrist and arm, one could see that they extended like branches of a tree on a winter day. The woman, gasping for breath with her face buried in the dirt, was the Grey Spider.

The Grey Spider was dying.

"....."

The bitter fate built by the Magic Tower. The hatred she accumulated. The endless challenges had eventually brought down her, who was once the emperor of the 50th floor.

"We won..."

Someone next to the dying spider spoke.

"Finally. At last, we've won."

The Grey Spider knew precisely who the voice belonged to.

Even in the darkness, it didn't matter. Despite nearly losing her sight and hearing, she could tell.

Despite the multitude of people gathered around the Grey Spider, despite so many witnessing her demise, the Grey Spider could identify the owner of the voice accurately.

Because she knew them all.

“What a monster!”

The man who just spat out those words was named Rodrick.

He was a werewolf from the White Wolf World, who had lost his family to the Magic Tower. The mages of the tower cherished the Moon Circle Stones embedded deep within the hearts and brains of werewolves as materials for ornaments. The more the werewolves starved, the brighter the Moon Circle Stones glowed, so the tower made it standard practice to imprison werewolves and starve them to death to harvest the stones.

“Devil...”

The sobbing woman was named Yichunlin.

Yichunlin came from the Dragon Fire World. Her race, called Diliks, resembled trees more than humans. A rare example in the lineage of intelligent life.

The boundless expansion of power and inflated self-awareness turn the living space of others into one's own stepping stone. The mages of the tower gladly substituted the rarity of Diliks for preciousness. Renowned mages planted Diliks in their personal flower pots, trimmed their various appendages with knives and scissors to their liking. The fruit that they bore once a year, apart from tasting good, enhanced the magic power of the eater, making it a favored delicacy.

“I wanted to be the one to kill her.”

The Grey Spider knew the name of the one muttering so.

“It was my right to have that privilege.”

She knew well where the one grinding their teeth in anger had come from.

“I...”

“Only I...”

“It should have been me...”

All of them had reasons to wish for her death.

The Grey Spider had been the queen of the Magic Tower. She bore the responsibility for all the deeds committed by the tower. It wasn't as if the Grey Spider was innocent.

Her hands were stained a deep red, burdened by far too many unnecessary bloodsheds.

“It was supposed to be me first.”

“Don't joke! My right to challenge came first.”

“Why couldn't you even wait for my turn...”

Growling voices surrounded the Grey Spider, weaving a web of enmity and tension with their words and breaths.

Someone stepped forward.

“Stop it.”

The Grey Spider knew who this someone was.

She knew that this individual wished for her death more than anyone else present.

This someone was the very person who had defeated her—the challenger in the recent battle.

“What’s this?”

“You think winning the challenge gives you the right to preside over this?”

“You're not sympathizing with this monster, are you?”

People bared their teeth. For those who had lost their skin to the tower and were left with exposed flesh, everything that happened in the world felt like a biting cold wind.

But the challenger spoke calmly.

“We didn’t come here to fight among ourselves.”

People silenced themselves. They could sense the precariousness of his calm, like a tower built on ice with cards.

Suppressing his emotions, the challenger looked down at the Grey Spider.

“You’re dying, aren’t you?”

The Grey Spider’s lips parted weakly, but only a bubbling froth of blood escaped before they sealed again.

It didn’t matter. He had no interest in her response.

Or rather, he was intensely interested but was forcibly



suppressing it.

“I hope you just die like this.”

The challenger crouched and whispered.

“Please, don’t try to show any will or spirit. Don’t flail about or try to leave a last will.”

“Just die as you are.”

The hushed whisper continued.

“You won’t have a dramatic death.”

The whisper was laced with a curse.

“There will be no coffin for you, no grave for your burial. No one will know the date of your death, so no one will commemorate it. I wish for you to die...”

“Lonely and forgotten.”

Silence ensued.

No one spoke. It wasn't just because of the chilling hatred. They were silently agreeing with his words.

Just as the Grey Spider couldn't forgive her own gods, they too couldn't forgive the Grey Spider. It was just that. That was the end of it. Some things in the world simply end that way.

The Grey Spider knew this too. She knew it better than anyone.

“I...”

The Grey Spider coughed.

“I-I...”

She reached out with a withered hand.

Those gathered tensed. Even the challenger who had been pouring out curses hesitated, reaching for his weapon.

It was a misunderstanding. The Grey Spider had merely stretched her hand towards the night sky. Her fingers, spread like hooks, grasped at the star-studded sky once.

And then let go.

With a light thud, it was over.

"....."

"....."

And that was the end.

The Grey Spider didn't open her mouth again. She couldn't.

Literally, she was no longer among the living.

“Is she gone?”

“She’s gone.”

People murmured. Some approached and poked at the Grey Spider’s body with the butt of their weapons. Only when there was no response did a sigh of relief spread among them.

It was brief. The relief soon turned to questions.

“What was she trying to say?”

Murmurs resumed.

“She probably wanted to act arrogantly until the very end.”

“No, she was likely begging for her life in a pathetic manner.”

“Maybe she wanted to say sorry.”

“Or maybe...”

In the darkness of the fields, those murmurs almost spread like wildfire.

The challenger shouted.

“Enough!”

People halted and fell silent.

The challenger, with clenched teeth, declared.

“Don’t speculate.”

It was as if he was stamping out the embers of a forest fire.

“Don’t try to interpret or convey. Don’t try to find meaning.”

"....."

“Understanding is necessary to harm, and comprehension is needed to kill. So, trying to understand the Grey Spider was only necessary when we were fighting. Now that she’s dead, there’s no need for that.”

The challenger stated firmly.

“Just forget it.”

People nodded silently. Someone echoed, [Right.] Another added, [Oblivion is the rightful hell for the soul of that monster to fall into.]

Following the challenger's suggestion, they resolved to forget the existence of the Grey Spider entirely.

However.

"....."

"....."

They all knew it was impossible.

The death of the Grey Spider, in the end, left an indelible scar on those gathered here, much like her life had.

“Damn it...”

Filled with resentment and reproach, the challenger could only clench his teeth and turn away.

The body of the Grey Spider was left in the field, unclaimed by anyone.

But it wasn't left alone.

[Key manifestation complete.]

A quiet declaration resonated.

[Despite facing the greatest turning point in their fate because of you, leading to their death, they hold no resentment towards you.]

[The 94th floor stage has been cleared.]

The one who heard the declaration looked down silently at the Grey Spider's corpse.

No soul or semblance of it rose from the spider's remains. There was no recognition of him, nor any confrontation with the Guardian Spirit by his side. Just as in life, there was no reconciliation or forgiveness between the Grey Spider and her victims after death.

Not yet, at least.

The one who heard the declaration knew such an event would happen. No matter how long it took, he knew it would happen, that he would facilitate it, that it was the role he had taken on long ago.

[You are entering the 95th floor.]

To make it happen, he would have to climb the tower.



# Chapter 392: The Time He Waited, The Time He Walked (5)

---

“Ha! So, you're the zombie that the shamans of the Great Yin Valley summoned together? You look like a damn cursed soul! I shall slay you and become the protagonist of the fifth great strike!”

He cut him down.

[Amitabha Sword. New life is always forged through the clash of blades by those who love each other. That has been the unwavering rule ever since the fourth great strike embroidered this world. A product of sorcery that shatters the harmony of this world due to its very existence! I shall grant you peace with my blade.]

He cut him down.

[Sent by the divine Martial Sword King, who governs the greatest realm of swords! Hang your head in silence, vile king

of zombies!]

He cut him down.

There were many to be cut down. Merely walking and breathing was enough to pile up a mountain of corpses destined to be slain by him. It seemed as though everything in this world existed solely to be cut down by him.

That couldn't be.

[Oh, Primal Blade!]

It shouldn't be.

[Once again, the Primal Blade has saved us!]

There must be something else.

[Primal Blade! Primal Blade! Primal Blade!]

[Our Beginning! Our End! Our Savior!]

There must be.

[The son of us all!]

He set out in search of that something.

He left the cave, [You,] roamed the world, [Cursed by the shamans of the Great Yin Valley,] traveled to the edge of the eastern seas on a ferry, witnessed the first sunrise, [the blade that swung towards the world.] set foot in a city of towers in the western continents that his homeland knew nothing of. [Everything in this world,] He brought down a dragon feasting on light in the divine Sword Mountains, [was waiting. For you —] and even met hermits sitting in lotus positions under a sky perpetually stormed with auroras.

[Tsk, tsk. Such a foolish fellow.]

The leader of the hermits spoke.

[Why so troubled?]

He looked at the leader of the hermits.

Most were smaller compared to his size, but the leader of the hermits was particularly diminutive. The glowing face had only the outline without eyes, nose, or mouth. Belonging to a race called True Humans or Divine Humans, he had already crossed swords with such beings several times.

A terribly strong race.

Yet, they were always a step weaker than him.

He felt sadness at this second truth. The True Humans, in particular, were a race that saddened him greatly.

He said,

[I am lonely.]

[Ho-ho.]

The True Human laughed bitterly and then spoke,

[What is there to be lonely about? All those who gathered in the Great Yin Valley to forge you are your parents. And since everyone gathered in the Great Yin Valley was forged by this world, in the end, you are the son of the entire world! Compared to orphans who are left stealthily at the doors of wealthy homes by their fathers or cling to the cold breast of their dead mothers unknowingly, how blessed are you?]

He was aware of that. Though there were many who faced him with blades, there were also many who opened their arms to him. He knew where to go when he needed a cozy embrace instead of harsh winds.

Yet, he desired.

[I wish to have a brother.]

Silence followed for a moment.

[That's a sorrowful thing to say.]

The True Human broke a reed and brought it to his face. A lip-shaped slit formed on the smooth face, holding the reed like a smoking pipe.

[Indeed.]

The True Human chewed on the reed for a while before sighing as if in lament,

[Indeed. A sword only finds its purpose when there's one in each hand.]

A sword held by one side only is merely a weapon, the True Human muttered.

While the tip of the reed bobbed up and down, he waited in silence.

Eventually, the True Human spoke,

[The sorcery that forged you is profound and potent. It can be said that the heavens, the earth, life, and principles of this world are all concentrated in you. The fact that it was artificially achieved means that human follies were also added. You will live an incomparably long life, but even so, throughout that long life, there will only ever be you who is like you.]

[.....]

[But there's no need to take such a grim conjecture as a prophecy.]

The True Human spat out the reed and walked towards him.

Thud, thud.

He hesitated. The stature of the True Human, who was surely smaller than him, grew with each step he took. Thud, thud. With each step, the sound of footsteps grew louder and heavier. Boom, boom. He felt it as a vibration before the sound, and the oppressive weight of the shadow, like a wet blanket, enveloped him.

[Lower your head.]

Soon, looking down at him, the True Human raised his fist.

[Let's see how many hits you can take.]

It was the day he entered the hermitage.

---

Blood splattered.

<Kuhuk!>

The man let out a desperate scream.

With eyes shimmering wetly with blood, he glared ahead and shouted as if vomiting blood,

<Black Dragon Witch... how could you...!>

The Black Dragon Witch, with her dark hair, laughed heartily as she unfolded her fan.

<Oh~hohohoho! My meticulous plan has come to a perfect fruition! Kim Gong-Ja! I thank you for your efforts to offer yourself to me!>

<Kuuk... Have you betrayed me...?>



<Had I done it alone, it would have been a betrayal. But!>

As the Black Dragon Witch snapped her fan shut with a thwack, a crowd of people surged forward in a rush.

<Take this! Kim Gong-Ja!>

<Kuek! Paladin, you...!?!>

<Here's a sword stab for you!>

<T-The Heretic Inquisitor...!>

<Hey, hey. Don't forget my sword too, will you?>

<Viper, aaaaaah...!>

<With this, I reclaim the top rank!>

<Even you, Sword Saint...!?!>

After being hit one by one, Kim Gong-Ja vomited blood, collapsing on the spot.

The Black Dragon Witch laughed loudly again, hiding her mouth with the fan.

<Ho! Ho! Ho! When everyone's will aligns like this, it's not betrayal but a grand consensus!>

Kim Gong-Ja couldn't respond to that ruthless statement. The laughter of those who were once his companions, who, in truth, had never been allies for even a moment, echoed endlessly as they mocked Kim Gong-Ja's end.

That's when it happened.

<Hah... W-Where is this...!?!>

With a face filled with bitter resentment, Kim Gong-Ja, who had closed his eyes, suddenly sprang up.

Before him stood a brightly flashing cross-shaped figure, leaning on a staff.

<I am the Tower Master.>

<T-Tower Master...!? Why...!?!>

<Kim Gong-Ja, you were not meant to die yet. However, having suffered such misfortune, I wish to grant you another chance.>

As the Tower Master spoke, light began to radiate from Kim Gong-Ja's body.

Trembling, Kim Gong-Ja looked at his hands.

<Oh... Ooooh... This, this power...!?!>

<It's your potential.>

<This power... that feels like it could even annihilate the Constellations, no, the Tower itself... This power is mine...!?!>

<And there's more. Open your status window. >

Kim Gong-Ja did as instructed and saw his skill slots filled to the brim with 99 SSS-class skills.

The Tower Master shone brilliantly.

<I will now send you back to the era of your choosing.>

<Understood.>

Gazing solemnly at the Tower Master, Kim Gong-Ja responded.

Soon, as Kim Gong-Ja melted into the crevice of time and space, he thought coldly,

<In my past life, I lived for others and was betrayed. I will not make that mistake again.>

Kim Gong-Ja declared resolutely,

<In this life, I will live solely for myself!>

Kim Gong-Ja.

The moment marked the return of the man who would be recorded as one who could even annihilate gods...

“Excellent!”

With a slap, the manuscript fell onto the table.

The Earth Spirit cartoonist scratched his balding head.

“Is that so?”

The Elf editor nodded.

“Yeah, really good! Especially this part around [This power that seems capable of annihilating even the Constellations]. It's amazing. I knew you were a great artist, but this is truly moving.”

“Well, I've been around for quite some time...”

“Right. It’s about time you had your own hit series, don’t you think? Can’t keep being an assistant forever. Time to settle down! Build a concrete home. Literally, and figuratively.”

The editor’s words made the cartoonist momentarily twitch his thick lips, but he soon laughed emptily and nodded.

“That would be the dream...”

“Ahh, it’ll happen. This kind of story is in vogue now. Totally trending. You know Kim Seul-Lam, right? That Mountain Calamity Tribe artist who debuted the year before last? Their first work turned into a drama and was a huge hit. Heard they built a building on the 20th floor of Paradise, not even Babylon.”

“Really...?”

“Of course, it’s true. Why would I lie?”

As the Elf editor grew more excited, the cartoonist’s face sank deeper into gloom. Regardless, the editor continued to tap the manuscript with a sugar stick while giving his critique.

“But, about this part with the Tower Master’s appearance...”

“Which part...?”

“Guess.”

Damn, why ask me? It's not like this is a classroom quiz. Just tell me what's bothering you... The cartoonist didn't voice his thoughts out loud. Instead, as he always did in such situations, he watched the editor giving him a meaningful look and tentatively spoke,

“Hmm... maybe having the godly figures as characters is too direct?”

“Nah. The godly figures are public domain, public domain. Didn't you see the stone tablet at Babylon? It's clearly written that you're free to use them as you please.”

“Then... um... maybe having 99 SSS-rank skills is too much...”

“Sigh. That's not it either. You really lack sense, author. Here, this part.”

Confused, the cartoonist looked where the Elf editor was pointing.

It was the scene introducing the Tower Master.

With a sigh full of exasperation, the editor said,

“Why would the Tower Master... What is this? What's this supposed to be?”

“Well, a hypercube... it's a 4-dimensional shape...”

“4-dimensional? Your brain works in 4 dimensions or what? Why did you do it like this?”

Mumbling, the cartoonist hung his head. The Elf editor, leaning in with his large ears, pressed, “Yes?” “What was that?” until finally getting an answer.

“Well... it seemed fitting for a god to have an unfathomable, incomprehensible aura...”



“Sigh~”

The Elf editor let out a long, world-weary sigh.

“That won’t do. Change it to a beautiful girl. Make her a beautiful girl wearing frilly clothes... oh, but wouldn’t a beautiful girl Tower Master overlap with the [Thousand-Year Viper] by the author next door? Then... how about a beautiful boy?”

“A, a beautiful boy?”

“Yeah, yeah. A beautiful boy, super pretty! Make one that we can even sell as a figure!”

As the Elf editor’s excitement grew, the cartoonist’s expression darkened further. Undeterred, the editor continued, tapping the manuscript with the sugar stick.

“And don’t just send him off like that... add something more. Since it’s going to be a beautiful boy, why not add some romance? Like, the beautiful boy Tower Master giving a kiss on Kim Gong-Ja’s forehead. Then light bursts forth! How’s that? The readers will drool over it, don’t you think?”

"....."

"Ah, I'm giving away such ideas for free... I should be charging for this. I'm losing out, seriously. I'm failing as an Elf."

"But...."

The cartoonist murmured with his head bowed.

"I'll... think about it."

The editor frowned.

"Think? What's there to think about?"

Without further reply, the cartoonist stood up.

True to his Earth Spirit nature, now known as Asura, the cartoonist's shadow grew large and enveloping, overshadowing the Elf editor. But the editor remained unflustered.

“You're not planning to draw your own comic, are you?”

Again, the cartoonist didn't respond but simply drooped his shoulders and turned away.

“That won't work! It won't sell!”

The editor continued to shout after the cartoonist's retreating back.

“After 15 years of hard work, you should know better, author!!”

It sounded more like a plea than a rebuke.

“Ah! It won't make money!!”

Holding the manuscript tightly, the cartoonist stepped out of the cafe. The editor's voice did not follow him outside.

Taking a deep breath, the cartoonist clenched his teeth, glanced at his own comic manuscript, then tensed as if to

throw it away, but ended up hugging it close and began to walk.

[Key manifestation complete.]

The Tower's declaration echoed.

[The paths your life has taken have now become the myths of this world.]

[The 95th floor stage has been cleared!]

Of course, the cartoonist didn't hear the declaration. He simply walked towards his studio in silence.

But someone who heard the Tower's declaration quietly followed him.

[You are entering the 96th floor.]

---

# Chapter 393: The Time He Waited, The Time He Walked (6)

---

[Our sect is righteous.]

His master began the conversation with these words.

[What is righteousness? How would you answer that?]

Pondering over his master's question, he delved into thought. 'Righteous' means just and upright.

He answered as he thought.

[I believe it means to pursue what is correct.]

[What is correct?]

He contemplated before responding.

[It means something that is not wrong.]

[What is the difference between what is not wrong and what is wrong?]

He thought over it but could not find an answer.

His master lifted his bandaged hand and pointed in a certain direction.

[What does 'that' look like to you?]

He looked where the master pointed. The spring sky was torn with blueness, with cotton-like clouds floating by.

[It looks like clouds.]

[Right. They are clouds.]

The master nodded and asked again.

[How do 'they' appear to you?]

This question plunged him into deep thought again.

It was after some time that he responded.

[They appear lonely.]

[Why so?]

[Because they occupy such a vast sky all alone.]

[Hmmm.]

A horizontal crease formed on the master's bald face, indicating a smile had spread across it.

Crouching down awkwardly, the master said,

[What you first described is 'righteous.' ]

Calling a cloud a cloud is not wrong, said his master.

[Seeing everything in nature as it is, accepting things as they are. Mountains are mountains, clouds are clouds, wind is wind, and water is water. This is the mindset of righteousness.]

Pffft.

The reed held between lips devoid of eyes and nose moved like a smoking pipe.

[What you described next is 'erroneous.']

Imposing one's feelings onto a cloud is incorrect, the master stated.

[Why is the sky so clear? Because it doesn't understand my



feelings. Why does the cloud float alone? Because it sympathizes with my situation... Such a perspective, such interpretations prevent mountains from being mountains and water from being water. This is the mindset of sorcery.]

Chewing on the reed, the master elaborated.

[In other words, righteousness involves emptying oneself to encompass the world, whereas sorcery involves using oneself as a rope to entangle with the world.]

[.....]

[Both have clear limitations. In the world of righteousness, a mountain is merely a mountain and cannot be connected to me. Conversely, in the world of sorcery, everything in existence cannot exist without me.]

While listening to the master's explanation, he thought about those who had forged him and those he had slain.

The master showed his bandaged fist.

[I hit your head, because it was part of our sect's initiation

process. Why do you think such a procedure exists?]

[To empty the mind.]

He answered and, with a respectful posture, added,

[Because only when empty can it be filled.]

[That is correct.]

The master nodded.

[It's difficult for a person to see a mountain simply as a mountain due to the contexts ingrained in their minds. It's necessary to cut off these contexts at least once. You, being of special origin, needed to be hit more.]

[I thought it was because my head was hard.]

[That was part of the reason, too.]

Silence lingered for a moment.

The master chuckled and then removed the reed from his mouth, holding it between his index and middle finger.

[Thus, we have emptied you, my disciple. But do not misunderstand. Both righteousness and sorcery have their values, as much as they have their limits. In other words, both are dangerous if taken to extremes.]

[By dangerous, you mean...]

[Imagine a renowned martial artist of righteousness. This illustrious martial artist, having reached the state of an immortal, can only see humans as merely humans. Whether it's a person grieving the loss of a child or someone born into wealth and never knowing want, in their view, they are simply humans. ]

The master sighed.

[As one becomes accustomed to seeing the world as it is, they eventually come to regard everything as non-entities. Truly, one who sees all as equal is incapable of empathy and becomes a monster detached from humanity.]

After clearly stating this, the master looked at him intently.

[Do not become such.]

[.....]

[I have taken you as my disciple. I have emptied you. Having been forged amidst sorcery, I will teach you to see the world correctly. But, my disciple! That 'world' includes the hearts of those who forged you and your feelings towards them.]

With his sword serving as a cane, the master spoke.

[The loneliness you've harbored until now is also part of this world. It need not be overvalued nor discarded. Accept its weight as it is.]

The master's sword pointed towards the cloud drifting across the sky.

[Accept it!]

He saw it.

[Accept the world, accept yourself!]

He did so.

[AAAAAAARGHHHHHHHHHHHHHH—!!!]

He stood up abruptly and took a deep breath. He opened his mouth and screamed.

A roar filled with a spring-killing fervor echoed far and wide.

His expression did not change. As he shouted with all his might, his eyebrows furrowed slightly. There were no tears, hence no sobs.

But it was his scream.

[Yes.]

The master nodded.

[Let it out. Cry. Keep what you've received, not to discard but to make room for other things. Next, I will teach you—]

The master spoke with renewed vigor.

[How to smile.]

The master kept his promise.

---

[Key manifestation complete.]

This time, the tower's declaration came swiftly, echoing immediately as they stepped onto the 96th floor.

[The number of works depicting your life, the number of people who have seen these works, and among them, the number of people whose lives have been changed due to these works, meet the required criteria.]

[The 96th floor stage has been cleared!]

Thus, the staircase leading to the 97th floor appeared.

However, the one who heard the tower's declaration did not step toward the staircase. Instead, they quietly followed the Earth Spirit cartoonist.

The Earth Spirit cartoonist was holed up in his workshop, lamenting his fate.

"Damn it. Am I lacking money or dignity? No, I get it. If you don't have money, you lose dignity. I understand, but really... Ah, should I climb the tower too? Learn martial arts and live the life of an adventurer?"

As one grumbles repeatedly, a smooth path forms. The cartoonist's complaints flowed effortlessly, even without the aid of alcohol.

"Why did I choose a pen instead of a sword? Why did I smear ink instead of blood?"

His gaze shifted from his own manuscript to the comic

magazine released this month. The cover featured a character from the comic by Kim Seul-Lam or Park Seul-Lam, who supposedly built a building in Paradise.

His self-pity quickly turned to resentment towards others.

"Envious... damn bastard. I wish others would just like what I enjoy drawing too. Damn it. Everyone else lives as they please, so why do I have to suffer like this..."

Jealousy weighs down the heart. Grinding his teeth, the Earth Spirit cartoonist eventually succumbed to exhaustion and collapsed onto his work desk. Like a wet cotton absorbing water, his mind, filled with thoughts of divine figures, the Black Dragon Witch laughing 'hohoho', and the Tower Master transforming between a bearded old man and a hypercube, faded away.

Snores filled the small workshop.

[You may enter the 97th floor at any time.]

Someone quietly observed the cartoonist, now lost in sleep.



The cartoonist couldn't feel that gaze. Not because he was asleep, but because no one in this world could feel that gaze.

Yet, the gaze was undoubtedly fixed on the cartoonist. Its owner was clearly present in the same room as the cartoonist.

-.....

In this world, an intangible hand touched the cartoonist's shoulder.

It moved up and down.

As if comforting, the hand gently soothed the sleeping cartoonist.

-.....

The lips of the hand's owner moved slightly.

Their voice didn't reach the cartoonist. Neither did the touch. Since they were on different planes of existence, there

was no way for the comfort to be conveyed, leaving no trace behind.

-.....

But that wasn't the case.

-....., ....., .....

No specific message descended like a divine revelation. The cartoonist didn't suddenly awaken with a skill, nor did he undergo a mental regression filled with ideas for hit comics.

Instead, each time the hand caressed his shoulder, the cartoonist's breath became more peaceful.

Jealousy subsided, and resentment faded.

-.....

That night, the cartoonist had a dream.

It was a disjointed dream... Therr was a man... a human man... cooped up in a space even smaller than the cartoonist's workshop, venting his grievances and lamentations about the world... everything outside the tower was unjust... everything inside the tower was corrupt... it seemed there was no place for the man anywhere....

Suddenly, this inconsequential man received a skill.

A skill that suited him perfectly... as if someone had watched him for a long time and crafted it specifically for him, it fit so well it was hard to believe it wasn't made just for him... if there was anything special about the skill, it was only because it was created solely for him... the skill encapsulated his life....

Perhaps the man was not alone.

Even while kneeling in lamentation, even while spewing resentment towards the world, the man was not alone. Someone was with him. The man didn't feel it at the time, but now, he knew it. Clearly, without a doubt.

-For you.

The man, while comforting the cartoonist, slightly parted his lips.

-May fortune be with you.

The cartoonist sprang up.

As if he had seen a ghost, he looked around. Inside the darkened workshop, he was alone. At least, that's how he perceived it.

"....."

Pondering over the dream he just had, the cartoonist thought for a long time. Like the sigh of an old woman dissolving into the winter wind, he desperately clung to and pieced together the fleeting contents of the dream, imagining a story.

Initially, he wasn't sure, but the images gradually became bold and vivid.

The cartoonist nodded, then made a phone call.

"Hello, editor?"

“Author?”

The irritable voice of the Elf, just awoken from sleep, came through.

“What’s this about at this hour?”

“Ah.”

The cartoonist's face flushed. It was dawn.

“Sorry... should I call back later?”

A groan came from the other end.

“No, it’s not the first time... just go ahead. What is it, author?”

The cartoonist's face turned red for a different reason before he cleared his throat.

“It’s about the comic...”

“Ah, yes. Hmm. I’ve thought about it too, but what if instead of a beautiful boy Tower Master, we have a cute mascot animal with a jewel on its forehead—”

“Can I redraw it?”

Silence echoed.

The cartoonist waited anxiously for the response, which came after a while.

“Redraw?”

The tone was unreadable over the phone. From that response, the cartoonist couldn’t tell if the editor was angry, shocked, or simply curious.

Feeling somewhat defensive, the cartoonist explained,

“Yes... I think I can draw something better than what I

showed you...”

Silence again.

The cartoonist hurriedly added,

“No, it’s just... I really think I can do much better than yesterday’s...”

“Are you sure?”

This time, the cartoonist was silent.

The editor pressed,

“So, are you certain?”

The cartoonist thought deeply. Was he sure? Was he confident in this path?

Could he really do it?

It was uncertain. Confidence? He had never been confident about choosing the path of an artist. Whether those who design their lives with clear vision truly exist in this world is something the cartoonist didn't know.

But still...

Despite that...

“I can take responsibility.”

The cartoonist answered with his head bowed.

A long silence.

Finally, the voice on the other end let out a sigh.

“You should be making some money by now...”



The cartoonist understood that tone. With a voice half embarrassed and half excited, he said,

“I will make it. I should be able to... probably.”

“Probably? What does that mean...”

“Please help me.”

The cartoonist said.

“Just help me a little.”

Silence flowed between them over the phone.

In the end, as history often records, the Elf conceded first.

“Sigh, really.”

The editor lamented.

“Alright. I’ll wait.”

Joy bloomed on the cartoonist’s face.

“Thank you!”

“If you’re really thankful, make it a hit. Let’s finally get some bonuses, shall we?”

“I’ll do my best...”

“Yeah. I’m hanging up.”

The call ended.

Placing down the phone, the cartoonist nodded. He neatly folded the manuscript he had drawn last time, stored it away in a drawer, and picked up his pen. His fingers, more excited than his heart, tapped the blank manuscript paper with the pen.

He still wasn’t sure, but this time, the feeling was good.

Really good.

-.....

A similar feeling was shared by another.

He watched the cartoonist begin his work. The pen raced across the paper so swiftly it seemed not one but six pens were at work, and the expressions of the characters, unconsciously mimicked by the cartoonist's face, felt not singular but triple. Engrossed in his work as if possessed, the cartoonist's dedication was a true reflection of his race's name, Asura.

Perhaps the cartoonist won't earn as much as he hoped.

He might be disappointed by the reaction of the people, and despair over his own capabilities.

But after overcoming all those hardships, he should be able to produce a work he feels he did his best on.

The cartoonist himself didn't know this. Nor did the editor.

But the one accompanying them knew it well.

-.....

As the clouds floated across the spring sky, a warm gaze swept over the cartoonist and then turned away.

[You are entering the 97th floor.]

The end was nearing.

---

# Chapter 394: The Time He Waited, The Time He Walked (7)

---

His master was not a perfect person.

[That's not how you do it. Look closely.]

There was always a hint of excitement in those words.

[Well done. You're quite good.]

Those words were always tinged with a bit of jealousy.

[I have nothing more to teach you in this area. You're better at it than I am.]

And those words were always mixed with a touch of despair.

It wasn't solely because he was particularly perceptive that he could sense these emotions. It was because his master made no effort to hide them.

When he had first joined, his master had made it clear.

[I will treat you exactly as you are.]

[.....]

[I won't embellish. I won't hide. I won't deceive. You will always see me as I truly am. The me you see will correspond exactly to the depth of my essence.]

The master looked him straight in the eye.

[Therefore, you must become strong.]

[.....]

[Sometimes people claim they're just being 'honest' as an excuse for their behavior. What they forget is that anyone's heart can be sharp enough to cut through someone else's. Just as there's no etiquette in carrying an unsheathed sword around, dealing with someone frankly is never just a heartwarming tale.]

The master took hold of both his shoulders and continued in a firm tone:

[Yet despite that, I will be honest with you. Your heart will be cut by me countless times. Be prepared for that. Understand?]

He nodded.

It was as his master said. Raw honesty was indeed a terrifying thing. Through actual combat, he learned that even when the people of Taeumgul clung to him, even when enemies pointed their swords at him, they were never completely honest.

His master also taught him how to cope with this knowledge.

[Don't give consideration to what cannot be considered. Cut through it. Don't avoid it; face it head-on. Don't accept what

can't be accepted. Counter it. Face me with the mindset of wielding a weapon in a duel. Endure. Confront. Grow stronger!]

He did just that.

He didn't avoid getting hurt. He didn't try to superficially please. He just treated the person known as his master as he truly was... and his master treated him the same way. There was no misunderstanding to wedge between them, just as there can be no gap between mountains and fields.

Therefore.

[It's about time for me to leave.]

He couldn't misunderstand the meaning of those words.

[Master.]

[I've lingered for quite some time.]



His master was dying.

The divine humans, a race that lived by absorbing sunlight through their skin and drawing sap with their mouths, did not change much in physical form from birth to death. One could roughly guess their age by the luminosity of their skin. Already dim when they first met, the master, now akin to a candle burning down to its last, was on the brink of extinguishing.

[I was not strong enough to live forever. That's all there is to it.]

The master coughed. His body flashed brightly once, then dimmed.

Learning that not misunderstanding can be terrifying, and at the same time, sad, was something he had come to know.

[I'm glad.]

And also, it could be as painfully joyful.

[That I could meet you before I left.]

In those words were sincere apologies and deep gratitude.

[That I could teach you many things.]

Contained within those words were profound regret and immense relief.

[It was a blessing to be your master.]

Those words held bottomless anxiety and soaring pride.

[Master.]

His master could have said other things.

I'm sorry. I was wrong. I wasn't enough.

That he couldn't lead the way consistently, that he couldn't even stand beside him due to his own weakness, he could have asked for forgiveness.

But instead of that, his master chose to express gratitude for their meeting. Instead of apologizing for his shortcomings, he was thankful. And it wasn't a lie. It wasn't a fabrication. Despite both being equally true, despite neither choice being false, his master chose that path.

He knew this without deceit.

Thud!

He pressed his forehead to the ground.

Thud!

The master, lying on the sickbed, maintained a faint flicker as he watched him.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

These were bows offered to the master.

Silently, the master received those bows. Each bow carried

gratitude, sorrow, and once more, gratitude. If each slice of the Primeval Blade had ensnared a soul in the sky, then the bows he made surely drew those souls down to the earth to rest in peace.

There were seventeen bows in total.

The master smiled. Without eyes or a nose, just the movement of his lips could convey a broad smile.

[Thank you.]

The master closed his eyes.

It didn't take long for the flickering to fade, leaving behind only a pale body. By the time that happened, he no longer had a master.

[.....]

Living in a world without his master was not as daunting as one might expect.

His master had taught him. There are problems in the world that exist regardless of one's strength.

A single person's heart could be sharp enough to wound him. The need to face each person with the mindset of crossing swords meant the world was full of adversaries. He could kill every living person in the world, but conversely, he couldn't save even one dying individual.

He was not invincible.

He was just a bit lucky.

He was just born a bit stronger.

That was all.

He was an ordinary person.

At that moment, he realized he was not lonely.

---

The declaration of clearing the floor came as soon as they entered, just as before.

[Key manifestation complete.]

[The slices of the world you've woven into your own are now completely bound to your world.]

[Worlds that were destroyed have been granted another chance in the realm of the dead.]

[The 97th floor has been cleared.]

Yet the one who heard the declaration did not step onto the staircase to the next floor. Instead, they quietly walked through the world.

No— through worlds.

"In this universe, as a cosmic knight would say..."

He walked through a world made up only of points and lines,

a world without stars, filled with countless artificial satellites and the massive corridors that connected them.

"In the legend of the renowned Dawn Cottage, there's a terrifying tale."

"What tale is that?"

"I don't believe in legends..."

"What's with this crazy old coot?"

He wandered through a world where a lone cottage stood atop a dimly lit mountain peak. A world that was nothing more than that cottage.

"Mom! Mom! Look at this!"

"Yes, my child. This is called 'dried pollock'. Where did you find it?"

"Ooh! Uncle Pollock gave it to me!"

A world where a free-spirited girl held the hand of her frail-looking mother, crossing a pedestrian crossing.

In that world, the woman and the man briefly locked eyes. Perhaps even with the woman's daughter, who might be her child.

It might have been mere coincidence, or they might have genuinely shared a glance. The man himself didn't know.

In truth, the man wasn't even sure if he and the silver-haired woman had genuinely shared any communication in the previous world, or if it was just an incredible coincidence.

But he knew he would find out soon.

Very soon.

-.....

After traversing several worlds, the man finally stopped in front of a blooming red peony in spring.



Beyond that peony, a sword was embedded in the ground.

There was nothing else. No tower-like tombstone, no mountain-like burial mound. Although it seemed maintained, as there was no rust on the blade, the area was indistinguishable from a flower garden, filled with wildflowers and weeds.

But this place was more than just a flower garden.

It was merely that the sword, along with that peony, were just flowers among the weeds and wildflowers.

-.....

The man began to bow toward the flower.

-.....

In his first bow, the man encapsulated a world where an innocent child's pain was used to achieve immortal happiness, the death and rebirth of that world.

-.....

In his second bow, he encapsulated the silver heart stuck in eternity, a world that died for a duty beyond love and lived again for a love beyond duty.

-.....

With the third bow, another world.

The fourth bow, the fifth bow, the sixth bow...

-.....

Eventually, in the last, the ninth bow, the man included the peony that bloomed at the end of an eternal winter.

-.....

The man bowed deeply.

Then he stepped back until the peony was out of sight before turning around to walk away.

[You are entering the 98th floor.]

---

# Chapter 395: The Time He Waited, The Time He Walked (8)

---

After his master died, he wandered the world for a while.

He was unparalleled.

He walked alone. Yet, people lined up to block his path and queued to follow in his wake.

[Stop, you wicked demon! How dare someone like you claim to be a disciple of the Sun Sage and falsely represent the righteous factions!]

[My son, the Primal Blade! When will you return to us?]

[You are a formidable one. I pay my respects.]

[My lord, I am called Myohuseong, and I wish to light your way....]

There were those who swung weapons, those who clutched at his sleeves, those who sought a handshake, and those who bowed, but they all shared one thing in common— they all surrounded him. The weight of the footsteps he left behind was deepened by all those he met.

Thus, wherever he passed, great roads were formed.

It was the Great Road March.

[Sword Demon.]

[Sword Dragon.]

[Sword King.]

[Sword Heaven.]

[Sword Saint.]

The myriad titles bestowed upon him were unified on those great roads.

[Sword Emperor.]

That became his new name.

One whom all blocked yet none could obstruct. One whom none could follow yet all sought to follow. One who walked with none yet was accompanied by all.

The Sword Emperor traversed this world of myriad swords like a comet.

However, this period wasn't named the fifth slashing strike in the Ten Thousand Sword world solely because of the Sword Emperor's path that cut deep like a blade's mark. It was also the time when "that" appeared.

People whispered amongst themselves.

[What is that?]

It was a colossal tower.

Yet, this tower was too significant to merely be dismissed. It was tall and thick.

Those who had lived in cities would not dare to consider it a mere tower as it was larger than the largest city they knew. Those who had climbed mountains would find it taller than any mountain's ridge they had ascended, and those who had ventured into the sea would not dare to think of it as a mere tower as it stood towering over the entire horizon.

[It's like the hilt of a sword that a giant has thrust into the world to split it apart.]

That's what people whispered to one another.

This murmuring spread in the following words.

[Who built it?]

[What dwells within it?]

[What being resides at its summit?]

And it was concluded with these words.

[Why can it be seen from anywhere?]

Just as they said, the tower could be seen from everywhere.

It was a strange phenomenon. It's impossible for something to be in two places at once.

Yet, wherever one turned their head, the tower was there, beyond.

Beyond the city, beyond the mountains, beyond the sea, beyond the roads, like a backdrop that wouldn't fade, casting its base far into the distance.

[Is it too big?]

Someone who claimed that by walking far enough, one would return to their starting point because the world is



round, speculated as much.

[Is it a mirage?]

Someone who found it strange that no matter how much they approached or fled, it never got closer or farther, speculated as much.

[No.]

The one who provided a clear answer to the heated debates was the Sword Emperor.

[It's following us.]

The people could not immediately comprehend the Sword Emperor's words. The tower was following them? Did that mean the tower was alive?

The Sword Emperor affirmed it plainly.

[It's waiting.]

[Waiting?]

[Yes. Can't you feel this 'waiting'?]

People looked at each other.

Anger is easily felt. Love, contempt, too, can be easily detected. But to feel 'waiting' was somewhat unfamiliar.

Yet, the Sword Emperor naturally used that unusual term. Even more astonishingly, what he said next surprised those gathered even more.

[I guess I should go and have a drink.]

"Ah," the Sword Emperor stood up. He stretched leisurely.

He said,

[I'll be right back.]

[Excuse me? Where to?]

[Up there.]

It sounded as if he was saying he'd pop by the tavern in front for a moment. His too-calm demeanor left the people unable to grasp the meaning of his words.

[Whoever wants to come, follow.]

And the Sword Emperor did not give them a chance to understand.

[I'll be waiting.]

That day, into the Ten Thousand Sword world, marked by blades, a single forged blade entered.

It was over 150 years ago.

---

After paying my respects with a triple prostration at my

master's funeral, I entered the 98th floor.

[You are entering the 98th floor.]

The moment I set foot there, I was seized by a peculiar sensation.

-.....

A familiar feeling.

The sensation of peering into something familiar.

-This place is.....

The Aegim Empire.

The very world where I met Shiny and fought with Ester.

I was standing in the quiet imperial audience chamber.

-It's been a while since I've been here.

I murmured.

Beside me, floating leisurely, the Guardian Spirit crossed his arms and chuckled slyly.

-It's been a while since you've seen someone too.

-Someone I haven't seen in a while?

-Remember what your family's advisor used to say?

-Eh? Ester?

-Right. Before she became your advisor.

-Oh, hold on. It's been quite some time..... Ah, perhaps the one who said she would send me to the 99th floor..... Ah.

Indeed.

As if in tune with my realization, a familiar sound rang out.

-.....

It was the sound of raindrops.

Drip, drip... drip-drip-drip. Drip...

Rain. The abandoned droplets from the sky hit the audience chamber window. A blurred streak slowly spread before being swiftly washed away by a new downpour.

-.....

Even in a world that had come to a halt, only the rain continued to flow.

And then, a voice reached me.

"Lord?"

I lifted my head.

From afar, Ester was walking towards me. That face, which I hadn't seen in so long, bore an expression as if she had seen a ghost.

"My Lord? ...Is it really you?"

Hmm.

I raised a hand with a pleased expression.

-Yeah, advisor. It's been quite some—

In the next moment, a terrifying shock struck me.

-Ugh...!!

Like a fly swatted by a flyswatter, I was slammed to the ground. Then, a waterfall of aura struck down on me again. I nearly perished!

-Wait, why are you suddenly— ugh!

"Why do you think!?"

Hmm.

Well, because it's been too long... No, wait a minute.

-How can you see me— kheuk!

"Because I am! Here! The test administrator of the 98th floor!"

-Being able to contact me means— ugh!

"Yes! The pillars came and explained! That you, Lord, would be coming soon, so I should prepare!"



-That I can be touched means— kik!

"Yes! Really, what in the world... seriously!"

I closed my mouth. The rapid-fire explanations made perfect sense. Even more so, the threat of being shattered with each question added made me wary of opening my mouth.

Ester, seemingly unable to contain her emotions, huffed and puffed for a while before lifting her red aura-wrapped greatsword again.

"Anyway, please take a few more hits!"

No.

Even if I keep my mouth shut, am I still going to be hit regardless?

-Just a moment, advisor. Isn't replacing the joy of our reunion with violence— gyaaak!

For a while, the beating continued. The sound of pouring rain and the shock that rang in my ears blurred together, indistinguishable, until Ester's sword finally stopped.

Not by Ester's will.

"That will be enough, advisor."

It was Shiny's voice.

I lifted my head. In my beaten view, I saw Shiny, step by step, descending.

Ester hissed.

"Hwiya."

"Yes. I understand the sentiment but... still."

Understood?

I wish she hadn't understood— just as I thought that, Hwiya added something.

"Ester's current look is just like those girls in the novel genres Viper loves...."

"Aaaaaack!"

Ester screamed. Hwiya extended a wing to gently pat Ester's head before turning to me.

Hmm.

I spoke.

-Hello, Shiny. You are—

"I'm also the test administrator of the 98th floor."

-Ah. Indeed. Just like Ester—

"I was also managing floors 11 through 20."

-Hmm. The reason you're interrupting me now is—

"Do you want to ask?"

-No...

I hung my head.

Both Hwiya and Ester, who had barely recovered her shattered self, glared at me with icy eyes.

Hwiya was the first to speak.

"Please come back soon."

-.....Hmm.

I couldn't argue against those words, laden with a sigh. After

all, I had been walking among people for a long time without revealing myself.

-I'm sorry.

I had no choice but to bow deeply, sincerely.

-I'll be back soon.

"Yes. ...Hmm."

Hwiya spread her five pairs of wings wide. The Goddess of the Sword stretching was like a blanket dried in the morning sun, scattering a soft fragrance around.

"We, along with the advisor, will help ensure you can do that."

A moment later, a message window opened.

[The Goddess of Protection offers you a reward.]

[The Demon King of Autumn Rain offers you a reward.]

[Please choose one of the two rewards.]

-Uh.

I unwittingly blinked.

It was inevitable.

Because those were messages I hadn't seen in a very long time.

-You guys.....

As if anticipating my reaction, a selection window floated up before me.

+

## [The Goddess of Protection]

Description: The Goddess of the Aegim Empire, moved by your dedication, offers you the honor of preparing a meal for her.....

+

-Uh... wait a minute. Is this saying I should prepare the meal? Not that she'll prepare one for me? And this is described as an honor?

+

You can prepare fried egg soy sauce rice, a Sormewin-style feast, or even fry chicken. Regardless of your choice, your cooking will undergo a strict evaluation and will be scored.....

+

-Excuse me!?

+

O Warrior of the Goddess! Please return soon.

And please, give Silvia a good thrashing!

\*Why can't I receive the Goddess's reward if I choose the Demon King's reward?

+

-No! The last part is really weird! Using a quest message like that, Shiny, you.....

As I stared at Shiny with a bewildered face, I was even more taken aback by the new message that appeared.

+

[The Demon King of Autumn Rain]



Description: The Demon King admires your feats. The Demon King proposes that you secretly collaborate with her. She promises the exact same reward as the Goddess, with an additional gift.

Hurry back and read 99 recommended novels by Ester and leave at least a 1200-character review!

If you promise that, the Demon King will use his power to transport you directly to the 99th floor.

\*Only one person can receive the Demon King's reward. (It's just you anyway.)

---

\*If multiple people choose this reward, one will be randomly selected. (But that won't happen.)

---

\*If no one chooses, the Demon King's reward will be automatically selected.

-Ester, you too... Hey, you guys.....

As I muttered with a dumbfounded face, looking at their faces made me laugh.

I couldn't help but laugh.

-You guys are really.....

Once upon a time.

There was a Demon King who became an avatar of vengeance after all it had was burned away. Because of that Demon King, a Goddess who could only watch as all she had achieved was submerged beneath a flood had no choice.

-Ester.....

The Demon King wished for nothing more than for others, even by a sliver, to not find happiness. Not even the future. Certainly not its own happiness.

The Demon King wished only for those who plunged it and its precious beings into misery, those who by their mere existence allowed this, to fall into hell.

-Shiny..... Hwiya.

The Goddess tried her best to prevent it.

Like scooping out water from an overflowing dam by hand. Desperately pleading with us to not fall for the Demon King's tricks, to give their already ruined world one more chance.

-You guys.....

Thus, the two, while opposing each other, used every character in the quest window to point their swords at each other. Tempting us, begging us, mocking, lamenting, all so that we would choose them and not the other.

There was such a time.

-.....

And now, those two were speaking to me through that very quest window.

Hurry back, they said.

We'll be waiting, they said.

That was.

That was a very beautiful thing to me.

-.....Yeah.

From the 91st floor to the 97th floor, what I had felt once again enveloped me.

The experiences I had while climbing the tower were not meaningless.

-I'll be back.

[Key manifestation complete.]

I said, wiping the corners of my eyes. Really, barely managing to speak.

Ester and Hwiya looked at each other and smiled faintly.

[The 98th floor administrator— the otherworldly managers you first encountered grant you passage.]

"Yes."

"Come back safely."

[The 98th floor stage has been cleared.]

Thus, they sent me off.

[You are entering the 99th floor.]

■.

As soon as the sandstorm dispersed, what enveloped me was an almost violent fragrance of flowers.

The fragrance of flowers in my sanctuary, is like a curtain soaked on a rainy day— subdued, only delicately touching and mingling with the weary lives, never overpowering.

But what filled this place was a completely different, vibrant scent.

The scent of those living unreservedly. The fragrance of those indulging in life without holding back.

“.....Sigh.”

I steadied my dizzy head, and almost immediately, I noticed another anomaly.

My palm distinctly felt textures.

Breathing was perceptible.

Temperature could be felt.

“.....Indeed.”

I clenched and unclenched my fist. I closed my eyes once and then opened them. A feast of natural colors as dazzling as the fragrance assaulted my eyes.

Amongst the living, I, too, was alive.

"....."

And there, I saw him.

Sitting cross-legged atop the overflowing flower bed, he was there. Perhaps he had been sitting there for a very long time. Amidst the ever-changing seasons, he seemed to have been weathered alive into stone, covered in moss beyond grass, flowers, and trees.

The wind blew.

Because he had been so still, at first, it seemed only his robe fluttered. Caught by that fluttering, it took a moment to realize he had extended his arm to the side.

His large hand grasped the hilt of a colossal sword submerged beneath the flower bed.

His shoulder, arm, and hand writhed independently as if alive.

The sword was drawn.

With a movement as fierce as a rising dragon, the flowers were not crushed, nor were the grasses broken. Instead, the flower bed merely rippled like the surface of a lake.

Standing amidst the flower bed, soaking his feet, he rose.

He turned around.



The piercing sunlight shattered into light and shadow upon his angular muscles. The shattered sunbeams danced around the flower petals like beads, and his sprawling shadow merged with the shadow of the grass on the ground.

The open sky was traversed by clouds as grand as mountains. Within this narrow world, he stood alone, a mountain range unto himself.

The wind blew again.

Dandelion seeds, whoosh, scattered.

“Come on in.”

Under the azure sky, the Sword Emperor smiled.

“You're late, you zombie bastard.”

---

# Chapter 396: Our World (1)

---

“I anticipated this.”

I began.

“You've hinted at the 99th floor a few times, making cryptic remarks—”

To correct myself,

I intended to begin.

“Quiet, zombie! Eat this first!”

The clouds in the sky split in two.

Then the sky itself cleaved apart. Following the real line of the bifurcated sky, a crack formed in the void, extending towards me and rapidly widening.

I exclaimed,

“This is absurd...!”

The moment I raised my dagger, an explosion ensued.

Boom...!

The aura I had infused into the dagger snuffed out like a flame hit by sand. I frantically pumped aura through the hilt, but soon realized the futility of my actions.

“Arghhhhh!”

It was akin to raising a shield against an oncoming tsunami. Even if some called that person a Don Quixote rather than a hero, from the perspective of someone once hailed as a hero, doing something that leaves a meaningful impact is the bare minimum.

Thus—

"Enough, for the love of...!"

With a grunt, I shifted my grip on the dagger.

The angle of entry skewed, and the Sword Emperor's strike was somewhat diverted. Given the sheer volume, it was impossible to block, but at least I had bought some time to breathe, which was all I needed.

I shouted.

"Do it now!"

The ground swayed and shook.

The roots spread beneath it, the grass above, sunflowers, anemones, lilies, larkspur, lilies of the valley, starflowers, poppies, marigolds, and morning glories— all trembled in unison. Pollen scattered in the air. Vitality and the will to live overflowed.

On this trembling land, however, I remained unshaken, firmly rooted in place.

What I envisioned was not a pillar, but a great tree.

The World Tree.

I imagined roots sprouting from beneath my feet, extending deep, very deep, and spreading wide, endlessly wide. Even if the ground shook, I wouldn't be disturbed since my roots reached the far end of the opposite side. Not only was I unshaken, but the trembling of the ground itself was due to the vibration of my roots.

I absorbed it all.

The scattered vitality, the nutrients spread throughout the ground, the grains stored in termite nests, the single breath of an unnamed insect hibernating for winter— I drew them all in. Energy rushed into me like a waterfall in reverse, but I didn't hoard it. Instead, I directed it all to one place, my left hand gripping the dagger.

I had become a conduit.

A tremendous energy flowed through me towards the dagger I held.

It exploded.

Boom...!

The Sword Emperor's strike from the sky was repelled by my own that burst forth from the ground.

The Sword Emperor, like a butterfly on a spring day, twirled and landed gently on a blade of grass, coming to a stop.

“That's right.”

The Sword Emperor grinned.

“You've learned to manipulate external energy.”

“What are you doing!”

I fumed, yelling out.

The Sword Emperor, not losing his smile, replied.

“Well done.”

“What? No, I mean, it's a bit embarrassing to be praised like that... I've been practicing what you hinted at in the Heaven of Truth and outright pointed out on the 91st floor all this time. No, no, that's not it. Why did you suddenly attack—”

“Knowing and using are different matters. I thought you might not know how to apply it in real situations since it's your undertaking.”

“Really now...”

I scratched the back of my head.

“Thinking about it, there were many hints even before you told me.”

"....."

“To manifest Ki, it's common to accumulate internal energy. And the most used method for accumulating that internal energy is to sit cross-legged in places with good water and air and meditate.”

These are commonly referred to as Ki Cultivation Methods, Energy Accumulation Techniques, and Internal Energy Heart Techniques.

“In other words, most of the Ki used by martial artists originates from the outside. They digest and refine it and melt it inside, which then becomes what we call [internal energy].”

Turning the Ki that exists outside of me into my own.

That's the essence of Internal Energy Heart Techniques, and why things like millennium-old ginseng, thousand-year-old maca, purified rock oil, and the medicines made by Apothecary, as well as that giant tortoise nearly made of aura, function as spiritual medicines.

“But the world and I are not separate entities.”



In the Demonic Cult, [I] am [the rope that ties the world together].

In the Orthodox Faction, [I] am separate from each object in the world, but precisely because of that, [I myself am also part of the world's end].

Subjectification and objectification. The advantages and disadvantages of each are clearly reflected in the martial arts of each faction.

It's commonly believed that while it's easier to advance to a certain extent in the Demonic Cult, it's difficult to go beyond, whereas in the Orthodox Faction, it's hard to reach a certain level, but there are more experts beyond the extreme compared to the Demonic Cult, probably for this reason.

“There's no need to obsess over growing [my internal energy] within me.”

As I spoke, I dispelled the image of roots I had spread beneath my feet.

“No matter how much I grow my internal energy, even to the point of transforming and shedding my mortal shell, there's a limit to the vessel that is [me].”

As the image of the roots receded, the pathway for absorbing external energy closed.

“Rather, it's more efficient to make [myself] into [a conduit].”

Naturally, the World's Ki that had been flowing into the dagger through my body dispersed.

“Of course, to [strengthen that conduit], I need to be somewhat stronger myself.”

I took a deep breath.

The external energy that flowed out with my breath filled my dantian, which was empty of internal energy, like a vessel.

“Even that is not a necessary condition.”

I looked at the Sword Emperor.

“That's why master could split mountains even without a speck of internal energy.”

“That's right.”

The Sword Emperor nodded.

“The core structure of Internal Energy Heart Techniques is mainly twofold: [Meditation] and [Circulation]. Whether it's the Nine Yang God Technique, the Purple Dew Heart Method, or the Valkenheim Mana Cultivation Technique, they all have these two elements, differing only in the depth of meditation they induce and the path they use to transport Ki.”

"....."

“Among these, meditation is for absorbing external energy into me. By deeply understanding the world, I break down the boundary between the world and myself, allowing me to absorb energy from the entire world. Circulation is to guide the absorbed Ki to the Dantian. As you just said, by combining the Ki I had with the absorbed Ki and refining it, I enhance my own Ki.”

The Sword Emperor plucked a piece of the severed cloud and sat upon it, raising a finger.

“But if you truly understand this, you can immerse yourself in deep meditation under any circumstances, breaking down

the boundary between the world and yourself, and directly transport the world's Ki to the desired location, making [your own internal energy] unnecessary.”

The Sword Emperor stated plainly.

“That is the essence of the Sword Heart.”

This entire process involved no grand ideologies, abstract metamorphoses, or inscrutable mysteries.

Once the premises are known, it all becomes logically possible.

Such is the secret of all magic.

“Have you been here all along?”

“Yeah.”

The Sword Emperor chuckled with his arms crossed.

“My ghosts that were attached to you and the old man... um. I do control them, but explaining this is even more complicated than explaining the Sword Heart.”

“Try explaining anyway.”

“Let me show you.”

With that, the Sword Emperor flicked his finger.

+

[Sword Constellation - Root]

Rank: A+

Effect: You can create your own spiritual beings to advise those climbing the tower. Whisper your experiences of climbing up to the 99th floor in their ears. Those who receive your advice will be astonished by your vast knowledge.

\*However, the recipient must possess a skill that

complements this one. Without it, no one will recognize you.

\*Synchronization between you and your spiritual being(s) occurs at specific intervals, typically daily, but this may shorten or lengthen depending on the floors the advisee is climbing.

\*The knowledge applied to your spiritual being(s) may be distorted or modified as it passes through the tower. These alternative guidelines are determined by the Pillar Assembly.

+

Indeed.

I understood.

“Just like messages in a chat program don't go directly to the recipient but first pass through a [server], the messages you send through the Guardian Spirit also go through the tower as a [server] and get censored in the process.”

“Similar. Uh, how should I put it? It's more like—”

“Ah. Is it closer to [Puppeteer’s Parrade sharing memories]? No, rather than sharing memories...”

“Right. It's like copying and pasting my memories to create them. Then, periodically synchronize and absorb the created Guardian Spirits' memories. After that, update again with another copy-paste. But during that process, the tower's censorship comes into play, and it's not done in real-time, so...”

I recalled the Guardian Spirit of the Sword Saint looking puzzled when it had just been copied.

Well, waking up in another world after falling asleep would be just as bewildering.

“When I was getting thrashed by the fox...”

“Yeah. Because there's a periodic synchronization process, I noticed something was off quite early.”

But with the time lag, coupled with the fox and the tower's double memory manipulation, that's how they indirectly helped.

I was completely convinced.

“Huh. So besides me and the Sword Saint, there could be others you're attached to...”

“Wanna know?”

“No. Honestly, I'm curious, but I won't ask because...”

I took out a new roll of duct tape and started rewrapping the handle, torn from the recent clash.

“Having you here means I'm the first to arrive anyway.”

The Sword Emperor's smile deepened.

That was enough of an answer, so I asked the next question.

“What's the quest for the 99th floor?”



“What do you think?”

“Well.”

I stroked my chin.

I looked around. The splendid flower garden welcomed me as always.

Despite the recent clash, where the Sword Emperor and I used the world's energy, there was no change, as if removing a spoonful of water from the ocean. Not only because the consumed external energy was returned to the world but also because the world was so powerful.

Naturally, my gaze settled on the Sword Emperor and stopped.

I smiled.

“Shall we settle it with a duel between us?”

The Sword Emperor also smiled.

“You've grown a lot, our zombie.”

“It's my growth spurt.”

“You're more of an uncle than I am now, aren't you?”

“Try calling me Uncle Gong-Ja.”

“Zombie ahjussi\*.”

\*Korean word for referring to older middle-aged men.

“Considering your juvenile jokiness, I'm definitely the adult here...”

“Ahjussi, shall we spar?”

“Oh, well.”

By then, I had finished wrapping the duct tape around the dagger's handle. As I tore off the tape with my teeth, I asked.

“So, what is it? What's this ninth key that's kept someone like you pinned here on the 99th floor for over a century?”

As if waiting for my question, a quest window appeared.

+

[The Ninth Key]

Do you remember the moment you first entered the tower?

+

The Sword Emperor must have seen this quest window numerous times, but it was my first.

I read the following sentences.

+

What was in your heart when you first entered the tower?

What was the first skill you acquired?

What did you seek to prove?

+

The Sword Emperor stood with his arms crossed.

+

Here is a man. He said everyone could become like him. Thus, his final key must naturally be for someone to become like him.

+

I was reading the quest window.

+

Here is a man. He asked if he could become like someone. Thus, his final key must naturally be that someone he wished to become.

+

The quest window spoke.

+

And now, here.

Finally, there are two men.

+

I looked at the Sword Emperor.

The Sword Emperor was looking at me.

+

Your key is each other.

+

The next moment, the world resounded loudly.

---

# Chapter 397: Our World (2)

---

[Key manifestation complete.]

[The 99th floor stage has been cleared.]

The flower garden split wide open.

[You are entering the 100th floor.]

Something surged up from the depths of the split garden.

It was a colossal mirror.

It was too large to merely reflect a person. It was of a mythic size that could reflect an entire legion in formation. The edges were jagged with crystal growths, and its surface bore a sinisterly dim purple hue on both sides.

Like a barrier from hell, the mirror stood between me and the Sword Emperor, featuring nine keyholes.

[Please insert the keys.]

I lifted my head and slowly approached the keyholes.

Although mirrors, unlike glass, couldn't show what's beyond them, somehow I knew that the Sword Emperor was mirroring my actions on the other side.

[The first key by those who breathe within the shadows you cast.]

I peered into the first keyhole.

+

What kind of person were you?

Were you strong? Were you lovely? Were you beautiful?  
Were you regrettable?



+

I took out the key and inserted it into the first hole.

“I was someone people could rely on.”

From the other side, the Sword Emperor's voice echoed.

“I wanted to be someone worth waiting for.”

The clanking sound resonated in unison.

The brightness and saturation of the mirror increased by a notch.

The more distinct purple mirror brought forth the next question.

+

[The second key by those who chose to follow you.]

What were the apostles to you?

Were they tools? Were they lovers? Were they family?

+

I inserted the second key.

“My apostles were peers, equals to me.”

Similarly, the Sword Emperor's response came from the other side.

“My apostles were like brothers to me.”

The brightness of the mirror surged once again.

+

[The third key by the gods you faced.]

What were gods to you?

+

“Beings capable of carelessness and mistakes, thus, naturally, capable of growth.”

“Had I not met my master, I might have ended up like them.”

I sequentially inserted the fourth and fifth keys.

“Honestly, I did have some regrets. It was sorrowful. If only I had been there, if only I had stayed till the end, at least till the conclusion with the Grey Spider. Maybe then, I could have done something more.”

“Well, I don't see it that way. Just like you talked about the first wave, the grey tide lived as they wanted. The one who was my 94th floor key was the same in that sense. Those who don't blame others walk on their own feet, naturally not leaning on others for support.”

“I was pleased to hear stories about me spreading far and wide. And I was scared. People assigned meanings to every facet of my life that I myself didn't know. I'm not talking about malicious distortions here, nor am I talking about misunderstandings. It was realizing that what I thought I had under total control, myself, wasn't really the case.”

“To become a myth is to go far beyond being just a subject of tales. People don't argue whether the nice neighbor has hemorrhoids or athlete's foot. But if that neighbor is bald, and the ones talking like baldness, then the story gets complicated. People fight as much for those they admire and respect as they do to exclude those they dislike and disdain. And being a cause for war is a shitty situation.”

Clank, clank.

The emerging phrases and the act of inserting the matching keys turned into a dialogue between me and the Sword Emperor, with the mirror between us.

“I felt I wasn't alone. Probably the Tower Master had been with me all along. Right from the moment I entered the tower till now.”

“Yeah. And she's probably watching us right now. Hey~ Lady~ Watching us~? We'll be there soon~”

“...Oh come on. Um. Anyway, if you were watching, you could've helped out sooner. Like when I first met the Tower Master and heard about her ideals. But then again, thinking about it, about the alternate timelines Mutia showed me. When someone gains an opportunity, it means depriving another of the chance they could have had.”

“Hmm.”

“Even if that someone didn't know they could have had that chance, the one who reversed time would feel it, even if vaguely. Even if they don't feel it, they'd have doubts. Is this really the best? Is this truly the best path for everyone, in the grand scheme of things?”

“Zombie, can you hear? The screams of countless victims created every time you reversed time. The footsteps of doom from an avenger who lost everything due to the butterfly effect of your actions that day are steadily approaching you.”

“Doing everything is the same as doing nothing. The Tower Master chose to bear everything by doing nothing. On the other hand, I chose to bear all the consequences of the altered causality caused by my actions by doing something. If anyone blames me for that, it's a burden I must carry.”

“That's too arrogant. I understand what you're trying to say, but...”

“Then what about you, Sword Emperor? If you could turn back time, would you?”

“Would turning back time prevent regrets?”

Clank.

“No. Usually, it causes even bigger regrets. You might resolve those regrets, but then you're immediately blocked by even bigger regrets. It's a continuous cycle.”

“Conversely, does living without turning back time prevent such issues?”

Clank.

“Indeed. Definitely.”

“That's it. Whether you turn back time or not, it ends up the same.”

Clank.

“It's a bit much to say it's all the same.”

“To someone who can't run, a sprinter seems like a person with special powers. To those who can't traverse time, a regressor seems like a monster, but in the end, they're all just people.”

“That reminds me of what the Apothecary said, but isn't that too arrogant? The Apothecary was also someone who wouldn't lose to anyone in arrogance.”

“Being able to do something means you can also die because of that something. People who can do things others can't often suffer in ways ordinary people don't. In that sense, the world is fair.”

Clank.

“Sword Emperor.”

“Say you could still save your master, what then?”

.....

“Even if you say, [The first wave went where it wanted], even if you're completely convinced, don't you have to persuade yourself again every morning when you wake up? Don't say no. I've watched you fall asleep and wake up.”

“You're right.”

I sighed.

The mirror was almost transparent by then. Even a transparent mirror couldn't show what's beyond, so I couldn't see the Sword Emperor. I just saw myself reflected in it.

“Every morning when I wake up, I ponder.”

“Hmm.”

“Whenever I feel the wind is a bit chilly, whenever I see peonies at the florist while walking down the street, eating ice cream with Heretic Inquisitor and Viper, I think about how wonderful it would be if the master were still alive, if I could bring the master back right now.”

“I know.”



“In the end, I decide not to. I think that's truly honoring the Master. But then I wake up the next day and think again, [But the dead can't wish for anything. But is leaving them dead really for their sake? Isn't that just my own satisfaction?]

“I know.”

“[If I revive the master, the master wouldn't forgive me, but isn't that just me being afraid of suffering? Isn't that all there is to it?]

If alive, if still present, wouldn't the master eventually find happiness again?

“In front of the master's grave... in front of those red peonies, I pondered with the nine worlds in my mind as I bowed.”

"....."

“It's paradoxical. Contradictory. Pathetic and pitiful. Perhaps this dilemma will never leave me as long as I live.”

“Rather, it will probably intensify as time goes by. You also

mentioned earlier, now every morning you'll think about the Grey Spider once more, won't you?"

"Yeah."

"Brat."

I looked into the keyhole that remained in the mirror.

Only one was left... I gazed quietly into that last keyhole... That's when it happened.

With a bang, a blade tip shot out from the keyhole.

"....."

I recognized that blade. It was far too massive to merely be called a sword, it was the Sword Emperor's weapon.

The giant blade, reminiscent of a parrotfish, twisted slightly. The thinned mirror, as if sensing the atmosphere, cracked and crumbled like sugar.

Amidst the falling purple glass eyes, the Sword Emperor stood.

He pointed the tip of his sword at me and said,

“Sitting there harboring such deep thoughts, are you not ashamed?”

“You're the one being indifferent like a true orthodox.”

“I've always been quite cool, you know. So cool that seeing a whiner makes me want to crack their skull.”

“Think you can?”

“Now it's finally possible.”

Despite the mirror's collapse, the ninth keyhole remained in its place, with the Sword Emperor's sword still inserted.

The Sword Emperor, as radiant as the unfolded flower garden, was smiling brilliantly.

“Let's have a match.”

"....."

I said,

“Is there a need?”

“I don't need it. You do.”

.....

“I've been impressed by you since quite early on.”

“Well, I do have some exceptional talent.”

“Yeah. So exceptional that not even bleach could straighten out those wrinkles. But despite being all wrinkled up, there was something about you that truly amazed me.”

The Sword Emperor continued with a smile.

“You performed rites for those kids.”

The 10th floor.

His words and my actions flashed before my eyes.

“It was a perspective I hadn't considered. And if you hadn't shown me, I would never have thought of it. Do you know what I felt when I saw it?”

“What did you feel?”

“[Ah. Is this how my master saw me?]”

I tilted my head, not understanding, but after a moment, I was taken aback and lifted my head.

A familiar expression floated on the Sword Emperor's face, one I could never have imagined.

“I felt humiliated.”

It was the first time I realized this man could wear such an expression.

The Sword Emperor smiled broadly again, but the remnants of humiliation lingered in that smile like an aftertaste.

“But if you can do it, then I should be able to do something similar.”

“Sword Emperor.”

“I'm best with a sword, so if I were to do it, it should be with a sword, shouldn't it?”

The Sword Emperor flicked the tip of his sword.

“Come. I'll give them solace.”

At a loss for words, I simply said,

“You were the ghost.”

“Not anymore. And it'd be cheesy to say I'm offering consolation.”

“What's wrong with a little cheesiness...”

“Gong-Ja, from now on, I'll console you...”

“Eeeek! Total goosebumps!!”

“I warned you.”

“Damn...”

The wind blew.

Unknown flower petals scattered wildly.

There, beyond the shattered mirror, across from the ninth

keyhole, the Sword Emperor spoke.

“My title is the Sword Emperor, the one who was honed at the bottom of the Dark Moon Cave, a disciple of the Sun Sage, inheritor of the righteous spirit of the orthodox sects, recognized as the supreme being in the world known as the Ten Thousand Sword World.”

Sword Emperor.

Origin, Ten Thousand Sword World.

Supreme Being.

Orthodox Sect.

“Let me request a bout.”

I remembered.

I remembered the expression I wore reflected in the mirror before it shattered. It was an expression that the Sword



Emperor would want to smack for being so pitiful.

Now, it might not be the same. Or perhaps, it's even more so. Honestly, I'm not sure. I tried to smile.

It didn't go well.

Not only when sad, but also when happy, people wish to cry.

“My epithet is the Heaven that Gathers Wails. As the future ruler of the tower's netherworld, my other titles include Wailing Heaven, the Moon of Ivansia, the White Lion of the Earth Spirit Tribe, and the protector of Asuras, the legitimate heir to the Demonic Law of the Heavenly Demon...”

No, that's not right.

I corrected myself.

“I am the Vice-Lord of the Demonic Cult.”

The Wailing Heavenly Demon.

Origin, World of the Lone Child.

Supreme Being Above All.

Demonic Cult.

“Let's engage.

In a duel.

Begin.”

# Chapter 398: Our World (3)

---

The sun, which was hanging bright in the sky, suddenly wavered.

The Sword Emperor made his move.

He struck like a bolt from the blue, without warning or herald. Following the skewed trajectory of sunlight, the sword flashed once, and immediately after, a missile-like white flash soared through the air.

"Three moves,"

I, too, raised my sword in response.

A shadow stretched over the flower bed beneath me, resembling the remnants I was riding on.

"Won't you yield even three moves!"

The shadow flickered along the path of the sword.

Demonic Heavenly God Sword

The First Form

Sword of Starving Death - Heart

Shadows sprawled on the ground bit into the earth in unison.

Vital energy was sucked from the ground. It was more akin to harvesting than training, closer to vampirism than harvesting. It was as if a swarm of hungry ghosts had crashed into a feast, gulping down food without even breathing. With the world's energy voraciously absorbed in such a manner, I hurled it straight up into the sky.

The surging blood-red shadow cleaved through the Sword Emperor's dragged-down flash of light in a thunderous manner...!

The Sword Emperor's vital energy was peeled away like an apple skin. The peeled layers of vital energy turned into a white hailstorm, pouring down.

The world flashed as if a million firecrackers had gone off at once.

I took that flash as a signal for my counterattack.

Demonic Heavenly God Sword

The Seventh Form

Sword of Contusing Death - Heart

Brightness and darkness mixed within the flickering world like a dance. From each appearing shadow, crimson vital energies were spewed forth. With no rhyme or reason, and nowhere to escape, the Sword Emperor faced the crimson tendrils with a smile.

"You, of all people,"

His fully revealed teeth gleamed like those of a lion.

"Aren't going to let me off with three moves, are you!"

The tip of the Sword Emperor's sword moved.

A sound reminiscent of a tongue clicking echoed.

If it was indeed the sound of a tongue clicking, it surely would have been made by the void itself.

—Whoosh.....!!

The void opened up.

It was as if a transparent giant was opening its lips to take a breath. The world's energy I had shot through the shadows like a conduit was sucked into the rift opened in the world.

It was sucked in.

And then it burst forth.

Boom.....!

Not vertically, but horizontally, a waterfall of light poured down.

The moment I saw the oncoming barrage of light, I realized what was happening.

"The vital energy I shot—"

Before I could even utter my retort about him swallowing and spitting back my energy, the Sword Emperor responded.

"As if it were yours to claim—"

Before he could finish, I reacted.

"Hup—"

I gripped a dagger.

Lifted it.

And buried both heels deep into the ground.

"Haa..."

Shadow is the offspring of light. If there exists something infinitely vast and boundless as light, it must be the shadow. With the oncoming flash of light, the shadows became as distinct as if they were anchored to the ground, to the world itself. I anchored my whole body in place.

I stood firm.

Then, as if a lightning rod was struck by a bolt of lightning, the wave of light struck the tip of the dagger.

"Urgh.....!"

Blood burst forth from my lips.



The blood quickly dried up and crumbled away. I could feel the blood flowing through my veins depleting from within, as if a desiccant was injected into them.

If being struck by the strike of the Constellation Killer felt like being burnt up by lightning in an instant, this strike from the Sword Emperor was like having the scorching sunlight beat down right in front of my face.

"Ugh..."

I breathed.

I breathed deeply.

With my heart burning up, I took a breath... and then,

"Hryaap.....!!"

I began my energy circulation.

Demonic Heavenly God Sword

## The Second Form

### Sword of Parched Death - Heart

Like a parched old woman guzzling seawater, I drank in the light mass just as it was, with its scorching thirst. I gathered the absorbed light mass into my heart.

In sync with that thumping heartbeat, I sent it toward my dantian and brain.

My vision flashed.

The light mass spread and burst along my veins and spine. It filled my trembling body, my drying blood. Gritting my teeth to take the shock in, I replenished it with the light I had taken in.

I exploded it.

"Swo.....!"

As I screamed, the streaks of light extending from my body burst forth from every pore.

".....!"

The Sword Emperor flinched, raising his sword to block.

He was fast enough. But it was too late. Like a porcupine shooting its quills all at once, the light mass I had expelled from my entire body whipped past the Sword Emperor.

"Keuk!"

Although the impact of the wide and thin rays of light wasn't significant, it was enough to disrupt his stance, and that was sufficient.

The void closed up.

The scent of incense burning in a temple wafted through the air.

"Thanks for purging the impurities... very, very much appreciated...."

While emitting smoke from my body, I spoke.

The Sword Emperor burst into a scoffing laugh.

"Crazy zombie bastard."

"It was you who started it... Whirling it around like that... It's not like it's noodles or something...."

"It was mine in the first place."

"Since when was there mine and yours in external energy...."

"Right here."

The Sword Emperor said.

Before I could retort further, he gripped his sword.

"Now you understand why I didn't yield those three moves."

Of course.

"Yeah."

I understood. I had no choice but to.

I...

"You have become stronger than that master of yours in winter."

"Yes."

The flowers of this world were living their lives with strong and resilient poison.

Despite the exchange of strikes that could split the heavens and scorch the earth, the flowers remained. They sang the song of their lives, entrusting themselves to the wind.

Among the scattering dandelion seeds, a man nodded.

"Are you happy?"

I was happy.

"Are you sad?"

I was sad.

"Both?"

I just felt a little like crying.

Amidst the emotions swirling like a double helix, only the Sword Emperor's eyes shone clearly like the midday sun.

"It's too early to be submerged in either."

I took a breath. I roughly erased the dampness sneaking deep into my nose.

"This."

The Sword Emperor gripped the hilt of his sword.

"This right now."

The tip of the sword moved.

"Needs to be received first."

And then.

Martial Sword

Formless Art

## Sword of Singularity

The world turned upside down.

---

I pulled my arm back, holding the sword. I took a step forward.

I put strength into my shoulder.

I thrust forward.

As a conclusion, it was a single stab.

And with that one stab, the world flipped over.

From below to above? From above to below? From left to right? From right to left?

No.



The world turned inside out, from within to without.

Like shoving one's hand into a stuffed doll and turning it inside out, the world expelled itself from the single point where the Sword Emperor's stab exploded.

Spring arrived. Summer burst forth within spring. Before summer even reached the edge of the world, autumn exploded. And from the core of autumn, winter, and then spring again, summer, and once more autumn spewed out.

A mandala made of greenery, leaves, flowers, fruits, grains, falling leaves, and bare branches swirled in a storm.

I knew that strike.

"It was the sword technique, used by "master."

"Yes, the final," strike that was unleashed.

"Now I see," it was such a sword technique.

"Do you only—" see?

"That's not," it.

Words spoken and unspoken passed between the Sword Emperor and me.

"Ah..."

I watched as the strike, not slicing through space but through time, time, and countless times layered upon each other, possibly in a spherical shape, leisurely flew towards me.

It was beautiful.

It was impossible not to be overwhelmed.

"This isn't—"

Just a simple Sword Heart.

It wasn't about shooting the gathered external energy.

"Your world.....!"

The sanctuary the Sword Emperor had built.

His life.

[The Garden of Thundering Flowers unfolds before you.]

His life covered me.

[In the beginning, there was it] [Nothing else existed] [Day of the Sword] [Moon of the Sword] [Day of the Sword] [Hour of the Sword] [Minute of the Sword] [Second of the Sword] [In the moment when gears perfectly meshed] [Oh! It became!] [Finally, it was forged!]

[The Primal Blade]

As if a dam had burst, countless images flickered before my eyes.

[Our] [Waiting] [Anguish] [Hunger] [Thirst]

[This world exists,]

[Only for you]

[All other humans are mere phantoms] [I am] [Alone]

[What is]

[So full of worry]

[On]

[Your] [Your] [Your] [Your] [Your] [Your] [Your face]

Semi-Divine Eye.

[What is so full of worry on your face]

That which occasionally opened after glimpsing into the life of the Tower Master, from this strike, was finally reading into the Sword Emperor.

"You..."

You were born alone.

You were forged.

"You..."

You longed for a sibling. You felt loneliness. You didn't want to be alone. You were seeking an opponent who could fight without holding back, someone into whom you could pour your entirety, someone like that. Then you met the master—the master taught you that you weren't so special.

You were...

"Satisfied,"

[He realized he wasn't alone.]

"Sword Emperor, you are satisfied—"

"I am satisfied!"

The Sword Emperor shouted aloud.

"I was a created life! A given life! I knew how to run before I could walk and was revered before I could shake hands, a shitty life!"

"Sword Emperor..."

"But!"

If the sun had vocal cords, it would have sounded like this.

"It was a life mired in happiness!"

With a shining voice, the Sword Emperor exclaimed.

"I affirm my life! Every meeting! Every parting!"

"Ah ha..."

"Brilliant Heavenly Demon!"

The Sword Emperor, still in his thrusting pose, shouted.

"How about you!"

"I..."

"Did you laugh! Did you love! Did you live! Were you happy!"

"I—"

"I know because I was there with you!"

The man who climbed the tower with me smiled proudly.

"But not as much as me!"

"Sword Emperor,"

"Accept my life! Feel it! Look up to it!"

I smiled.

"That's..."

I reversed the grip on my dagger.

The feel of the duct tape, freshly wrapped but already peeling and burnt to tatters, moistened my palm.

I saw the incoming strike from the Sword Emperor, the sphere of the mandala.



I made my mark.

Demonic Heavenly God Sword

The Ninth Form

Sword of Solitude Death

The dagger, twisted horizontally to avoid my ribs, cleanly pierced through my heart.

Blood flowed.

Slower than a snail creeping along a rainy window, the trickling blood ran down my wrist, soaked my sleeve, and then dropped, plink, onto a blooming flower at my feet.

"You..."

The moment the Sword Emperor hesitated, the flower that drank my blood began to wither.

"You..."

"I..."

[He realized he wasn't alone.]

"I sought refuge in the tower."

"Kim Gong-Ja,"

"I had no parents. I respected the director, but at that time, I was still too young, I couldn't truly see him as my parent. I couldn't make contact. I couldn't ask for help. I..."

I thought of the Black Dragon Witch.

A strong and noble person. A formidable figure facing the tower alone and the world outside. But even she, when she first stepped into the tower, did so because there was nowhere left for her outside. She...

"Sought refuge."

I thought of the Sword Saint.

There were those in the tower who had left behind their achievements outside, entering with a light heart. There were those who entered to challenge.

The Black Dragon Witch was not one of them.

Neither was I.

"I had nowhere to belong."

Everywhere I went, I seemed like an unwelcome guest.

Among people laughing and chatting, where everyone had places to go and homes to return to, rushing their steps on the streets, but only I seemed to be floating adrift.

In a city overflowing with light, my star, moaning in fever, seemed not to want me.

"So I came here."

Appropriately, I had no parents.

It was symbolic.

"Unlike you."

If you were forged by the world, I was discarded by the world. If you had all who shaped you as parents, I was an orphan abandoned by my parents.

So,

"Just like you."

We both left the worlds we grew up in behind and came here.

"Kim Gong-Ja,"

"Sword Emperor, sir."

Blood flowed.

The slowly trickling blood drenched my feet. My blood, spreading along the shadows, withered everything it touched.

It made everything rest.

"Don't you feel unsatisfied?"

The Sword Emperor hesitated once more.

I lifted my lips into a smile, still with the dagger plunged into my heart.

"I am satisfied—"

"Satisfied..."

[He realized he wasn't alone.]

"You weren't satisfied, were you!!"

Just like I had considered my master not wanting any more of life,

[He realized he wasn't alone.]

But just like every time I awoke, I wavered,

[He realized he wasn't alone.]

In the end, you were the same.

"Satisfied,"

You were satisfied with that - you weren't satisfied with that - you could have been satisfied with that - you wanted to be satisfied with that.

That you,

"Ahah,"

For some reason, Bambolina flitted through my mind.

The golden-haired child who truly found everything in this world beautiful, the eternally youthful boy who smiled so brightly without a care, but even he yearned for something beyond. Because he was human. Because we are all merely human.

Because you, too, are just human, I,

“You!”

Screaming at you like this,

"I'll satisfy you!"

You roar at me like a beast.

“If you can,” you say, challenge me,

"I will!" I scream back in response,

[The Garden of Withered Flowers unfolds before you.]

From my heart, I spread my shadows.

The shadow with both Yin and Yang swallows the bright sunlight. My sanctuary, a resting place for weary souls, encroaches upon the Sword Emperor's flower garden.

"Ha!"

The Sword Emperor laughed.

Like a dragon taking a deep breath, he laughed heartily, very heartily.

"Ah ha,"

I laughed.



Like whispering, softly, very softly.

"Ahaha,"

"Ahahaha,"

"Ahahahahahaha!"

The Sword Emperor's time mandala unraveled.

Spring, summer, autumn, winter, and spring again, were all unrolled and unfolded.

The once unstoppable torrent of time, within a halted world, folded its wings.

“To have blocked that...”

The Sword Emperor stamped his foot down.

"It's not over yet!"

I stamped my foot down too.

Our swords— my dagger and his greatsword— clashed, making a clear, chilling sound.

"Good!"

"Yes, it's good!"

Ding!

"Good! It's good! Ah!"

"Yes, yes, it's thrilling!"

Ding!

"You're quite something, Wailing Heavenly Demon!"

"And you, Primal Blade!"

Shadows flowing from my heart shot toward the Sword Emperor. The Sword Emperor, gathering light in one hand as if grabbing the neck of a dragon, parried and slashed with his sword. Ding! I barely managed to deflect with the dagger raised. Then, I spun around and aimed the dagger at his neck.

Even that was blocked, and I laughed.

The Sword Emperor laughed.

"I am not alone!"

He laughed even louder.

"I am not special!"

He laughed with genuine satisfaction.

"I am!"

The Sword Emperor swung his greatsword. He slashed.

Thunder struck.

"I am ordinaryaaaaah!!"

"Yes, Primal Blade! And I am!"

To you, I am.

"I am not lackingaaah!!"

I swung my dagger. Ding! Ding! Ding.....! I did not let go, clinging to the Sword Emperor, who parried with his greatsword, like a wolf biting and hanging on.

"I am not incomplete!"

I am,

"I was not born wrong!"

Now I,

"Have a place to return!"

"Yes! There is! Of course, there is!"

"Like you,"

"Like you!"

Ding!

Our weapons collided.

Our gazes met.

Then separated.

"So, I am,"

"We are!"

With a final intertwining of light and shadow, and a ding sound, the moment it all dissipated...

My dagger and his greatsword were crossed in the air, locked into an unseen keyhole.

"Living is alright!"

And then, the world shattered into pieces.

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# Chapter 399: SSS-Class Hunter who Lives to Die (1)

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-Breaking news.

-The King of Death, who ventured to conquer the 100th floor of the tower, has been out of contact for some time, hasn't he? There was speculation that he might have failed, and there were rumors that the Black Dragon Guild, along with the other four major guilds and the King of Death family, would send search parties. But now, it seems all those rumors can be put to rest.

-The top rank in the hunter ranking!

-The King of Death has conquered the zenith!

Roars of cheers echoed throughout Tam's Square.

-As you can see, Babylon's squares are now a cauldron of festivity. Everyone probably heard through Tam's messages even before we could report it. Did you hear, announcer?

-Yes. From what we've checked, it seems everyone in the tower heard that announcement.

-This reminds me of when the Celestial Martial Guild Master and the Constellation [Ruin-Harvesting Cow] created an unranked item before.

-Right. Back then, there were prophecies that the Ruin-Harvesting Cow would block the King of Death's path, causing quite a stir in the tower. There were debates about whether all the worlds within our tower should band together to form a large hunting party, or whether we should wait and see.

-The controversy only settled after the Celestial Martial Guild Master returned and explained what had happened.

The announcer wiped his forehead.

-Compared to that time, the current situation is practically calm. The biggest chaos we're seeing across the worlds of the tower is probably the shortage of liquor and chicken.



-Yes. It's undeniably good news, with no room for misunderstanding.

-Those opposing the King of Death, like the [Group Demanding Truth from the King of Death], seem eager to misconstrue it, but what do you think?

-We'll connect to the scene.

Masked individuals gathered, raising placards reading [King of Death(X) King of Lies(O)], [The Manufactured King of Death], [The Dark Connection between the King of Death and the Aegim Empire], [The Traitor of Earth - Puppet of Sormewin], and more.

The leading figures raised their voices.

-We, the [Group Demanding Truth from the King of Death], colloquially known as [KingTruth], have gathered here today to point out the high likelihood that the message, which is claimed to have been broadcasted throughout the tower, has been manipulated.

Listening to our expert (.....) In essence, they say the King of Death has bribed the tower. Observations have been made of the tower's administrators showing favoritism towards the

## King of Death (.....)

Or the message itself could be the result of a skill. Even if it's not a skill, our group suspects the very fact that the King of Death ascended to the throne of a Constellation is questionable. But look, if it's true that the King of Death has become a Constellation, it's possible for him to send the same message to countless people simultaneously.

(.....) Up until his early twenties, he lived a life as aimless as a drawn picture; how could such a person become the tower's representative hunter and conquer the 100th floor? Anyone with even elementary school-level common sense could immediately tell this doesn't make sense.....

The announcer narrowed his eyes.

-What are these people talking about?

-I'm not quite sure either. Essentially, they're saying it's manipulation, it's a scam, and even if by any chance it's true, it's still a conspiracy cooked up with the tower, so the King of Death has achieved nothing. Even if he's reached the 100th floor, does it improve people's lives by even a gram?

-Seems like we don't need to pay attention to such words. It's

been a while since the message about the 100th floor was sent, have you heard anything from the King of Death himself?

-We've been continuously in touch with the wide-area communicators, the five major guilds, the House of Ivansia, and the apostles of the King of Death's family, but still... Ah.

The announcer's expression changed suddenly.

-We've just received a message from the King of Death!

-Really! Which side?

-It's from the Black Dragon Guild.

The people conducting the broadcast understood what that meant. The fact that it was the Black Dragon Guild, not any other place, that announced receiving a message from the King of Death meant all private contacts with him had concluded, and what to announce and what to keep secret had been perfectly decided.

In that case, the broadcasting station felt less burdened. The announcer said:

-Please connect us to the scene.

The screen shifted. The hall of the Black Dragon Guild appeared.

Previously, there was a vote regarding the fate of the tower.

Whether to be pioneers or to settle, the people of the World of the Lone Child chose to move forward.

No one would dispute that it was the King of Death's speech that decided the direction of the vote.

The hall of the Black Dragon Guild on the screen was the very place where that legendary speech was made. Likely, the Black Dragon Witch had orchestrated even the associative effect.

Kim Gong-Ja, the protagonist who stirred the tower, stood in the same spot he had been during that speech.

-Ladies and gentlemen, the King of Death!

-After announcing his departure to the 90th floor 16 years ago, the King of Death reveals himself for the first time in 16 years!

The announcer exclaimed excitedly.

Beyond the screen, in the hall of the Black Dragon Guild, a chaotic noise could be heard.

[Everyone, there's no need to rush; the King of Death will soon return to your side...]

[Journalists, please maintain order for entry...]

Members of the Black Dragon Guild were managing the chaos and ushering in the journalists.

Meanwhile, the announcer commented on the situation inside the hall.

-Ah, the King of Death isn't actually standing there! It's a hologram.

-There's the Wide-Area Communicator standing right next to it. Seeing the King of Inventions there as well, it seems like a real-time connection is guaranteed.

-Just now, the [KingTruth] claimed that if the actual King of Death doesn't appear, it would be a scheme by the Black Dragon Guild. What do you think?

-As I've said repeatedly, we don't need to listen to their words. I was a bit disappointed myself when I realized it wasn't actually the King of Death appearing, but just a hologram. However, just having a similar thought to them makes me feel completely unworried about that alone, which I appreciate.

-While we're discussing this, it seems the hall has been somewhat organized. I'll move on to the press conference...

Soon, journalists gathered in front of the projected Kim Gong-Ja.

They asked.

-Hello, King of Death! Or should we now call you the Wailing Heaven?

The first question was thrown at him upon his return.

The King of Death smiled.

-You can call me whatever you like. It seems members of [KingTruth] are also here; you too can call me whatever you prefer. Even Flame Retard is fine, but I do prefer being called Kim Gong-Ja. Calling me 'Sir Gong-Ja' makes me feel more at ease.

That was his first response.

The journalists threw the next question.

-We received the message about your conquering the 100th floor. Congratulations. What was beyond it?

-What rewards did you receive?

-What happened there?

-What are your plans now?

Despite the Black Dragon Guild members' best efforts to control the order, the questions almost burst out simultaneously, like a serpent with many heads. It didn't matter.

They were all stories that needed to be told.

Kim Gong-Ja took a deep breath.

"I am—"

---

I met with the Tower Master. Became a Pillar. Parted ways with the Sword Emperor. Talked with my comrades.

I accepted the first event calmly. Or rather, when the Tower Master appeared in the collapsed world after the final key was turned, neither I nor the Sword Emperor were in any state to kick up a fuss.

The Tower Master described it like this:

"You two look like a pair of sergeants who've collapsed in the middle of a soccer field after a hard game."



Lying spread-eagled on the ground and gasping for breath, I didn't even turn to look at where that amethyst voice came from and said.

"Isn't soccer... a game you play with eleven people, not just two?"

"You revealing that you're from a generation that never served in the military is quite the plot twist, Gong-Ja."

I had no idea what she was on about.

I then looked up at the Tower Master.

Just as the summit of a mountain is merely a white dot when seen from afar, so too was the Tower Master just a lone figure standing on that white dot, looking down at the Sword Emperor and me.

The Sword Emperor raised a hand in greeting.

"Hello, Aunty."

“Hey there, Uncle.”

The Tower Master also raised a hand in return.

I laughed.

“Isn’t this where you’re supposed to go ‘Who, who are you calling aunty?!’ while blushing, or shadow your eyes with darkness and ask ‘What... did you just say?’?”

“Wailing Heaven, please be aware that the term ‘ordinary’ cannot encapsulate what you just said. Are you trying to cast me in what role?”

Indeed, fitting for the goddess of fertility with twenty-four children. Even though I was motherless, I imagined that's how it would feel if my mother found a manga I was reading.

The Tower Master sighed and fluttered his sleeve.

“If you insist on using ‘ordinary,’ you should say it like this: ‘Don’t people usually meet in a more sacred and impactful atmosphere?’”

“That response, I already know. Because originally, we should have met here for the first time.”

But I had already faced the Tower Master several times. Compared to my first encounter with the Sword Emperor, the impact was inevitably less.

Even so, a greeting more formal than "Hi, nice to see you" might have been possible. As I thought this, the source of that atmosphere-less meeting scratched his cheek.

“This is our first time meeting, right? I'm the reason why the Pillar meetings were convened several times. There's no need to censor it; I remember.”

"If we don't count the time I encountered your avatar on the 29th floor of the World of the Lone Child, and if we don't count the times you've always been by our sides, if we only count the times we've met face-to-face, then yes, that's correct."

“How about a drink?”

“For the first proposal to come from those who've just crossed the 100th floor, overcoming the zenith, to be this...”

The Tower Master snapped her fingers with a smile.

“Not a bad idea at all.”

A holographic summoning circle appeared in the empty world.

The Sword Emperor pulled a porcelain liquor bottle from his belongings. I was incredulous.

“Isn't that alcohol at least 140 years old?”

“Probably even older? You know, time flies where I stayed.”

“Sword Emperor, sir... Have you heard of something called an expiration date? When I lived alone, I used to open cans of tuna that were years old and add them to expired ramen, but that's really not good. It kind of... makes life feel barren...”

“Don't you know that alcohol gets better with age? Stop your nonsense and prepare some side dishes.”

The Sword Emperor, still seated, pushed my back with his foot.

Ah, such a hassle, I grumbled, but stood up anyway.

“Didn't you bring the Pillars?”

“I didn't.”

“Why not?”

“Because most of the Pillars wouldn't welcome you. Especially you, Wailing Heaven.”

I recalled the attitudes of the Pillars, excluding the Princess, towards me when the Staff of Time Immemorial was revealed.

Laughing while igniting aura instead of fire, I said.

“I like provoking those kinds of people.”

The Sword Emperor also snickered.

"This guy really has a knack for that."

"And you seem like you'd be good at fanning the flames beside him, don't you think?"

"Should I hang around and play by your side for a while, like I used to?"

"I'll appoint you as the official consultant of sarcasm for the King of Death family."

I cooked fried rice with the aura ignited. Come to think of it, these eggs and rice were also pretty old, but since I had kept them in the all-too-convenient magical bag, they should be fine. It's not like these folks here would suffer food poisoning.

Meanwhile, the Tower Master had prepared cups and dishes.

"I didn't come here just for you. Now that there's finally a pioneer, shouldn't I get to enjoy something too?"

“Watching the Pillars suffer from the banter between me and the Sword Emperor from a distance... Tower Master, you seem like you'd really enjoy that.”

“Of course, I'll enjoy it, and I'll continue to enjoy it thoroughly, but still.”

The Tower Master smiled as she placed a cup in front of each of us.

“I want to enjoy this peaceful atmosphere for now.”

I finished the cooking.

I shaped the fried rice into rice balls and topped them off with a touch of oyster sauce.

The Tower Master seemed taken aback by the egg fried rice.

“Wailing Heaven, do you consider rice a side dish?”

“Egg fried rice with oyster sauce is delicious.”

"Wailing Heaven, do you consider rice a side dish? I asked again because I wasn't sure if you heard me correctly the first time."

"It's salty, so it goes well with alcohol. Especially with slightly sweet makgeolli or fruit wine, it's a perfect match. The Sword Emperor's drink is makgeolli, right?"

"It's distilled liquor."

"Sword Emperor, sir, even outside of the Guardian Spirit, you're still the Sword Emperor... At crucial moments, you're utterly useless..."

The Sword Emperor shot a drop of alcohol imbued with aura at me, nearly piercing my heart and sending me into regression.

The Tower Master scolded us.

"How can it be that before and after breaking through the zenith, it's still nothing but fighting and mischief?"

"Oh, dear. Tower Master, life is a series of [struggles], isn't



it?"

"Wailing Heaven, please don't try to compete with Viper in that regard. Have a drink instead."

So, the Sword Emperor and I did just that.

The Tower Master first poured liquor into my cup.

"You've worked hard."

Mm.

"Yeah."

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# Chapter 400: SSS-Class Hunter who Lives to Die (2) (End)

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As my cup was filled, I took the bottle and poured some for the Tower Master.

"Kim Gong-Ja, you're slated for a Pillar position, aren't you? Has your mind changed on that?"

"Yeah, I am."

As I poured the drink, I continued.

"And I haven't changed my mind about aiming to become the Tower Master either."

"Hmm. It's common for all new employees to aim for the CEO's position. It's a valid ambition."

The Tower Master spoke while looking at the rising liquor in her cup.

"Just be careful not to shatter that ambition. You've barely managed to take on the [netherworld] among the portfolios the Pillars manage."

"....."

"If you wish to challenge me, Kim Gong-Ja, plunder the sanctuaries held by all the Pillars."

The cups were now full.

I set the bottle down.

"What sanctuaries do the other Pillars hold?"

"That's for you to discover in time. While ambition is good, discussing work matters at a welcome party might dampen the mood."

"Fair point."

I lifted the cup filled by the Tower Master.

She, too, lifted the cup I had filled for her.

"Wait."

"I will."

Our cups clinked together.

With a clear sound and ripples in the reflected surface, the two of us smiled. I drank the liquor filled by the Tower Master. Initially cold, the drink ignited a fire in my veins as it slid down my throat. A sense of fulfillment, relief, and anticipation for tomorrow.

There were no explicit messages, but I realized that I had become a Pillar, officially taking charge of all the netherworlds in this tower.

While I was immersed in this realization, the Tower Master also poured some liquor for the Sword Emperor.

"Thanks for coming."

The Sword Emperor took the bottle and reciprocated by filling the Tower Master's cup.

"No need to mention it."

The bottle was placed back on the tray.

They clinked their full cups and drank. After a sigh laced with the spirit of the drink, the Tower Master said,

"Kim Gong-Ja, a Pillar position was destined for you. You've accepted that position."

"Congratulations, Gong-Ja. You've made it as an executive in a conglomerate."

"But, Sword Emperor, there was no specific promise made to

you."

The Tower Master looked directly at the Sword Emperor.

A purple mirror reflected the Sword Emperor.

"What do you desire?"

"Nothing in particular."

The Sword Emperor answered plainly.

"If there's a difference between a tower and a mountain, it's whether someone built it or not. But what does it matter to someone who's reached the top, be it a tower or a mountain?"

Holding the bottle again, the Sword Emperor filled the Tower Master's cup.

"It's time for me to leave."

The Tower Master hesitated.

To the Tower Master, the Sword Emperor said,

"Grant me the 'Authority to Leave the Tower.'"

"Ah."

The Tower Master sighed.

"So you're bringing that up."

"You guessed?"

"From the start, your reason for entering this tower was to have a drink with me."

Snow-like amethyst breaths accumulated on the white pinnacle.

"I'm possessive. I don't wish to let go of any treasure I hold. Literally, until my skin rots, my flesh crumbles, and my bones collapse, even as those bones mix with the earth, I wish for them to mix within my box."

That was something I too had realized when I learned there was an netherworld in the tower.

"But even so..."

Drinking the poured liquor, the Tower Master muttered with his gaze lowered.

"A warrior cannot be leashed."

With her face obscured by the cup, the Tower Master appeared powerless, unlike when she hinted at the domains of the Pillars earlier.

Instead, she seemed infinitely fragile and lonely.

I realized this look was familiar.



'Ah.'

It was the director.

The current expression of the Tower Master resembled that of the director watching our backs as we left the orphanage.

'.....'

In hindsight, the Jaa Soo-Jeong in the side story had also bid me farewell with such a face.

Perhaps all parents share the same expression when parting with their children.

"I'll visit occasionally."

The Sword Emperor, having drained his cup, thumped my head gently with his large hand.

"I'll come to see this garden turn grey. And if this guy is moping around, I'll kick his ass."

"Ah, when have I ever moped..."

Ignoring my muttering, the Sword Emperor looked at the Tower Master.

"I'll visit occasionally, have a drink with you like this, so don't worry."

"Yeah."

The Tower Master said.

With a visage clearly struggling to suppress his loneliness.

"Please do visit occasionally."

To the Tower Master, who has encompassed countless numbers of worlds within the tower's box and witnessed even more lives and deaths, farewells must always be a freshly painful thorn.

I thought of the fox. During my ascent of the 90th floor, the

fox, along with the Goddess and the snake, had hidden herself, suffocating in her loneliness. The Grey Spider beside me now, the Sword Emperor, my master, and even Raviel had all faced their greatest enemy not as a more powerful being but as the sheer absence of anyone beside them.

Even for the mighty, loneliness is the only blade that reaches them.

I deeply felt that the Tower Master was also struggling against that blade.

I bowed my head.

"Thank you."

The Tower Master lifted her head.

To the Tower Master, who still wore a face tinged with loneliness as she looked at me, I said, just like I had once thanked her before,

"Thanks to you establishing this tower, we were able to come this far."

I said.

"I was able to become someone."

I spoke of what I had learned.

"The Sword Emperor wasn't the only one."

I spoke of what I had learned.

"Ester didn't need to become a Demon King."

One by one.

"Hwiya didn't establish a wrong nation. Kim Yul wasn't born trash. Master..."

One by one.

"Master didn't face a meaningless death. Raviel could be a bit

happier, and Silvia could find happiness without hurting or belittling others. Anastasia could smile more genuinely, and Paladin could pursue justice without actually killing anyone. Bambolina wasn't an incomprehensible monster. Liǎofàn..."

Each name, like raindrops, seemed to pour into me from somewhere else, not here. With every overflow from my heart, there were people I had met. I,

"Sarbast Aegim,"

"Hamusutra,"

"Fox,"

"The first wave,"

"The director,"

"Yoo Soo-Ha,"

I am.

"I wasn't born wrong."

I filled the Tower Master's cup as I bowed deeply.

"Thanks to you building this tower, all of this could be proven."

Liquor overflowed from the cup. My reflection appeared in the spilled drink on the tray.

It soon became unclear.

Tears falling from my chin had disturbed the surface.

"Thank you, mother," I said to the Tower Master.

"Thank you, brother," I said to the Sword Emperor.

"I'm glad to have met both of you."

Silence fell.

"Mm."

Breaking the silence was the Tower Master.

"Mm."

With her arms crossed and head bowed, the Tower Master repeated it several times.

Mm, mm, and then,

"I'm pleased!"

The Tower Master's face, as she spoke, was brighter than the sun reflected in the Sword Emperor's coronet.

A hand touched my forehead. With the same warmth as that hand, the Sword Emperor said,

"Call me anytime."

"Yeah."

I wiped my eyes and nodded.

"I will."

Time passed.

We shared a few more cups of liquor.

When the fried rice was all gone, naturally, the bottle was empty too.

"Then..."

"Yeah."

Both the Sword Emperor and I carefully stood up.



The Tower Master did not. She sat there as she had when drinking, because this was her home.

It was her place.

But the Tower Master clasped her hands and looked at us.

"May fortune be with you both."

And with that, she let us go.

---

There's not much to say after that. Everything mentioned before covers it all.

I became a Pillar.

I didn't start working right away. Even I needed some rest. The souls that had waited for me while I climbed to the 100th floor, I'm sorry, but please wait a little longer. I intended to meet those who were still waiting for me in life first.

How can you skip work on your first day, the Staff of Time Immemorial scoffed. I joked that if it was already upset about this, how would it endure the time we would spend together? The Staff of Time Immemorial just sighed.

I parted ways with the Sword Emperor.

The Sword Emperor received the 'Authority to Leave the Tower.' Astonishingly, this authority applied to 'all worlds where the tower was established.' In short, the Sword Emperor could not only return to the original Ten Thousand Sword World but also to my modern Earth, the outside of the Grey Spider's Tower, and even the world where the Tower Master was born.

The Sword Emperor, who seemed to have developed a competitive spirit after our encounter on the 10th floor, surprisingly burned with a desire to compete. When parting, he said he would visit the world of the great Tower Master to face the being praised as the strongest swordsman across all worlds, the Absolute Sword Duke.

However, it seems it will take a considerable amount of time before that plan comes to fruition. The Sword Emperor, who had been stuck on the 99th floor for a long time, had just as much to catch up on. He would first visit his homeland, the Ten Thousand Sword World, to meet those still alive. Then he would come to Babylon, the 1st floor of our tower, to share a drink with the Sword Saint. If there were others he had been close to, he would share a drink with them too. After that, he would visit my flower garden to pay respects to the Grey

Spider. Only then would he set off for the Tower Master's world.

I envy the carefree Sword Emperor, but like he made his choice, I made mine. I have a responsibility to live my life.

I talked with my comrades.

To be honest, I never imagined I'd receive so much scolding in my life... well, to be more honest, I did imagine it. I think it's only fair to be scolded after making them worry and wait. That, too, is a responsibility I must bear in living my life.

Even though hearing all those scoldings felt like my heart would break, being able to touch the fox's fluffy fur helped me calm down. Although the fact that the fox later bit my finger is a secret just between us. As we talked, I shared my experiences, and my comrades shared theirs. Given what they had observed and experienced while I ascended the 90th floor, the situation was sorted out quicker than expected. The snake, who had appeared at the fox's call, had evolved into something akin to an Anaconda, gathering divinity during my absence. Nonetheless, the gaps were filled thanks to the secrets it shared along the way. I'm truly grateful for that.

Once the situation was sorted, the topic of future plans came up, and that's when this press conference was planned. It was Anastasia's suggestion. I gladly followed the advice of a wiser friend.

"That's all."

Most of it, I shared with the journalists watching me through the projector screen. I hid what needed to be hidden and omitted what needed to be omitted, but it still took quite some time to tell the tale.

Perhaps the journalists will have an easy time finding stories for a while. Whether that's a happy or a troublesome thing, I'm not sure, but if any of them find joy in it, they're welcome to delight in it a bit more. I was ready to answer all the questions that came from this conference.

Then, a journalist asked.

"What do you plan to do now?"

I lifted my head.

I saw the journalists looking at me, the camera capturing me, and beyond that, the many people watching me through the camera.

"What will I do now?"

First, I plan to enjoy being alive by playing with Raviel. That's truly my plan for the future, without a hint of deception.

But I didn't say that.

Because surely, somewhere beyond that camera, there's someone like me from the past, cooped up in a small room, looking at me on the television with the same face I had when looking at the Flame Emperor.

In those days, the Flame Emperor never said the words I wanted to hear in any interview. And now, I understand it's not something to resent. The Flame Emperor lived as the Flame Emperor and spoke as the Flame Emperor.

If there are words I wish to hear, I have to be the one to say them.

"Mm."

The words I, at thirty-three, wanted to hear.

The words I wished my idol would say to me.

"I will..."

I spoke of something I could share with everyone.

"Live through today."

That, too, was an utterly honest plan for the future.

- The End of SSS-Class Hunter who Lives to Die -

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# Afterword

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Author's Afterword:

Hello, this is Sinnoa!

The story of SSS-Class Suicide Hunter, also known as [Suicide Hunter], has come to an end today. I couldn't ask for more if you enjoyed it.

There might be side stories in the future, but for now, the main story has concluded...!

Answering what SSS-Class Suicide Hunter is about isn't an easy task for me as the author. Putting aside the fact that it mixes many genres, the title itself is SSS-Class Suicide Hunter...

Speaking of the title, there was a chance to change it to 'A Hunter who Dies to Live' before it went premium. Sometimes I wonder if it would have been better that way. However, after going premium, the ISBN was registered, so... (..) it became impossible to change...

I sincerely thank all the readers who have spent a long time with a novel titled as such...!

SSS-Class Suicide Hunter was a story about loneliness.

How to deal with loneliness, how incredible a person who can make someone feel not lonely is, wasn't it a story about what it means to be a savior?

SSS-Class Suicide Hunter was a story about life.

You don't need shining talent, strength, or skills. It was a story that there is value in being alive, even if you can't prove anything to the world or are failing to do so.

SSS-Class Suicide Hunter was a story about death.

It was a story about love and friendship, about choices and responsibilities.

I'm not confident if I have successfully conveyed all these themes I eagerly wanted to include. Looking back, there always seem to be shortcomings and regrets. If I, the author, see them, I can only imagine how the readers must feel,



leaving me without a face to show. It's all due to my lack of capacity as an author.

Yet, this inadequate story was able to reach so many of you by chance and receive such generous love.

I'm grateful to everyone on the JPlus management team who spared no support for Sinnoa's first work, to Manager Jong-seong Lim, who leveled up from agent to manager midway, to Cornbits who drew the first cover, to Mintaka KIM who drew the second cover, to Phantasmagoric Beetle, and to everyone who supported us.

And of course, to all the readers who read this work.

If it weren't for your company, love, and support, it would have been impossible for me to complete this journey.

As a writer who sits in front of a monitor to work, it's easy to forget that you are always living with people and writing for people living in reality.

Thanks to the voices, comments, and interest of the readers, I was able to barely remember that fact. At least, I could try not to forget it.

Thank you.

Because of you, Suicide Hunter was possible, and beyond that, I was able to be here.

I will continue to work hard!

My next work will likely start being written after at least a year. In the meantime, I plan to spend time learning things I lacked and wanted to learn by attending classes. I hope to return a bit more grown when we meet again.

The weather is getting hotter. This summer is expected to boast the worst heatwave in recent years, and it seems the novel coronavirus is still lurking, holding its breath.

Please take care of your health.

Have a great day.

This was Sinnoa.

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## Translator's Afterword:

Hello, dear readers! This is the translator, Ryuu.

I find myself at a loss for words now that our adventure has reached its grand finale. It's been a wild ride, filled with laughter, tears, and more than a few moments of existential pondering (and the occasional desperate search through the glossary).

Who could forget the time we first met Kim Gong-Ja, our hero with a penchant for flirting with death more frequently than a lovestruck teenager with their first crush? Or the introduction of the Tower Master, who made us all pause and wonder, "Is this what Gandalf would be like if he got really into administrative work?"

Translating this novel was no small feat. There were times when the cultural nuances were as tricky to navigate as a minefield in stilettos. And let's not even get started on the puns and jokes that made me wish I had a lifeline to call a native speaker, or perhaps a friendly neighborhood spirit with a knack for languages.

One of the most memorable challenges was certainly the title itself. "SSS-Class Suicide Hunter" - a name that sparks more curiosity than a cat in a room full of laser pointers. It's a title that made every coffee shop writing session an adventure in itself, with passersby casting puzzled glances my way, probably

wondering if I was working on a self-help book with a very niche audience.

And who could forget our forays into the philosophical? Discussions about loneliness, the value of life, and the essence of friendship often left me pondering my own existence and reaching for the nearest tub of ice cream for comfort. This novel wasn't just a story; it was a journey into the soul.

To the readers who stuck with us through thick and thin, through every misinterpreted idiom and every cultural reference turned comedic goldmine, I salute you. Your comments, theories, and occasional corrections were the wind beneath my wings, the espresso shot in my morning coffee.

As we close this chapter (pun intended), I can't help but feel a mix of relief and melancholy. Relief because my nights will no longer be haunted by the fear of mistranslating a pivotal plot twist. Melancholy because I'll miss our daily rendezvous with Kim Gong-Ja and his merry band of misfits.

But fear not! Like any good serial, the end is never truly the end. There are side stories to anticipate, and who knows? Perhaps our paths will cross again haha.

Until then, keep reading, keep questioning, and most importantly, keep laughing at the absurdity of it all.

See you around, hopefully enjoying more of my works,

Ryuu

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Editor's Afterword:

Bruh, Ryuu really wrote a lot. Anyways, I'm the editor of this series, Abstract.

I joined the team mid-way through the series and enjoyed my time editing the series. Although I never really understood what the MC or author were tryna do, but hey, shit was good XD.

Thank you all for sticking with us until the end of the series and I hope y'all stick around for more since Ryuu is gonna go goblin mode soon. See ya around folks!

# Glossary

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1. [Tower](#)
2. [Timeline](#)
3. [Translator's Note](#)

# Tower

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[image]

The tower

The Tower was said to have mysteriously appeared out of nowhere, Hunters lived differently compared to the people living from the outside world and the tower can be seen on the horizon from anywhere on Earth. Hunters all stepped into the tower and mostly lived there. Whether they liked it or not, they faced life-threatening events regularly. Whoever stepped foot in the tower could never leave, that was one of the rules in the tower.

## History

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The Tower was created by Ja Soo-jung she made the Tower so that it would be the only place where all the sadness in the world gathers so she can take the burden of it on herself.

When the Tower first appeared, numerous individuals entered in search of fame, riches and adventure. The first decades of the Tower was characterised by suffering and strife,

as numerous groups attempted to establish authority and dominate over the Tower. There existed a slave system, terrorist organisations, racial discrimination and clashing sentiments, eventually coagulating into a chaotic hodge pot which 'seemed as though the whole of humanity's history was compressed into one thing'. Additionally, the outside world had taken to sending 'unwanted' individuals into the tower, such as war refugees and orphans, thus fostering the image of the Tower as 'society's garbage can'.

Eventually, the five leaders of the current five great guilds gathered. Black Witch proposed the eternal non-aggression pact. Countess agreed under the condition that she would hold monopoly over the Tower's economy. Heresy Inquisitor agreed under the condition that each guild would be allocated territory in exchange for his ability to cover-up crimes, while Sword Saint, then head of the Vigilante's Guild and Rank 1, agreed to step back and turn a blind eye. In the face of then conflicting beliefs and principles, all leaders agreed to carry out what happened next under their own beliefs and principles.

Over the next 5 days, the original 10 great guild was reduced to five and a mass genocide was carried out. On the 1st night, 4,653 people were killed. On the 2nd night, 10,171 people. The 3rd night saw 8,275 people murdered. The 4th night saw 7,412. Lastly, on the 5th night, 23,781 people were killed. After the deed was done, all five guild leaders collectively agreed to never speak of the incident again. This event also led the Sword Saint to abandon the Vigilante's Guild.



# Structure

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The tower has many floors that are connected one by one and each of the floors is made up of one world. Those worlds are only a replica or clones observed by the tower owner with its ability, however, all of them are real even though it is just a cloned world. Each of the floors is filled with different kinds of monsters, to get out of the floor, you need to clear the stage. It is different from the outside world since you can have skill cards and auras when you enter the tower and become a hunter. Each of the floors has different ways to clear it and the worlds are all different from each other.

Stages that are not attacked basically move in units of time independent of each other, and if you challenge a stage, it is linked with the time on the first floor of the tower at the moment of challenge.

The society in the tower was much more bloody than the outside world. To put it nicely, the strong ate well, and the weak were the meat. It didn't matter even if the hunters wanted to escape the tower and live lavishly in the outside world. Those who had entered the tower had abandoned their wealth, their relationships, their nationality, and their identity.

The tower had different themes on floors. The 1st floor to the 10th floor was [Tutorial] while the upper floors all have different plays.

Only the Countess can interact with the world outside, she was the only hunter who has the title 'Count,' however, she can only send and receive things from the outside world.

- The hunter's nationality doesn't matter inside the tower.
- Retired hunters work in the first-floor city as a waiter, chef, etc.
- All the hunters in the tower have auras in their bodies.

Three skills have been revealed to support the tower's structure, the fourth skill is not revealed until completion. They are...

- The Earth Bone Dragon's Skull
- The Ice River Dragon's Breath
- Mansaeng

# System

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- System Message - like most webcomics that have hunter or game themes, the tower also has a system message where a message window will appear only to the hunters.
  - They can check their skills by saying "Open skill card."
  - They can check their current status by saying "Status Window."
- Rankings - The tower ranks the hunters and it will show up through a hologram after they clear the stage. The one who ranks first has the most privilege, they get a lot of rewards and have the right to decide. The people who contributed the most would get the rewards first and will be summoned first to the next floor.

# Skills

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The tower gives a skill to those who they acknowledge and that's when hunters awakened their skill. The skill awakening sound would normally say something like "The Tower is

moved by your determination," or "The Tower rewards you for your honest efforts," or "The Tower praises you for your achievements."

Monsters residing in the tower also have their own skills.

# Stages

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## Individual Route

- 1st Floor City : Base
  - It is a city where hunters could rest however long they wanted. It was a step for beginners to get used to the tower. It is also called the Babylon/ Naraka/ City of Ascension.
  
- 2nd Floor : Hunting Ground
  - It is a hunting ground where hunters can hunt slimes.

- 3rd Floor : Hunting Ground
  - The inhabitants living on this floor are Orcs. They are ridiculously strong, their attack patterns are simple and has tough skin.
  
- 4th Floor : Hunting Ground
  
- 5th Floor : Boss Monster
  - The Goblin King is the boss monster and is the one staying on this floor. He is a senior member and was strong.
  
- 6th Floor : Hunting Ground
  - It is a hunting ground where wolves are the inhabitants on this floor. These weren't ordinary wolves. They were engraved by what appeared to be tattoos which could be seen even through their thick hair. These were Meadow Wolves and the more complex the patterns on their bodies, the stronger they were. This place is where Kim Gong-ja killed Yoo Soo-Ha during

the first few chapters.

- 7th Floor : Hunting Ground
- 8th Floor : Hunting Ground
- 9th Floor : Hunting Ground
- 10th Floor : Boss Monster
  - This floor is the last tutorial in the tower. It has an old big mansion and inside it are thousands of dolls, the Hellfire Maiden is the boss monster on this floor.

## Public Route

[image]

The map from 11th to 20th floors

All information below from the 11th to 20th floors is written by the Author Shin Noah.

- 11th Floor : Imperial Port

- It is close to the fishing port where the seafood is mainly supplied. It is also used as a commercial port, but it trades with a nearby port adjacent to the seashore or along a river.

- 12th Floor : Imperial Capital

- The largest city in the world. It is a magnificent and colorful place, but there is no day when it is comfortable with the struggles of all kinds of forces and political blood. The water and sewage facilities are very well done, but the sewage system is huge as well. That means, yes, the sewer is infested with monsters...
- Hunters without tinnitus these days are aiming to level up while going around the quest hit and run. Unlike the 1st to 9th floors, which have only hunting content, you can build relationships with natives (NPC), and there are many empty houses, so the top 1 has reached real estate saturation. There are also more and more people who have homes and hideouts here, avoiding floors.

- 13th Floor : Temple

- It is a temple built in a place that separates the east and west of this world. In the tradition, it is said that this place, also called the Dragon Emperor's spine, was tightly wrapped around it. Its authenticity is unclear, but it has been handed down in the goddess's temple as if it were orthodox.
- As it was built in a place separating east and west, many people come and go. As such, incidents occur often. As a result of the Heretic Inquisitor's negotiations, hunters can receive full-fledged quests from temples under the jurisdiction of the Guardian Goddess Church, including this one. By completing these quests and accumulating achievements, you can receive better quality equipment or better quality healing miracles.

- 14th Floor : Fairy Forest

- It is home to the elves. Elves are also spreading throughout the world. However, the elves are also home to this forest. Elves in different worlds



have different shapes, but the lifespan of the Elves in the Chumsan World is about 300 years.

- The home of the elves is clearly in the forest, but it is protected by a magical barrier. So it can never be reached by blindly wandering.
  - There are a lot of rare herbs, berries, mushrooms, and animals. One of them is the balloon cat.
  - There are also a lot of powerful monsters. From pretending to be trees, things that all predators could use as role models, and things that wouldn't feel uncomfortable. The fact that there are a lot of rare things means that many people don't want to step into it.
- 
- 15th Floor : Mermaid Lake
    - It is the home of mermaids and lizards, and other children who are difficult to live in the land for a long time. If mermaids are nobles, Lizardmen is more like a knight. Apparently, the mermaids are in the upper ranks, but Lizardmen don't take

it.

- Here, the difference in lifespan between the mermaid and the Lizardman and the social structure resulting from it plays a part. The life span of this world mermaid is approximately 500 years. Lizardmen's lifespan is about 50 years, which is a whopping 10 times difference. Thus, the Lizardmen in this world have one mermaid for each clan, and the clan is cared for by the mermaid. The mermaids take care of the Lizardmen, and the Lizardmen are building a mutual respect & symbiosis society that protects the mermaids.
- Lizardmen can be active outside the lake. Somehow educated, mature Lizardmen, half of them stay in the lake, half of them go outside and wander around the world before returning.
- Mermaids, on the other hand, have difficulty getting out of the lake. So, the outer oil itself hardly occurs, but if you have to go outside the lake somehow, you can move while floating around with floating water droplets.
- Mermaids and Lizardmen are also good at magic. Among them, the

mermaids have excellent magical skills that they are called 'the wise men of the lake'.

- It is such a lake, but it is by no means a peaceful place. Most of the monsters that seem to be friendly with water live. The lake is enormously wide and the water is terrifyingly deep, and there are also many giant monsters that can cause a deep-sea phobia. And since the water of this lake itself comes from the open sea after going through Cheomsan once, the eggs of the open sea monsters that Cheomsan could not filter outflow in and hatch, causing a riot.

- 16th Floor : Volcanic Zone

- Defeat the twisted Nether monsters pouring out of the volcano, climb to the top, and defeat the Death Knights riding small drakes (Wyverns) in the nest. Lava is flowing all over the place, and if you drop your foot, you take enormous sustained damage.
- After clearing, that is, before being invaded by Estel, even if it were a volcano, it was not a place full of rocks and stones, it was just a lush mountain.

At the top, there was a mountain lake full of clean water, which is said to be among the three thousand and six thousand of Baekdusan Mountain. Near Sanjeong Lake, some fighters valued honor.

- Despite belonging to humans, half human-half weapons, which paid more attention to their dragongari and spearmen rather than humans, are ranked as competition. The score of the horse dragon skill competition is higher. Among them, there is a special Wyvern instance, which is said to have been tamed by one of Shi Emperor Aikim's associates. Since then, those who know how to ride this special object have come to be called prophecy dragons.

- 17th Floor : Merchant City Federation

- They lived together in a large river where the water flows from the Sanjeong Lake, which is located at the top of the volcano, and the water flows from the Great River. The ancestors were serfs or exiled criminals who fled from a small state on the 19th floor, but now that they gained their wealth, they bought a genealogy and succeeded in laundering them.

- It is a republic made up of merchants, but it does not go back to a particularly democratic process. This is a place where rich humans have more power to speak. It will be similar anywhere, not on the 17th floor, but it is uncommon for people to stop killing opponents by using it with more spear swords as well as the right to speak.
- The slave traders are also active. There is no hesitation in capturing those who have fallen out of the 19th and 18th floors behind civilizations, that would have been their ancestors before the Emperor of the Shim era, and sent them to the east. In some cases, they are so unrestrained that they stop hunting for slaves on their own.

- 18th Floor : Great Plains

- It is a plain where nomads live. It is a paradise for field bosses, not only the nomads, but also the big monsters, giant toothed worms, and huge wolves from time to time.
- The indigenous peoples who live here are strong and belligerent nomadic

peoples.

- 19th Floor : Small Nations
  - It is a place where absurdity and irrationality, barbarism, and savagery run wild. Civilization, culture, and technology are centuries behind the eastern empire.
- 20th Floor : Paradise
  - It is now a desolate land that has not been touched for a long time.
- 21st Floor: Rest Area
- 22nd Floor: Chronicles of the Heavenly Demon  
(Genre: Martial Arts, Fusion)

- 23rd floor: Saga of the Iron Knights in Space (Genre: Sci-Fi)
- 24th floor: Dawn Mountain Cabin Journal (Genre: Mystery, History)
- 25th Floor: The Tale of Sormwyn Academy (Genre: Romance, Fantasy)
- 26th floor: Festival City Apocalypse (Genre: Sports)
- 27th floor: Bakery Street Epic (Genre: Cooking, Business Management)
- 28th Floor: Me and Our Scapegoat (Genre: Fairytale)
- 29th floor: Tale of the Ascending City - Side Story (Genre : School)
- 30th Floor: [Corner Librarian] who lived in [The Great Library of All Things]

- 31st to 49th Floor: Race War Continent

# Rankings

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| 7th   | Sword Saint |
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# Timeline

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## The Appearance of the Tower

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The **Tower** mysteriously appeared one day and that was the start of the Hunters, it can be seen on the horizon from anywhere on Earth.

## Other World Timeline

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### **Sword Emperor**

He lives in a town, he was untidy and sings horribly that over thirty people broke in tears. He was famous for having good eyesight since he was young.

He entered the tower when it appeared and conquered it faster than anyone else.

At some time, he died at the 99th floor of the tower.

## Hellfire Maiden

She pleaded for food until a wealthy and 'kind' mister took her in his mansion. Horrified by the scene of the other orphans getting tortured, she was traumatized and a fire broke out making her die without fulfilling her wishes.

She became the boss monster on the 10th floor tower.

## Future Timeline

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- **Kim Gong-Ja** stayed in the orphanage when he was a kid and was given the name '**Kim Gong-Ja**' by the caregiver.
- **Marcus Calenbury** left his family, connections, and fortune to become a hunter.
- **Countess, Paladin, Black Witch, Viper, and Heresy Inquisitor** subjugated the 2nd floor together.

- **Marcus Calenbury** became the Rank 1 Hunter.
- At the age of 21, **Yoo Soo-Ha** became an average F-Class hunter who lived in an apartment. He always wakes up at 11:00 AM and would start hunting on the second floor of the tower at 2:00 PM.

May 6th, hunters ranked 2nd and 7th in the world intend to challenge and defeat the 10th floor of the tower. The Sword Saint still refuses to work with anyone else.

June 7th, during summer, Yoo Soo-Ha awakened on his birthday. During this time, Kim Gong-Ja in his early twenties only had a cheap hoodie, sweatpants, and a new knife.

Three weeks and four weeks later from May 6th, When Yoo Soo-Ha obtained the [Returner's Clockwork Watch (EX)] skill, he used it to win the lottery and won first place, not once, but twice.[5]

One year later, Kim Gong-Ja, who was 22 years old, started collecting articles related to Yoo Soo-Ha and hanged them to his wall. He was one of many people who believed Yoo Soo-Ha was a hero, he was obsessed with him and praised him for being upfront and honest.

- 'Gold Piece Cat' is a well-known mascot of the Tower.
- Saintess Isabelle, who has the greatest beauty, was selected by the Bureau. She earned the title 'Saintess' for giving her earned-hard money to the orphanage.
- Kim Gong-ja waited one year to get a medicine from Master Alchemist.
- The Black Dragon Guild was created and the Black Witch is the one who leads it. Master Alchemist became a rank 5 hunter who leads a guild filled with doctors and pharmacists. Saintess Isabelle became a rank 9 hunter, famous for her exceptional beauty that matched her stellar personality. Paladin became a rank 10 hunter and is the leader of the Vigilante Guard.
- Marcus Calenbury suddenly disappeared for 22 days. The life that Yoo Soo-Ha wished for came true, he became famous and was crowned as the rank 1 hunter.
- The Black Dragon Guild tried to clear the 40th floor of the tower but failed. Yoo Soo-Ha was the first person to have cleared the 40th floor of the tower. Yoo Soo-Ha and the Saintess were rumored to be dating. During this time, Kim Gong-Ja

became jealous of Yoo Soo-Ha at the age of 32 and wants to become like him. The tower acknowledges him because of his envy and gives Kim Gong-Ja an S-Rank Skill, named [I Want to Become Just Like You (S+)].

One day later, Saintess Isabelle killed Yoo Soo-Ha by poisoning his drink and Yoo Soo-Ha returned 24 hours prior.

Loop 1, Kim Gong-Ja came across Yoo Soo-Ha killing the Saintess, he tried to escape but was eventually found by Yoo Soo-Ha and died.[2] Kim Gong-Ja's skill activated and copied Yoo Soo-Ha's skill, it was the [Returner's Clockwork Watch (EX)]. Kim Gong-Ja then returned 24 hours prior.

Loop 2, Kim Gong-Ja thought Yoo Soo-Ha carried him back home but realizes that he returned 24 hours prior.

One day later, Kim Gong-Ja read every bit of information written in the newspaper about Yoo Soo-Ha in one of his interviews. A fire broke out and Kim Gong-Ja went to where the fire started, the Master Alchemist was confused on why the Saintess had not arrived yet. Paladin politely asked Yoo Soo-Ha for help but he refused, Kim Gong-Ja decided to kill him and he jumped into the fire. He returned 24 hours prior and killed himself 4,090 times.

## Current Timeline

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This timeline is when Kim Gong-Ja returned back 11 years in the past...

## Kim Gong-Ja's revenge and the meeting with the Sword Emperor

A few days before, Marcus killed a few top-ranking hunters because they provoke him by mentioning his grandchildren.

May 6th, Kim Gong-Ja returned 21 years old.

Loop 10, Kim Gong-Ja repeatedly killed himself 10 times to collect information about Yoo Soo-Ha's schedule. He followed Yoo Soo-Ha at the 2nd floor of the tower and covered himself in blood, he asked Yoo Soo-Ha for a healing potion but Yoo Soo-Ha tried to attack him so Kim Gong-Ja kicked his crotch and killed him. A few hours later, he went to a bar and saw Marcus who has arrived. Marcus noticed Kim Gong-Ja following him and mistook him as an assassin sent by the **Black Dragon Guild** because Kim Gong-Ja's kill count is around 4091. Kim Gong-Ja's head was cut off by Marcus.

Loop 11, Kim Gong-Ja obtained the [Sword Constellation (A +)] skill and meets **Sword Emperor**. Sword Emperor tells Kim Gong-Ja that he has a rare talent of not being afraid of death and that he'll help Kim Gong-Ja be stronger than Marcus.

In next three days , Kim Gong-Ja killed Yoo Soo-Ha once more and avoided the Sword Saint. Kim Gong-Ja went to the Merchant's Union and received his prize for winning the lottery. Kim Gong-Ja was about to buy an elixir but Marcus came so he went to a poor neighborhood to meet the **Master Alchemist**. before she became famous Kim Gong-Ja made request for an elixir from the Master Alchemist.

Four days later, May 13th , on lunchtime, the Master Alchemist came at Kim Gong-Ja's room while carrying three boxes of elixirs.

The next day, Kim Gong-Ja headed towards the hunting ground and drink his elixir, he then felt the effects of the elixir. Kim Gong-Ja fights with an Orc, his body couldn't handle the aura and an Orc went to him and Kim Gong-Ja died. The Sword Emperor and Kim Gong-Ja were shocked to know that monsters had skills too. The Sword Emperor tells Kim Gong-Ja that he can see the skill card's effects and Kim Gong-Ja screamed with joy, he then picked the [Chiik, Chik (F)] skill card.

Loop 1, Kim Gong-Ja arrived at the 3rd floor hunting ground to hunt Orcs and activated his new skill.

### **The 10th and 11th Floor of the Tower**

One week later May 21th, Loop 5, Kim Gong-Ja went to the 5th floor, he took down the Goblin King and copied the skill

[Goblin High Society (F)]. He became an E-Class Hunter and made a bet with the Sword Emperor. He went to the 10th floor and told a fake story to the doorkeeper to let him in. He went inside the house and saw dolls telling him to play with them. He used his aura but it eventually went out and died by the flames. He then picked [Night and Day Fire Caution (자나 깨나 불조심)] skill and regressed 24 hours ago but because of his skill, he received a penalty of the **Hellfire Maiden**. Both Kim Gong-ja's and the Sword Emperor's consciousness are floating around while they watched the Hellfire Maiden's trauma. After that, Kim Gong-ja regressed 24 hours ago.

Loop 1 May20th Kim Gong-ja and the Sword Emperor were shocked and went back to the mansion again. Kim Gong-ja activated his new skill and played with the dolls. He patted each of the dolls until he reach the basement where the Hellfire Maiden was located. The Hellfire Maiden thanked Kim Gong-ja as she melted down like paper. The Sword Emperor complimented Kim Gong-ja and a voice in the sky suddenly announce that the 10th floor stage was cleared and fireworks exploded. More news about the announcement were posted online and everyone wonders who's the one who cleared it. The doorkeeper of the 10th floor ran towards Kim Gong-ja and asked if he was the one who cleared it. Kim Gong-ja was reminded about the bet and tells Sword Emperor to call him "Kim Gong-ja-nim" forever. At the Starbucks, Kim Gong-ja teases the Sword Emperor and the Sword Emperor cried out, a brown cat appeared and a group of hunters started to recruit him. The brown cat transform into her original form, it was the **Countess**. The group of hunters left and after 10 minutes, **Viper** angrily arrived, next is **Heresy Inquisitor**, then **Paladin**, and last is the **Black Witch**. They ordered coffee and Kim Gong-ja took out a trump card, telling them if he wins, he'll apply all their guilds. Kim Gong-ja won every round and defeated the hunters, the Sword Emperor was happy that their bet ended. When the time hits 00:00, a goddess appeared and Marcus split the image, the goddess still continued saying the announcement. Kim Gong-ja received the rewards for clearing



the 10th floor and the hidden stage reward, he then asked General **Sarbast Aegim** to kill him. General Sarbast hesitated but killed him in the end.

Loop 2, Kim Gong-ja was riding a horse with General Sarbast and led the soldiers, he got the [Discernment of the Battlefield (B)] skill and the **Holy Sword of the Goddess of Protection**. He killed a high Goblin King while using the [Chiik, Chik (F)] skill and ranked #1 for clearing the 11th floor. The highest ranking challengers were summoned to the 12th floor first.

# Known Rankings

These are the top rankers in the tower.

## Future Timeline Hunter Rankings

| Rank | Ranker                 |
|------|------------------------|
| 1    | Yoo Soo-Ha(current)    |
| 2    | General Aegim (former) |
| 3    | Blind Witch            |
| 4    |                        |
| 5    |                        |
| 6    |                        |
| 7    |                        |
| 8    |                        |
| 9    |                        |
| 10   |                        |
|      |                        |

|            |  |
|------------|--|
| 10 Paladin |  |
|------------|--|

Current Timeline Hunter Rankings

| Rank | Name (GL 140) |
|------|---------------|
| 1    | Paladin       |
| 2    | Paladin       |
| 3    | Paladin       |
| 4    | Paladin       |
| 5    | Paladin       |
| 6    | Paladin       |
| 7    | Paladin       |
| 8    | Paladin       |
| 9    | Paladin       |

# Translator's Note

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Hello everyone, considering this is the first chapter where I've been ahead of the old translator, I imagine a lot more of you guys are joining me on this journey from this chapter. Before you begin reading the chapter, I wish to let out some thoughts and context beforehand.

For the new readers, my terminologies are very different from the old translators. I've followed and amended the terms used by the manhwa translators and modified a lot of things. From my comparison, I also seem to be translating a newer version of the novel, which has some things modified by the author/publisher, hence the terms are vastly different, especially in the latest 'Race Wars' and 'Race Wars Part II' arcs. So, at the very least, I would recommend everyone to re-read the 'Race Wars' arcs. I understand that not everyone would like my term changes and my methods, and I respect that. I am not a perfect translator, I doubt anyone is. Especially with a novel like this one, where the interpretations are so poetic and it's really up to the reader how they want to interpret a lot of things. This is simply 'my version' of the novel. It's my way of showing love to the series.

Now, time for some context, as some of you might have been wondering how this release rate was possible. I've basically been grinding translations for this novel at a, quite frankly, concerning rate during my uni semester break. I had initially decided to catch up within a couple months, but well, I ended up getting hyper-obsessed and did 10-15 chapters a day until

today, when I'm caught up to the old translators. I plan to reduce my release rate soon, since I don't want to spend my entire 1-month semester break on my desk, typing while looking at a laptop screen, but I promise that I plan to consistently keep translating this novel until its end.

I hope you all will continue enjoying this hyper-obsessed fan's translations. Please do not hesitate to report any possible change suggestions or fixes by reaching out in our discord server.

For the ones who are still too lazy to re-read, here are some terms which will help you in this chapter, as well as coming chapters:

- Pure Humans Tribe: Humans - Sword Saint's race
- Ghost Tribe: Dokkaebi - Viper's race
- Mountain Calamity Tribe: Snails - Heretic Inquisitor's race
- Gill Fish Tribe: Mermaids - Paladin's race
- Vampiric Tribe: Vampires + Dream Demons - Black Dragon Witch's race

- Fairy Tribe: Elves - Countess's race
- Earth Spirit Tribe: Goblins/Hobgoblins/Asuras - King of Death's race

Thank you and enjoy reading!